MOHAMED BARAKAT

HOPE DIES LAST

A TRUE STORY OF TRUTH, JUSTICE AND A DAUGHTER'S MEMORY



PILOT. FATHER. PRISONER. MAN.

While writing this book, I often found myself wondering how much detail I should reveal.

I am still locked inside the very system I am writing about — a system that has inflicted physical and psychological suffering on me and my family for years. There were moments when I stopped and asked myself whether telling the whole truth would lead to even more harassment, punishment or pain.

But whenever fear made me hesitate, I reminded myself of one lesson I had learned after my arrest. These words are mentioned in the Quran 365 times:

Do not be afraid.

And so I kept writing.

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Dedicated to Sophia Barakat

In Loving Memory of Sophia Barakat
6 October 2018 — 24 October 2019
Although you were so young, and now you are gone, you taught your father the most important lesson of his life:
Hope dies last.
“We belong to Allah, and to Him we return.”

From the Author

I write these lines from a place where human freedom is measured in walls, bars and time. I was once a pilot. My profession was bound up with the sky, distance and freedom. I flew aircraft and was responsible for people's lives. Today my life is very different. I am a prisoner. But above all, I am a father who has lost his daughter.

And that is where the real reason for this book begins. After her death, I was accused and convicted. The state closed my case. But for me, the questions did not end with the verdict.

That is why I began to write. Not for revenge. Not for fame. Not for pity. I wrote because a person deprived of freedom must not be deprived of the right to speak.

In these pages, I describe what I have seen, experienced and understood for myself. I tell the story of my case, the investigation, the trial and life in prison. But I do not demand that you accept my account simply because this is my book. On the contrary:

Check what I say.

Ask uncomfortable questions.

Have doubts.

Justice should not fear questions. If a decision is truly just, questions will only confirm it. If a mistake has been made, society must have the courage to acknowledge it.

I cannot change what happened. I cannot bring my daughter back. For seven years I have fought this battle — for truth, for justice and for the right to be heard. Seven years is an enormous part of a human life. But however long it takes, I will not stop. I will keep fighting for the truth.

I believe that truth does not cease to be truth simply because many years have passed. And I believe that justice is possible even when every possibility seems exhausted. This book is my voice. Now that voice has reached you. And that means hope is still alive. Hope dies last.

Chapter 1: Born Beside Big Ben

Born Beside Big Ben

Mohamed Barakat was born at St Thomas' Hospital in London on the 30th of August, 1978, just across the Thames from Big Ben. It was a beginning full of contrast. The name Mohamed Barakat may not have sounded typically English, but he was born in one of the most recognisably British places in the world: central London, beside Parliament, the Thames, Westminster Bridge, and the famous clock tower known across the world. From the first day of his life, his identity carried two worlds within it.

He was British by birth, Egyptian by heritage, Muslim by family upbringing, and Londoner by childhood. His parents, Mohamed Barakat and Hasnaa Barakat, had come from Alexandria, Egypt, part of a generation of Arab immigrants who arrived in Britain with ambition, uncertainty, hope, and determination. They were not simply trying to survive in a new country. They were trying to build something better for their children. Mohamed grew up in South London, at 12 Hutchins House, King's Avenue. It was a maisonette in a block of flats, surrounded by other apartment blocks, small garden play areas, and chestnut trees below. The area was mixed, but in those early years it still had many English families. There were neighbours downstairs, children nearby, and families from different backgrounds living side by side.

As a child, Mohamed's world was full of movement, voices, accents, smells, and cultures. South London was changing, but it was still a place where children played outside, walked to school, and knew the faces around them. He attended King's Acre Primary School from nursery, walking there from home with his sisters. In those early days, the walk felt normal and safe. His childhood was filled with love. His parents worked hard and gave everything they could to their children. Mohamed remembers them with gratitude: a mother and father who devoted themselves to protecting their family and giving their children the best life possible. They dressed well, took pride in their home, and made sure their children never felt less than anyone else. When Nike Air Max became popular, the children had them. When Air Jordans came out, they had them too. Their home carried the scents of expensive perfumes: Christian Dior, Gucci, and other names that, to a child, represented care, pride, and a sense that his parents wanted them to feel special.

His father, Mohamed Barakat, was a bridge between worlds. He knew many Arabs who came to Britain from the Gulf and the Middle East: from the Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and beyond. Some came for business, some for visits, some for medical treatment, and some simply to experience London. His father would meet people, help them, show them around, and take pride in introducing them to the city. He loved London by night: Parliament, Westminster Bridge, London Bridge, Big Ben, and the great landmarks that gave the city its character.

His mother, Hasnaa Barakat, also built a long working life in Britain. She worked in Arabic newspapers and media, including Al-Arabi, Al-Quds, Al-Hawadeth, and later BBC Arabic. Together, his parents represented something important: the first generation of Arabs who helped connect Britain with the Arab world. But Mohamed's childhood was not only about Arab identity. It was also about learning how many different communities lived together in Britain. At school and in the neighbourhood, he encountered Caribbean families, African families, Chinese families, South American families, Indian families, Jewish families, Muslim families, and English families. Children learned about one another's traditions. Ramadan and Eid were part of his own life, while Christmas, Easter, Diwali, and Hanukkah were part of the wider world around him.

At home, the family sent Christmas cards to neighbours. They wished people a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. At school, other children learned about Muslim celebrations, just as Mohamed learned about theirs. This was one of the great gifts of growing up in Britain at that time: difference was not always treated as a threat. For a child, it was a classroom of cultures. Still, that mixture could also be confusing. Immigrant parents wanted their children to succeed in Britain, to speak English, to study, to behave properly, and to fit into society. But they also wanted them to remember where they came from, to keep their religion, culture, language, manners, and values. For children like Mohamed, this meant growing up between two expectations. At school, he was British. At home, he was Egyptian and Muslim. In the playground, he was surrounded by children who were also carrying different worlds inside them.

He later understood that many children from immigrant families were experiencing the same thing. Caribbean, African, Arab, Indian, and other families were all trying to do something difficult: to become part of Britain without disappearing into it. Their parents had travelled for a better life, but they carried the memories, wounds, pride, and discipline of the places they had left behind. South London itself was a place of strong cultural influence. Brixton, with its Jamaican and Caribbean presence, was full of life, music, markets, fresh fish, yams, bananas, pineapples, and the energy of people who had brought their culture with them. These communities changed London, just as London changed them.

Mohamed has fond memories of small things: local shops, neighbours, childhood games, and buying ice cream. He remembers soft-scoop ice cream with raspberry syrup, strawberry flavours, chocolate sundaes, and flakes. These memories were simple, but they mattered. They belonged to a childhood that, despite the challenges around it, still felt alive and full. But as the years passed, Mohamed began to sense that the world around him was changing. The safety of early childhood started to fade. The walk to school, once ordinary, began to feel different. The neighbourhood changed. Families moved away. Shops changed ownership. Communities shifted. The London of his earliest memories was slowly becoming another London.

One of the first moments that made him feel this change came near the end of primary school. A group of older boys approached him after a summer fair. One of them, Dexter, had been in his eldest sister's class, and another was his cousin, Sydney. They noticed Mohamed's Swatch watch, a fashionable watch at the time, with visible cogs and mechanisms inside. They tried to rob him. When Mohamed returned home, his mother gave him sympathy. His father's reaction was different. He was angry at what had happened, but his advice was shaped by pride and survival. He told Mohamed that if anyone ever tried to rob him again, he should throw the money or item into the nearest drain. If Mohamed could not have it, then the robber should not have it either.

Not long after, that advice would be tested. At around eleven years old, while walking home, Mohamed was followed by an older boy, perhaps sixteen or seventeen. The boy harassed him for change. Mohamed had about fifty pence, enough at the time to buy a small bag of chips from the local fish and chip shop. Remembering his father's words, he threw the money into a drain. The older boy became violent. He turned Mohamed around roughly, attacked him, and beat him. Mohamed tried to fight back, but the age and physical difference was too great. The boy threw him to the ground and kicked him in the face, breaking his nose. Blood poured onto his shirt.

He was close to home, but the walk back felt long. Cars stopped and people asked if he needed help, but he refused. He only wanted to get home. When his father opened the door, he immediately knew something terrible had happened. He asked what had occurred and drove Mohamed to St George's Hospital, where he was kept overnight and examined again the next morning. That incident became one of the moments that marked the end of one stage of childhood. It was not only a broken nose. It was a break in the feeling of safety.

Within months, the family began moving toward a new chapter. Whether that attack was the reason or simply one event among many, Mohamed's parents decided it was time to leave South London. His father had been looking for a house, and eventually found one in Perivale, near Alperton, on the corner of Bideford Road. It was a newly built red-brick house that stood out from the other homes around it. The family had outgrown the maisonette. The old flat had three bedrooms, and although the new house had only four, the difference in space felt enormous to Mohamed as a child. He had no deep emotional attachment to the old home. For him, the move was exciting. His mother had grown tired of London life in that area, and his father seemed energised by the idea of a fresh start.

The new house needed renovation inside. His father brought over Maria's uncle and cousin from Poland, relatives of an old family friend from Alexandria. They came to Britain and transformed the house at a reasonable cost, installing parquet flooring, painting, and bringing new life into the place. It became not just a move, but a rebuilding. Moving from South London to West London was another cultural education. South London had carried strong Caribbean and African influences. West London, especially around Alperton and Perivale, felt

very different. It was like entering another world, with rows of Indian shops, groceries, mangoes, papayas, and products Mohamed had rarely seen before. Where South London markets had yams, pineapples, bananas, and Caribbean foods, Alperton introduced him to Indian life, Indian families, and a different rhythm of London.

For Mohamed, it was a culture shock. He had grown up hearing racism toward Indians in South London, but now he found himself living in an area where Indian families formed a major part of the community. It forced him to see how neighbourhoods, identities, and prejudices could shift depending on where one stood. This was the beginning of Mohamed's deeper understanding of Britain: not as one simple country, but as a place made of layers. English, Arab, Caribbean, African, Indian, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, immigrant, working-class, ambitious, proud, afraid, hopeful. His own life had already passed through many of these layers before he had even become a teenager.

And through all of it, one thing remained constant: the determination of his parents to give their children a better life than the one they had known.

Chapter 2: How did I end up here?

How Did I End Up Here?

Now that I have introduced you to Mohamed Barakat, it is time for me to introduce myself. The boy from South London whose childhood you have just read about is me. Everything from this point forward is my story, told in my own words. When I began writing this book, I spent a long time thinking about where to start. Should I begin in a prison cell in Kazakhstan? Should I begin with the death of my daughter? Should I begin with the trial that would change the course of my life forever?

The answer was no. Because none of those things happened in isolation. To understand how I arrived in Kazakhstan, you first need to understand the journey that brought me there. You need to understand how a child born beside Big Ben became a commercial airline captain, a type-rated instructor, a husband, a father, and eventually a prisoner in a country thousands of miles from home. This is not simply the story of my life. It is also a story about borders. Lines drawn on maps by politicians, kings, generals and governments. Lines that can completely change the value of a human life depending on which side of them you stand.

Cross one border and your rights may be protected by independent courts, free media and democratic institutions. Cross another and those same rights may exist only on paper. The difference between those two realities can determine whether justice is served or denied, whether truth is heard or silenced, and whether an innocent person walks free or spends years fighting to prove what really happened. As you read these pages, you may find yourself asking uncomfortable questions.

Do governments value all their citizens equally? Would my story have unfolded differently if my name had been Michael Barrett instead of Mohamed

Barakat? Would the response of those entrusted to protect British citizens have been the same? Or do politics, economics and international relationships sometimes matter more than the rights of an individual? These are questions I will leave for you, the reader, to answer. There will come a time later in this book when I will take you into courtrooms, prison cells, government offices and diplomatic meetings. I will show you evidence, decisions and events that continue to shape my life to this day.

But we are not there yet. For now, I want to take you back to the beginning. Back to a young boy growing up in Britain during the 1980s. Back to the choices, opportunities, successes and mistakes that would ultimately shape the man I became. Because life can change in an instant. One conversation. One decision. One meeting. One flight. One phone call. One moment that seems insignificant at the time can alter the entire course of a life. This is the story of how mine changed.

Chapter 3: Growing up in London

Growing up in London meant that my world was much smaller than many people might imagine.

Today, when I think about family, I think of a large network of relatives spread across different countries. But as a child, my family consisted of only five people: my father, my mother, and my three sisters. I have very few memories of my grandparents from those early years. Most of my uncles, aunts and extended family members would only become part of my life later. During my childhood, we were largely on our own. Perhaps because of that, the bond between me and my sisters became exceptionally strong.

We grew up together, learned together, argued together, protected one another and experienced every major event in our lives side by side. We were not simply siblings; we were our own small community. That bond has never disappeared. If there is one thing that my experiences in later life have taught me, it is that when everything else is stripped away, when careers disappear, when reputations are attacked, when governments fail you and when the world turns its back, it is often family who remain standing beside you. Through every challenge I have faced, my parents and sisters have remained my foundation.

When I was very young, my father travelled frequently to Egypt for business. My mother would also travel regularly, usually once a year, and whenever finances allowed, my parents would take us with them. One particular memory has remained with me for almost my entire life. I was still a young boy when my father and I drove my mother to Heathrow Airport before one of her trips. After saying goodbye to her at the departure lounge, most people would have simply gone home.

My father had other ideas. Instead, we drove to the top floor of the airport car park. From there, we had a perfect view of the runways. For what felt like hours, we watched aircraft arrive and depart. We counted the time between take-offs and

landings. We watched the aircraft line up, accelerate, rotate and climb into the sky. But more than the sight of the aircraft, I remember the smell. The air was filled with the unmistakable scent of aviation fuel. Sweet, powerful and strangely addictive.

Even today, decades later, the smell of jet fuel can instantly transport me back to that rooftop overlooking Heathrow Airport. Standing there beside my father, watching aircraft disappear into the clouds, something changed inside me. For the first time in my life, I knew exactly what I wanted to become. I wanted to be a pilot. Not a doctor. Not a lawyer. Not a businessman. A pilot. I could not have explained why at the time. There was simply something magical about flight. The freedom. The power. The engineering. The idea that a machine carrying hundreds of people could leave the ground and cross oceans.

From that day forward, aviation was no longer something I watched. It became a dream. And although I did not realise it then, that dream would eventually shape the entire course of my life.

Chapter 4: Growing up in London 2

Growing up in London, I honestly believe there is no other city quite like it in the world. For me, it will always rank number one.

As a child, you never really appreciate what you have because it is all you've ever known. Education was free. Healthcare was free. Dentistry was available. Student grants existed. Looking back, I realise just how fortunate we were. Even if you weren't considered wealthy by London's standards, you were wealthy by much of the world's standards. Designer labels such as Versace, Armani, Moschino, Gucci, DKNY and Nike were part of everyday life. Our wardrobes reflected what we saw on television and the Paris fashion shows. As teenagers, we drove around in GTIs, RS Turbos, Renault 5 GT Turbos, Subaru Imprezas—better known to us as "Scoobys"—BMWs and Mercedes. We spent weekends at the Ministry of Sound and enjoyed opportunities and experiences that millions of teenagers around the world could only dream of.

The streets really did seem to be paved with gold. But London has always had another side. Behind the opportunity, prosperity and excitement was a city where crime was never far away. Drugs of every kind were readily available. Petty crime, burglaries, organised crime, gang violence, car thefts, stabbings and robberies formed part of everyday life. As the years passed, the situation seemed only to deteriorate. Sometimes people were attacked for no reason at all. Looking at someone the wrong way could be enough to provoke violence.

As I travelled around the world, I noticed that although cultures differ enormously, many of the motivations behind crime remain remarkably similar. Whether in Europe, Asia, Africa or elsewhere, the same temptations appeared again and again: sex, drugs, alcohol and, above all, money. Or, as the comedian Harry Enfield used to put it: "Loads of money!" But what separates those who

become successful from those who crash and burn? For me, the answer can be summed up by a single lyric from Shaggy:

"Life is one big party when you're still young... but who's gonna have your back when it's all done?" Those words stayed with me because they contain a simple truth. There comes a point in everyone's life when you realise that nobody else can build your future for you. Eventually, you have to take responsibility for your own decisions, your own ambitions and your own discipline. That was the moment my own life began to change. Of course, I did not make that journey alone. My parents and my sisters gave me the love, encouragement and stability that allowed me to stand on my own two feet. Without them, none of what followed would have been possible.

As I travelled more and experienced different countries, I developed a philosophy that worked for me. I don't present it as advice, nor do I suggest everyone should live this way. It is simply the balance that helped me navigate life. I call it the 40-40-20 principle. Forty percent of your energy should be devoted to your work, your ambitions and your contribution to society. Forty percent should be invested in your family, your loved ones and the relationships that truly matter.

The remaining twenty percent belongs entirely to you. Spend it praying, exercising, reading, travelling, relaxing, enjoying hobbies, or simply doing whatever brings you peace. Never feel guilty about investing time in yourself. The only question worth asking is whether you have earned that twenty percent by managing the other eighty well. Ironically, I also discovered another truth. The more successful you become, the more visible you become. And the more visible you become, the more likely you are to attract envy.

In London, that envy usually came from street criminals or organised gangs looking for money or status. What I failed to understand was that not every country works the same way. After living abroad for many years—in places such as Singapore and Malaysia—I had become optimistic. I had started believing that, deep down, most people were fundamentally good. Somewhere along the way, I had forgotten the lessons that growing up in London had taught me. I had lowered my guard.

When I eventually arrived in Kazakhstan, I believed I was simply beginning another chapter of my career. I had no idea that, as a foreigner, I had already become a target. The greatest organised criminal network I would ever encounter would not be found on the streets. It would be found within the very institutions entrusted with enforcing the law. In my experience, those institutions were the police, the prosecutors and the judges. That was a lesson I never expected to learn.

By the time I understood it... it was already too late.

Chapter 5: From State school to Private school

From State School to Private School

Looking back, some of the happiest memories of my childhood were made at King's Acre Primary School in South London. From nursery onwards, King's Acre became my second home. Almost every happy childhood memory I have seems to begin there. The teachers were wonderful, and I genuinely loved going to school every morning. One of my favourite parts of the day was story time. Every afternoon we would all sit together on the classroom mat while my favourite teacher, Mrs Washington, read to us. The story that captured my imagination more than any other was The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, now better known as part of The Chronicles of Narnia. Even today I can still picture those afternoons as if they were yesterday.

School itself was very different back then. At morning break we were given small bottles of milk in old- fashioned glass bottles, complete with a paper straw and a slice of fresh apple. At the time it all seemed perfectly normal. Looking back now, they are the little memories that somehow stay with you the longest. Growing up in London also meant growing up surrounded by many different cultures. At school we celebrated Halloween, danced at Diwali discos and learned about each other's traditions. On the way home we'd stop at the sweet shop where sweets were sold by weight. I would usually ask for a quarter of rhubarb and custards, although if they had strawberry bonbons, there was no competition — they were always my favourite.

When I think back to King's Acre, I don't remember exams or classrooms. I remember happiness. After primary school I moved to Chestnut Grove Secondary School. If I'm honest, I don't have many happy memories of my time there. It was simply a period of transition in my life before everything changed. That change came when my family moved from South London to West London. Almost overnight I found myself entering a completely different world. I was accepted into King Fahad Academy in North Acton, one of the most respected private schools serving the Arab and Muslim community in Britain. Many of the students were the sons and daughters of diplomats, businessmen and wealthy families from across the Middle East, alongside British Muslim families who wanted the very best education for their children.

For me, it was a remarkable opportunity. The standard of education was excellent. The teachers expected discipline and achievement, and the friendships I made there would last a lifetime. In fact, some of those same friends would still be helping me decades later as I sit writing these pages. If there was one thing I disliked, it was the school uniform. Whoever chose green and grey as the official colours certainly didn't consult the students. To this day, I still think it was one of the ugliest school uniforms ever designed.

Fortunately, everything else about the school more than made up for it. The campus itself was exceptional. King Fahad Academy had excellent sporting facilities. We had basketball courts, badminton courts, football, cricket and regular physical education lessons that I genuinely looked forward to each week. Weight

training took place at the sports facilities on Bromyard avenue, and for someone who loved being active, it was an environment where I felt completely at home.

Sport became another way of building friendships. Whether we were playing football, cricket, badminton or basketball, there was always healthy competition, plenty of laughter and the kind of memories that stay with you long after you've left school. The Academy also had its own masjid built within the school grounds. Every Friday, the entire school would gather together for Jumu'ah prayers. Looking back now, I realise how unique that experience was. It wasn't simply about religion; it was about community. Students from different countries, families and backgrounds stood shoulder to shoulder in prayer before returning to class together. It reinforced the idea that although we came from different parts of the world, we belonged to one school community.

Even the school dinners have stayed with me. I've eaten in restaurants all over the world, flown First Class with some of the world's finest airlines and stayed in luxury hotels on almost every continent. Yet somehow, the meals served at King Fahad Academy still rank among the best school lunches I have ever eaten. It may sound like a small detail, but childhood memories often are. Sometimes it isn't the biggest events that remain with us. Sometimes it's a bottle of milk with a paper straw.

A favourite teacher reading a story. A bag of strawberry bonbons on the walk home. A game of football with friends. Friday prayers in the school masjid. Or simply sitting in the school dining hall, never imagining where life would eventually take you.

Chapter 6: Becoming my own man

Becoming My Own Man

One of the greatest gifts King Fahad Academy gave me was something I didn't fully appreciate until much later in life. Growing up in South London, I often compared my family with my English friends' families. Like many children, I sometimes thought that the things my parents did were unusual or overly strict. Looking back now, I realise I was simply comparing two different cultures. King Fahad Academy changed that. For the first time, I found myself surrounded by children from families that looked very much like my own. I realised that many of the traditions, values and expectations I had grown up with weren't strange at all—they were perfectly normal in Arab and Muslim households.

Alongside the standard British curriculum, we also studied Arabic and Islamic Studies. It gave me a far deeper understanding of my own heritage while still receiving an excellent British education. As a Muslim school, the boys' and girls' sections were separate. Some people might imagine that meant we lived in complete isolation from the outside world. The reality couldn't have been more different. The boys' school was situated just a short distance from the Barbara

Speake Stage School in Acton, where Naomi Campbell had studied. West London was full of life, diversity and opportunity. We certainly weren't living in a bubble.

After graduating from King Fahad Academy, I moved on to Hammersmith and West London College. For me, that was an entirely different world. If King Fahad Academy taught discipline, college taught independence. Looking back, it sometimes felt more like a fashion show than a place of education. Boys and girls mixed freely all day long. Some of my friends had already started driving, and many of us were beginning to experience the freedoms that come with adulthood. We were no longer boys.

We were slowly becoming men. It was there that I learned how to talk to girls, built new friendships and, like many teenagers, began experimenting with alcohol. If I'm being completely honest, I don't remember attending that many lectures. The teachers didn't chase you if you failed to turn up. Nobody phoned your parents. Nobody checked whether you were sitting in class. College worked on a completely different principle. It assumed that if you wanted an education, you would take responsibility for earning it.

That was a completely new concept for me. My routine became surprisingly simple. I'd attend the lectures I felt were important, collect the notes and study materials I needed, then spend the rest of the day enjoying life with my friends and, occasionally, whichever girlfriend happened to be in my life at the time. At the time, I hadn't yet developed what I now call my 40-40-20 philosophy. But looking back, I realise I was already living something very similar without even knowing it.

Whenever I found myself alone, I studied. When it was time to enjoy life, I enjoyed it. And every evening, no matter what had happened during the day, I went home. Almost every night our family sat together around the dining room table to share dinner. That simple routine kept us grounded. Perhaps the funniest moment came when my exam results arrived. I had passed. My family were genuinely shocked. They were convinced I hadn't even sat the exams. Seeing how little time I appeared to spend at college, they had assumed I was simply wasting my days.

What they hadn't seen were the hours I spent studying quietly on my own. Looking back today, I think that system used by British colleges teaches one of the most valuable lessons a young adult can ever learn. There comes a point where nobody follows you. Nobody reminds you. Nobody forces you to succeed. Responsibility becomes your own. And I believe learning that lesson was one of the first real steps towards becoming an adult.

Chapter 7: West London, new friends and new music

West London, New Friends and New Music

Moving from South London to West London didn't just change the school I attended. It changed the soundtrack of my life. Growing up in South London, my

world revolved around reggae, ragga, hip hop and the uniquely British sound of jungle music. Those were the sounds of my childhood. They echoed through parks, youth clubs, passing cars and the streets where we spent our weekends. West London introduced me to something completely different. Many of my closest friends came from Pakistani families, and before long I found myself listening to more and more bhangra music. At first it was simply because my friends enjoyed it, but the more I listened, the more I appreciated its energy and its connection to family celebrations and community life.

It also helped me realise just how much Arab and Pakistani families had in common. Our cultures were different, but our Islamic heritage meant we shared many of the same values. Respect for parents, hospitality, family loyalty and education were all things that were deeply rooted in our homes. Looking back, I have enormous respect for the parents of many of my Pakistani friends. They wanted the very best for their children, and years later that became obvious. Many of those friends went on to become highly educated professionals and successful businessmen. Their parents' sacrifices and dedication had paid off.

There was also something else that always made me smile. Whenever one of us got into trouble, our parents seemed to have remarkably similar ideas about discipline. Let's just say that, whether you came from an Egyptian household or a Pakistani one, there wasn't much sympathy when you had done something you shouldn't have. Growing up, my sisters and I certainly kept our parents busy enough to deserve a few stern lessons along the way. Looking back now, those friendships taught me something far more valuable than I realised at the time.

They taught me that cultures can look very different on the surface, yet share the very same foundations underneath. It was another lesson that growing up in London quietly gave me, long before I ever realised I was learning it.

Chapter 8: Learning to master fear

Learning to Master Fear

My father was born and raised on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea in Alexandria. He always believed that swimming was simply in our blood. I honestly don't remember anyone ever teaching me how to swim. Some of my earliest memories are of being in the sea or in a swimming pool with my father while I was still very young. Swimming became as natural to me as walking. It was simply something we did as a family. I only have one memory of getting into serious trouble in the water.

As children we regularly visited Latchmere Leisure Centre, where one of the attractions was a large water slide. One day I did exactly what I had done countless times before. I went down the slide head first, entered the water and somehow... something went wrong. To this day I still don't know exactly what happened. I found myself unable to reach the surface. I tried to tread water, but

instead I began swallowing water. I realised I was drowning. It probably lasted no more than thirty seconds, but to a child it felt much longer.

The lifeguard immediately jumped into the pool and pulled me to safety. I remember being confused rather than frightened. Within minutes I was back in the pool swimming with everyone else as though nothing had happened. Looking back now, I realise that this was already part of my personality. Many experiences that might have traumatised other children became, in my mind, lessons rather than fears. There were only two experiences during my childhood that genuinely frightened me.

The first happened in an indoor adventure playground. I cannot even remember where it was. Inside were soft play tunnels made from brightly coloured padded fabric. Children crawled in through one end and came out through the other. I climbed inside one of the tunnels when several children began jumping on top of it. Suddenly I couldn't move. The tunnel collapsed around me. I couldn't breathe. For the first time in my life I experienced real claustrophobia.

The second happened during a school trip to the Monument in the City of London. Like every group of schoolchildren, we raced one another up the narrow spiral staircase, laughing all the way to the top. I had no idea that I was afraid of heights. The moment I stepped onto the viewing platform, an overwhelming feeling came over me. My legs seemed to disappear beneath me, and I instinctively fell backwards in terror. Fortunately, our teachers had seen it all before.

Without making a fuss, they calmly escorted those of us who had discovered a fear of heights back down the staircase. Those two experiences taught me something that would shape the rest of my life. I accepted that I had fears. But I refused to let them define me. Instead of avoiding them, I deliberately looked for opportunities to overcome them. After all, how could I ever become an airline pilot if I allowed myself to remain afraid of heights? How could I spend hours inside the cockpit of an aircraft if I allowed claustrophobia to control me?

I learned very early in life that the greatest obstacles we face are often the ones we build inside our own minds. The decision to improve yourself... to become someone... to overcome something... is a decision that nobody else can make for you. It is a mindset. Years later, that mindset would be tested in ways I could never have imagined. No amount of aviation training could have prepared me for losing the most precious person in my life—my daughter, Sophia.

No simulator could prepare me for betrayal by my wife, Madina. And no life experience could prepare me for finding myself trapped inside the legal system of a foreign country whose language I did not even speak. There are moments in life when you feel as though a pack of hyenas and vultures has descended upon you, each waiting to take its share before there is nothing left. You can allow that to consume you. Or you can decide that no matter how impossible the circumstances appear, you will continue to fight.

Everything you have read about my childhood and my early life has been building towards that moment. Because before you can understand how I survived what happened in Kazakhstan, you first have to understand the mindset that refused to surrender.

Chapter 9: Discovering my roots

Discovering My Roots

My parents always believed that education was the greatest investment they could ever make in their children. Whenever one of us needed extra help, they never hesitated to pay for private tuition. Looking back, I now realise how many sacrifices they must have made to give us every opportunity they never had themselves. I grew up during the years of Margaret Thatcher and Britain's economic recession. Like millions of other families, we watched EastEnders, Coronation Street, Spitting Image and Mr Bean long before he became famous around the world.

Our summers were often spent at the Serpentine in Hyde Park, enjoying what now seem like the simple pleasures of childhood. After Hammersmith and West London College, I enrolled at Middlesex University. My goal was to improve my grades sufficiently to secure a place at Kingston University to study Aerospace Engineering. By then, however, I had fully embraced university life. If I'm honest, my priorities were no longer where they should have been. Fast cars.

Beautiful girls. Good friends. Late nights. For me, life had become one long adventure. The 40-40-20 philosophy I speak about today certainly didn't exist back then. Back then it was more like... Fun. Fun. Fun. All I wanted to do was spend time with my mates and party until the early hours of the morning. Leicester Square became our playground. We moved from club to club—Capital Club, Equinox, Limelight, China White and many others that have probably disappeared long ago.

Student life in London was incredible. Drinks were often just one pound a shot, and tickets for student nights were sold in advance at the university. The city seemed to come alive every evening, and we believed those nights would last forever. My parents, however, saw something I couldn't. They watched my priorities changing. They saw my attitude towards life beginning to drift. Eventually, my father and mother sat me down and gave me a choice. "Either go to Egypt and spend some time learning about your roots...

or you're on your own, son." For several months I tried the second option. Living independently sounded exciting. The reality was very different. It didn't take long before I realised just how difficult life becomes without the support of the people who genuinely love you. So I accepted their offer. That decision would become one of the most important turning points of my life. For the first time, I left Britain for an extended period. For the first time, I truly discovered Egypt.

Until then, my understanding of family had largely been shaped by family friends whom we affectionately called "uncle" or "auntie." Now I was meeting my real uncles. My real aunts. My cousins. My grandparents' world. For the first time, I began to understand where my parents had come from and the culture that had shaped them long before they built a life in Britain. But Egypt gave me something else as well. It was the first country where I truly witnessed how corruption can slowly erode a nation.

I saw how injustice could exist at every level of society, how influence could outweigh fairness, and how ordinary people often found themselves powerless against systems they could not change. At the time, I had no idea that these observations would one day become deeply personal. Standing there as a young man, I simply remember feeling grateful. Grateful that my parents had chosen to build our lives in Britain. I thought I was travelling to Egypt to discover my roots.

I never imagined I was also receiving my first lesson about the dangers of corruption—one that life would force me to revisit years later under circumstances far more devastating than I could ever have imagined.

Chapter 10: Writing from inside

Writing from Inside

As I sit here writing this book, the person I am today is exhausted. Not only from the years that have been taken from me, but from watching my family being financially drained simply to provide me with something resembling a normal standard of living. Food. Clothes. Laundry detergent. Toothpaste. Cigarettes. Basic medicine. These may be things you have heard about prisoners needing elsewhere, but imprisonment in Kazakhstan goes much further than that. Here, we literally help build the prison in which they keep us.

Prisoners work with bricks and cement. We repair buildings, install barbed wire and help construct and maintain heating plants and water systems. When things break, the costs somehow find their way back to us and our families. The state imprisons us, but our families are expected to help finance the prison. They have already taken our freedom. Then they reach outside the walls and punish the people who love us as well. What amazes me most is how the officers still manage to put on their uniforms every morning and pretend that the uniform means something.

They come to work as beggars. They walk around day and night asking prisoners for cigarettes, drinks, food and sweets. When those small demands are not enough, they invent new tricks and scams to extract money from us and our families. Yet somehow, we are labelled the criminals. I think back to the British police officers I saw growing up in London. Whatever faults the British police may have—and no institution is perfect—I remember officers patrolling the streets with pride in their uniform and in what it represented.

Would a British police officer sell that pride for a packet of cigarettes? Would he wander around begging prisoners for sweets and fizzy drinks? Would he expect the families of prisoners to pay for the building he had been employed to guard? Before Kazakhstan, the only place where I had personally seen officials lower themselves in this way was Egypt. Egypt is part of my blood and my heritage. My parents were born there. My family comes from Alexandria, and I will never deny or erase that part of myself. But loving your roots does not require you to lie about what you have witnessed.

I saw officials in Egypt abuse their uniforms, rob members of the public and use their positions to improve their own lives. They wore authority on the outside while behaving like petty thieves underneath it. Some of them even seemed to stink in their uniforms—not only physically, but morally. That experience made me appreciate how fortunate I had been to grow up in Britain. Then I came to Kazakhstan. Here, I encountered the same mentality, but inside a legal system that appeared to have refined it into an industry.

Kazakhstan's own newspapers constantly publish stories about police chiefs, prison officers, prosecutors and judges being investigated, arrested or convicted. Judges have been imprisoned for bribery and corruption. Senior police officers have been convicted of horrific crimes. Court employees have been exposed taking money and manipulating the very systems they were employed to protect. This is not foreign propaganda. Kazakhstan reports these scandals about itself.

The police, prosecutors and judges are all supposed to operate as separate parts of the justice system. From where I sit, they appear to be in bed together. They protect one another. They refer complaints back to one another. They investigate one another and repeatedly discover that nobody has done anything wrong— until a video appears online, the public becomes outraged and the evidence can no longer be buried. The torture videos that spread across the internet were filmed at the notorious prison complex in Zarechny where I am now being held.

The images showed prisoners being beaten, restrained, suspended and tortured by the very people paid by the state to supervise them. Those were not simply "allegations." The videos existed. The officers were identified. Seven former prison officers received real prison sentences of up to seven years for torturing prisoners. The prison governor was removed, senior staff lost their positions and numerous officers were dismissed. So what changed? Absolutely nothing that I can see.

The corruption business continues as usual. The uniforms changed bodies. The positions were filled again. New officers arrived, and the same culture carried on. The begging continued. The pressure continued. The schemes continued. The expectation that prisoners and their families should finance the system continued. That is why dismissing these events as a few "bad apples" means nothing to me. When one group is removed and the same conduct continues, the problem is no longer a few individuals.

The problem is the system that produces and protects them. Corruption here is not an occasional interruption to daily life. It is daily life for many of those operating inside the legal and prison system. And what does the British Government think about all of this? Does it care? Judging by the years I have spent here, it often feels as though it does not care enough when the issue is the suffering of one of its own citizens. The British Embassy has raised some of my welfare concerns and sent diplomatic notes. I acknowledge that. But I remain imprisoned after years of reporting torture, mistreatment, legal violations and the destruction of my right to a fair process.

Where is the urgency? Where is the outrage? Where is the same determination that Britain displays when commercial interests are involved? When Kazakhstan wanted to attract foreign investors, Britain cared very much about the quality of justice available to international businesses. British expertise helped establish the Astana International Financial Centre. An English-law court was created outside Kazakhstan's ordinary judicial system, and distinguished British judges were brought in to provide the credibility and protection international investors demanded.

Think about what that means. For international businesses, Kazakhstan's ordinary courts were apparently not trusted enough. Investors were given English law. They were given British judges. They were given a separate court and protections designed to inspire international confidence. But when a British citizen is prosecuted, tortured and imprisoned within Kazakhstan's ordinary system, he is left to the same police, prosecutors and judges from whom international business was deliberately protected.

Business receives British justice. The British citizen receives diplomatic notes. Kazakhstan's oil, minerals, trade and investment opportunities appear to command attention at the highest levels. My freedom does not. My daughter's death does not. The evidence identifying who was responsible does not. The torture and violations I have reported do not. So I ask the question plainly. If the ordinary Kazakh legal system is good enough for Mohamed Barakat, why was it not good enough for British investors?

And if Britain was willing to provide judges and legal protection for international money, why has it remained on the sidelines while one of its citizens has been consumed by the system those protections were designed to avoid? Double standards? You, the reader, can decide.

Chapter 11: Don't go to Kazakhstan

Don't Go to Kazakhstan

When I was younger, I watched a Guy Ritchie film called Snatch. It features Brad Pitt and Vinnie Jones and is filmed in England. Everyone in the film seems to be chasing after one very large diamond. Towards the end of the movie, a character called Cousin Avi, an American, has finally had enough and decides to

fly back to the United States. At the airport he's passing through immigration when they ask him: “Anything to declare?” His response is simple: “Don't go to England.”

It seems funny in a movie. But when you look at how I have been treated, it shouldn't sound quite so funny when a man who has experienced Kazakhstan's legal system first-hand gives you his own two cents of advice: Don't go to Kazakhstan. I know Kazakhstan is a beautiful country. I've seen it. I've seen the mountains, the steppe and the lakes. I've travelled through the country and met some wonderful people. This book itself contains Kazakh people who helped me, supported me and showed me kindness when they had absolutely nothing to gain from doing so.

My warning isn't about them. It's about what can happen when something goes wrong and you suddenly find yourself inside the legal system. Look at what happened to me. Listen to the cries from the locals themselves asking for justice. Then look at what appears on social media. Videos of Indian tourists complaining that Almaty police robbed them of their phones. Foreigners describing their encounters with police and authorities. Then come inside the prisons.

Over the years I've watched increasing numbers of foreigners filling them, and I have sat and listened to their stories. Different nationalities. Different backgrounds. Different allegations. Yet so many complain about the same things. Corruption. Fabrication. Unfair trials. Money. After hearing the same complaints again and again, eventually you start asking yourself how so many completely different people ended up describing such similar experiences. And there's a saying in Kazakhstan, and it's written on the walls of C18 detention:

“Want to go to prison? Visit Almaty.” Think about that for a moment. When you travel somewhere as a tourist, you don't think about any of this. You think about your hotel. Restaurants. Mountains. Nightlife. Food. Weather. Maybe where you're going tomorrow. You don't arrive at an airport wondering what will happen if you're arrested. You don't research the investigator who might question you. You don't ask yourself whether witnesses will be separated before giving their statements.

You don't wonder whether evidence will be preserved. You don't think about prosecutors, judges, forensic experts, translators, interrogation rooms or prison cells. You certainly don't imagine that one day you might be sitting inside one of those cells trying to explain your innocence in a language you don't speak. I didn't. I came to Kazakhstan as an airline pilot. I worked here. I travelled here. I married a Kazakh woman. My daughter was half Kazakh. I looked at buying property here.

I considered businesses here. I had friends here. I was building part of my future here. I certainly wasn't walking around thinking: Be careful, Mohamed. One day these people might put you in prison for twenty years. Who thinks like that? But that's the problem. You only discover how much protection the law actually gives you when something goes wrong. By then it can be too late. I have spent

years watching people inside desperately trying to undo what has already been done to them.

Appeals. Complaints. New lawyers. New evidence. Families begging. Families borrowing. Families selling things. People searching for connections. People searching for money. Everybody looking for some door back out. I know there will be people who read this and say: Mohamed hates Kazakhstan. No. If I hated Kazakhstan, this would be a much easier chapter to write. There are Kazakh people I love and respect. There are people here who have shown me enormous kindness. There are places in this country I will remember for the rest of my life.

But loving good people doesn't require me to remain silent about a system that I believe destroyed my life. And after everything you've read in this book, you can decide for yourself whether my warning is justified. You don't have to believe me. Look. Read. Ask questions. Listen to Kazakh people complaining about their own justice system. Listen to foreigners who have encountered it. Then make up your own mind. Because Cousin Avi was leaving England when he gave his advice.

I'm writing mine from inside a prison. I've had considerably longer to think about it. So if one day somebody asks me the same question— “Anything to declare?” Yes. One thing. Don't go to Kazakhstan. And if you decide to go anyway, enjoy the mountains, enjoy the food, enjoy the people and enjoy everything beautiful this country has to offer. But pray that nothing ever goes wrong. Because the Kazakhstan you visit as a tourist and the Kazakhstan you meet when the door of an interrogation room closes behind you can be two very different countries.

Chapter 12: The beauty of injustice

The Beauty of Injustice

"The beauty of injustice." It was a phrase I once heard from a man I travelled with many years ago. For obvious reasons, I won't reveal his identity. He loved corruption. Not because he considered himself a criminal, but because he genuinely believed it was simply another tool for getting ahead in life. His business depended on it. If a contract was available, he didn't rely on submitting the best proposal. He relied on "greasing the palms" of the people responsible for awarding it.

He drove an expensive car and sped everywhere he went. Whenever the police stopped him, he would lower his window just enough to reveal a confident smile, a pair of dark sunglasses and a driving licence with folded banknotes tucked neatly inside. Within seconds, the officer's expression changed. The angry face disappeared. A smile appeared. Sometimes he was even escorted away as though he were an honoured guest rather than someone who had just broken the law.

Every time I argued with him, he laughed. "Mohamed," he would say, "if you have one dollar in your pocket, you're worth one dollar. If you have a million dollars, people treat you like you're worth a million. Corruption is just another

tool. Learn to use it." Then he'd grin. "I can smoke a packet of cigarettes, drink a beer while I'm driving, and if I hit someone, I have enough money to pay the family." He would lean back in his seat and say the words I have never forgotten.

"That's the beauty of injustice, Mohamed." At the time, I completely disagreed with him. I still do. I'm no angel. Like everyone else, I've made mistakes in my life. But I have never believed that wealth gives someone the right to abuse power or purchase justice. In my opinion, the people who offer bribes are just as responsible as those who accept them. Every time someone pays a police officer, a prosecutor or a judge to perform a duty they are already paid to perform through taxpayers' money, they feed the disease.

Eventually the disease spreads. Officials stop doing their jobs unless they receive payment. Need a document signed? "Where's the cake? Where's the perfume?" Need to renew your driving licence? "I don't see any cash inside the paperwork." Don't pay? Perhaps your paperwork mysteriously disappears. Perhaps your application sits untouched for months. Or perhaps, if you understand how the system works, everything can be finished before you've even finished your coffee.

At first glance, it can all seem harmless. Convenient, even. But corruption is like cancer. It begins quietly. By the time people realise how dangerous it has become, it has already spread into every institution that was supposed to protect society. By now you're probably familiar with my 40-40-20 principle. It's a way of trying to think rationally about life. Take a simple question. At first glance there seem to be only two answers. Yes. Or no. Fifty-fifty.

But life is rarely that simple. Sometimes the answer is "maybe." Sometimes it's "let me think about it." Sometimes it's something entirely different. So perhaps the reality is closer to forty percent yes, forty percent no and twenty percent somewhere in between. I tried applying that same way of thinking to corruption. Was my friend right? When I first saw him using it, everyone around him appeared happy. The police officer smiled. He smiled. Business deals were completed.

Nobody seemed to lose. So I asked myself a difficult question. Could corruption ever be harmless? Then I arrived in what I have come to call... Korruptionstan. Everything I believed about human relationships began to change. Very soon after entering detention in Kazakhstan, I noticed something disturbing. People rarely greeted me simply to say hello. Almost every conversation had another purpose. "Mohamed..." "Can I have a cigarette?" "Can I have some tea?"

"Do you have any chewing gum?" The greeting wasn't the reason for the conversation. It was merely the introduction to the request. Other detainees even argued with one another and bribed guards to have me transferred into their cells because my family regularly brought food, drinks and cigarettes. Even the guards changed. Some began calling me rodnoy—a Russian word expressing closeness, almost like calling someone family or a brother. Not because we had become close.

Because a few moments later they wanted cigarettes. Or tea. Or toilet paper. Or something else. When my food parcels suddenly stopped arriving, I later discovered that they had simply been stolen. It forced me to ask myself a question I had never considered before. All those friendships and relationships I had built during my life... Were they genuinely selfless? Or do human beings always carry some hidden expectation of personal benefit, even when we don't consciously realise it?

Kazakhstan forced me to confront questions about human nature that had never crossed my mind before. It also forced me to ask another. How does a legal system hand so much power to people who abuse it so easily? The answer I eventually reached was deeply unsettling. Power is often given to those who are willing to use it without asking questions. People willing to beat. To steal. To extort. To humiliate. Not because they are forced to. But because they enjoy the authority that comes with it.

They are cheap to control. They are rewarded with scraps. And many seem perfectly satisfied with those scraps, provided they are allowed to exercise power over someone weaker. After the Second World War, many Nazi officials defended themselves by saying the same thing. "I was only following orders." Those words later inspired the famous Milgram obedience experiments at Yale University, which explored how ordinary people could inflict pain on others simply because an authority figure instructed them to do so.

It is a fascinating study. But I have often wondered whether it left one question unanswered. What about the people who don't need to be persuaded? What about those who actually enjoy exercising power over another human being? That is the question Kazakhstan left me asking. In my experience, some prison officers appeared to take genuine pleasure in humiliating and abusing prisoners. When allegations were made against them, investigations too often seemed ineffective or went nowhere.

The result was a culture where many prisoners believed there would be no real accountability. That belief was almost as damaging as the abuse itself. For me, Korruptionstan is more than a place. It is a way of thinking. A place where innocent people can find themselves accused, extorted, beaten and broken by those wearing the very uniforms that are supposed to protect society. A place where corruption doesn't merely steal money. It steals trust. It steals dignity.

It steals justice. And eventually... it steals lives. So I ask the same question again. Was corruption really as harmless as my travelling companion believed? Or was that "beauty of injustice" simply the first crack in a system that, left unchecked, eventually destroys everything it touches? The law is one of humanity's greatest achievements. When it is applied fairly, it allows civilisation to exist. But when those entrusted to uphold the law begin selling it to the highest bidder...

it ceases to be law. It becomes another commodity. And that is where civilisation itself begins to break down.

Chapter 13: Love, Dreams and the road not taken

Love, Dreams and the Road Not Taken

As the years of my life continue to be wasted by a system that refuses to let me go, I often find myself reflecting on the arrogance of the people responsible. What amazes me is not simply the injustice itself. It is the confidence with which it is carried out. Those involved behave as though they never have to answer to anyone. They don't seem concerned about how disgraceful their actions appear to the outside world because, from where they stand, there is no higher authority capable of holding them to account.

Unlike Europe, which has the European Court of Human Rights, or many other regions where independent international mechanisms exist, Kazakhstan has no comparable regional human rights court. Although Kazakhstan has ratified numerous international human rights treaties, my experience has left me questioning how consistently those commitments are reflected in practice. Over the years I have also come to question whether the institutions that should protect people in situations like mine possess either the independence or the power necessary to do so.

From inside this system, hope can feel like a very rare commodity. For someone in my position, justice often seems impossibly far away. What becomes painfully clear is that corruption does not simply demand money. It convinces people that freedom itself has a price. During my imprisonment I have repeatedly heard extraordinary figures discussed as the price of making problems disappear. In my own case, I came to believe that a figure of around one million US dollars was attached to my freedom.

Whether such promises would ever have been honoured is another question entirely. In Kazakhstan, I have seen enough to know that even after paying enormous sums of money, many people are simply deceived. The scam often continues long after the money has disappeared. Before this book is finished, I will share many of the cases I have personally witnessed and the conversations I have had over the years. But for now... I'd rather return to a happier memory. During my time in Egypt, I met Mona.

Many people knew her by her stage name, Mona Lisa. Her father was Egyptian. Her mother was Scottish. We met through my sister, who already knew her from the United Kingdom. Mona was travelling back to Cairo and kindly agreed to carry a CD player back to Egypt for me. That simple favour led to one of the most memorable relationships of my life. I still remember the first time we met. It was outside one of Cairo's famous sporting clubs. The moment I saw her, I thought she was absolutely stunning.

We exchanged telephone numbers and began seeing one another. Every Thursday I would take her horse riding at Sahara City. The stables were located near the Pyramids of Giza, and as the evening became night, we would ride across the sand dunes until we reached the highest point overlooking the pyramids and

the lights of Cairo. Even today, it remains one of the most beautiful memories of my life. Looking back now... I sometimes wonder whether I should have married her.

She suggested it. But my heart had already chosen a different path. I wanted to become an airline pilot. That dream consumed everything. No matter how much I cared for her, aviation remained my greatest passion. I was determined to travel to California, attend flight school and pursue the career I had dreamed about since childhood. Perhaps the funniest memory of all happened in a video rental shop in Alexandria. My cousin and I were standing at the counter when I noticed a huge promotional poster of Mona hanging behind the shopkeeper.

I looked at my cousin and said, "What would you say if I told you that's my girlfriend?" He burst into laughter. "He'd tell you to get the hell out of here, you nutcase!" We both laughed. It was one of those moments that has stayed with me ever since. My relationship with Mona did not last very long. Life had other plans for both of us. But I mention her for one important reason. She represents the biggest choice I made as a young man. I chose aviation. I chose the dream of flying over the certainty of staying with the woman who, even today, I believe understood me better than almost anyone else I have ever met.

I followed that dream across continents. Across cultures. Across thousands of hours in the sky. I had no idea that the journey I believed would lead me to the cockpit of an airliner would eventually lead me somewhere I could never have imagined. It would lead me... to Korruptionstan.

Chapter 14: America

America

Egypt is home to some of the most beautiful places I have ever visited. The people are warm, generous and welcoming, and I will always be proud that my roots come from there. But in my opinion, the disease of corruption has done enormous damage to the country. It has robbed ordinary Egyptians of opportunities they deserve and, unfairly, it has damaged the way the outside world often perceives the nation. That is a tragedy because the Egyptian people themselves are highly intelligent, hardworking and resilient. Given the opportunity, they succeed all over the world.

Yet too often, visitors leave remembering something else. The rubbish in the streets. The chaos. The bureaucracy. The corruption. I don't blame them. Those are things they genuinely see. After a year and a half living in Egypt, I had reached a conclusion. I would never forget my time there. I had discovered my family, my roots and my culture. But Egypt was not where I wanted to build my future. My future was somewhere else. I returned to Britain and began preparing for the biggest adventure of my life.

America. Like so many young people growing up in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s, I was fascinated by everything American. Tupac. Dr. Dre. Nas. Snoop

Dogg. Madonna. Michael Jackson. Hollywood films. Home Alone every Christmas. Brewster's Millions. Eddie Murphy. McDonald's. KFC. And, as a kid growing up in Streatham, nothing could beat a deep-pan pizza. America wasn't just another country to me. It represented possibility. And now, for the first time in my life, I wasn't just going there as a tourist.

I was going there to fulfil the dream I had carried with me ever since standing with my father at Heathrow Airport, watching aircraft disappear into the sky. I was going to become a pilot. I left London on Virgin Atlantic on the 3rd of September—my mother's birthday. The night before, my friends had taken me out to celebrate. We drank ridiculous amounts of vodka mixed with Red Bull, and by the time I boarded the aircraft, I hadn't slept for a single minute.

The result was predictable. I slept through almost the entire flight. I don't remember much until we landed on a beautiful sunny morning at Los Angeles International Airport. Waiting for me was a young woman from the flight school, driving a small minivan. She loaded my bags, welcomed me to California and drove me straight to the student residence. I barely had time to put my suitcase down before she said, "Come on, let's go." Within minutes I was on my way to Air Desert Pacific for orientation.

What I didn't realise was that my dream was about to begin immediately. That very day I climbed into the cockpit of a Piper Warrior for my first lesson as a student pilot. Forty-five minutes. Forty-five unforgettable minutes with my hands on the controls of an aeroplane. That is one thing I will always admire about the American way of teaching aviation. They believe in learning by doing. If you want to learn to fly, they let you fly. You study the theory alongside the practical experience, progressing at your own pace.

Nothing can replace experience. I flew almost every day. Then came the morning of the 11th of September. I was asleep when the door suddenly burst open. Arthur, a Russian student pilot who lived in the residence with us, was shouting at the top of his voice. "Mohamed! Wake up! Aeroplanes are falling out of the sky!" Half asleep, my first thought was simple. Leave me alone. I'm tired. I want to sleep. But another voice inside my head said something different.

You're training to become a pilot. Whatever is happening... this matters. I walked into the student lounge. A large American television filled the room. At first I genuinely thought someone was showing an Arnold Schwarzenegger film. On the screen, airliners were crashing into enormous buildings. None of it looked real. Then I noticed the news ticker running across the bottom of the television. The words hit me harder than the images. "War against Islam." My brain simply refused to process what I was seeing.

I stood there in silence for a few moments, then walked into the bathroom to brush my teeth. One ordinary thought suddenly crossed my mind. I need to call home. Today is my nephew's birthday.

Chapter 15: California Dreaming

California Dreaming

California was larger than life. In fact, that's probably the best way to describe America as a whole. Everything seemed bigger. The cars. The highways. The houses. The skyscrapers that dominated downtown Los Angeles. Even the portions of food seemed enormous. Americans have a remarkable ability to make almost everything practical. They don't always overcomplicate things. If there's a simpler way of doing something, they usually find it, and more often than not, it works.

One thing I noticed, however, was that Americans could sometimes come across as rather condescending, especially towards people with foreign accents. If your English sounded British or Australian, nobody seemed to care. But if your accent came from almost anywhere else, people would often slow their speech down and speak to you as though you struggled to understand basic English. It always amused me because many of the foreign students I met spoke two, three or even four languages, while the people speaking down to them often spoke only one.

America was also much more open about race than Britain. People tended to say things out loud that would rarely be said so casually back home. I remember introducing myself as Mohamed and occasionally hearing someone respond in a thick American accent, "Oh... Mohamed? Well... that's okay... that's fine." It was as if they were reassuring themselves that they could forgive me for having a Muslim name. I always found those moments more amusing than offensive.

Despite all of that, my year in America became one of the happiest years of my life. Then came the attacks of September 11th. Every aircraft at Air Desert Pacific was grounded for almost two weeks. The atmosphere changed overnight. People were frightened. Suspicious. Uncertain. At the student residence I even found myself being singled out by one rather strange French student who seemed determined to blame me for events that had absolutely nothing to do with me.

Not long afterwards I was interviewed by the FBI. They were professional throughout, but it reinforced how dramatically the world had changed in a single morning. I eventually spoke to the Chief Pilot, Mark Webster, an Australian whom I have enormous respect for to this day. He listened carefully as I explained some of the prejudice I was beginning to experience. Without making a fuss, he simply decided that he would become my instructor himself. It was a gesture I have never forgotten.

Sometimes the smallest acts of fairness leave the biggest impression. Another person who stood firmly by my side was Natalie, a German who had grown up in New Zealand. Having experienced discrimination herself while growing up, she immediately understood what I was talking about. Her husband, Blake, was an experienced bush pilot trying to make the transition into the airlines. Life has a

funny way of coming full circle. Many years later, Blake would end up sitting beside me in the cockpit as my First Officer.

But that part of the story comes much later. For now, I prefer to remember the flying. Those cross-country flights remain some of my favourite memories. American flight schools attracted students from every corner of the world. Many of them were excellent pilots, but because English wasn't their first language, radio communication often proved challenging. Being a native English speaker gave me a huge advantage. Before long, students from Spain, Germany, Japan, Korea, Brazil and many other countries were asking me to fly with them so I could handle the radio calls.

Officially I couldn't log those hours. Unofficially... I was flying almost constantly. Looking back, I realise just how much those extra hours accelerated my development as a pilot. Experience is everything. Over those months I flew across much of the American West. San Francisco. Las Vegas. San Diego. The Grand Canyon. Each flight revealed another incredible landscape. One of my closest friends became Rafa, a Spanish cadet who had travelled to America for exactly the same reason I had—to build flying hours.

A group of Spanish students rented an apartment together, and before long I had moved in with them. Rafa and I flew together. Travelled together. Partied together. We seemed to spend as much time laughing as we did flying. What fascinated both of us most was how ordinary aviation felt in America. People owned small aeroplanes the same way people elsewhere owned motorbikes. Many families lived beside lakes with their own boat tied to a private jetty and a short dirt runway running behind the house.

It felt like complete freedom. And compared with Europe, it was surprisingly affordable. Whenever we stopped somewhere to refuel, the airport staff would often hand us the keys to the airport courtesy car without a second thought. "Bring it back when you're done." That level of trust amazed us. When we weren't flying, we'd head into Los Angeles. Sunset Boulevard. Downtown LA. Music. Bars. Friends from every corner of the world. Looking back now, I realise I wasn't just learning how to fly.

I was learning how big the world really was. California gave me memories that I will treasure for the rest of my life. Would I want to live there? Probably not. But would I go back? Without hesitation. Some places become part of who you are. California will always be one of mine.

Chapter 16: My Mother

My Mother

Growing up, I was always closer to my mother than my father. That isn't to say my father, Mohamed Barakat Senior, didn't have a profound influence on the man I eventually became. He certainly did, and throughout this book I'll speak more about the lessons he taught me. But my mother, Hasnaa, has always been

something different. She has been my closest friend. From my earliest memories, I remember sitting beside her, absent-mindedly playing with her hair while we talked. She always dyed it somewhere between hazelnut brown and ash blonde. I know that sounds like a strange detail to remember, but years later, whenever I stopped at the pharmacy, those two colours would often find their way onto my shopping list for her.

Some memories never leave you. My mother always seemed to understand what I was feeling before I had spoken a single word. Sometimes all it took was one look. Sometimes it was simply the way I answered the telephone. She could hear something in my voice that nobody else noticed. Before I left for Egypt, our mornings followed a familiar routine. A cup of coffee. A cigarette. Conversation. We laughed more than we worried. One of the things I loved most about Mum was that she never insisted on the formal distance that often exists between parents and their children.

She allowed me to joke with her. To tease her. To be sarcastic. She would laugh, usually quicker than anyone else in the room. Those moments never made me respect her less. If anything, they made me admire her even more. Apart from my time in America, wherever I travelled in the world, Mum eventually came to visit. When I was younger, she often spoke about all the countries she dreamed of seeing one day. Neither of us could have imagined that my career in aviation, along with all the years of study, exams, licences and conversions, would eventually allow us to fulfil those dreams together.

Wherever I happened to be in the world, Mum somehow became part of the journey. And even now, during these unimaginably difficult years, nothing has really changed. She is still there. Listening. Supporting. Living every moment alongside me. There has always been a bond between us that is difficult to explain. It is simply there. Unbreakable. As I write these words, I find myself thinking about something I have perhaps never fully appreciated until now. My mother's fighting spirit.

No matter what life threw at our family, she never gave up. Not on my sisters. Not on me. She devoted her life to giving us every opportunity she possibly could. There was no hidden fortune. No family wealth. Everything we had came from years of hard work. Long days sitting in front of computer screens, working for Arabic newspapers in Britain, often finishing exhausted, only to get up and do it all again the following morning. She built our future one day at a time.

Of all the people I have loved in my life, only my daughter Sophia occupies a place in my heart equal to my mother's. When Sophia was born in Hong Kong, Mum was there beside me. She shared one of the happiest days of my life. And when Sophia died... she was there again. I know that losing Sophia broke her heart just as deeply as it broke mine. She had every reason to fall apart herself. But she didn't. She stayed strong. Not because she wasn't grieving. But because she knew I needed her.

Even in the darkest chapter of both our lives, she chose to carry her own pain quietly so that she could help carry mine. There are many ways to measure strength. Some people think it is found in power. Others think it is found in success. For me, true strength has always looked like my mother. And if there is one thing this journey has taught me, it is that I could never have survived it without her.

Chapter 17: Malaysia Calling

Malaysia Calling

After a year, my time in California was coming to an end. I had achieved what I had travelled halfway around the world to accomplish. I qualified as a commercial pilot with a multi-engine rating and a Frozen ATPL, meaning that once I reached 1,500 flying hours, I would be eligible for a full Airline Transport Pilot Licence. My childhood dream was no longer just a dream. It was within touching distance. But the world had changed. While I was in America, I received the news that my parents were separating.

My father had decided to move to Malaysia. To be honest, I wasn't shocked. All of us had known for a long time that their marriage was slowly falling apart. Sometimes relationships don't end suddenly. They simply fade away until one day both people realise they're no longer walking the same path. The timing couldn't have been worse for anyone trying to become a professional pilot. After the attacks of September 11th, airlines around the world were struggling.

Thousands of highly experienced pilots had lost their jobs. As student pilots, we all understood what that meant. If airlines already had thousands of experienced captains and first officers looking for work, what chance did newly qualified students like us have? Very little. So I returned to the United Kingdom knowing that, for the foreseeable future, I would have to work in jobs that had absolutely nothing to do with aviation. The truth is... almost everything outside aviation bores me.

Flying has never simply been a career. It's part of who I am. Without it, I quickly become restless. I even become depressed. One of my first jobs was working in an exotic car showroom selling Ferraris and other high-end sports cars. I won't pretend there weren't enjoyable moments. Driving a Ferrari from one showroom to another certainly wasn't the worst way to spend a working day. But it wasn't my dream. It never could be. Later I moved into finance. The money was good.

Very good. But if anyone ever asks me what the most depressing job I've ever done was, my answer is immediate. Working behind a desk in finance. Without question. Some people are perfectly suited to office life. I discovered very quickly that I wasn't one of them. Every morning I felt as though I was putting on someone else's life instead of living my own. That continued for a couple of years. Then one day my father called. "Son," he said, "there's a new flight school opening not far

from where I live. It's on an island called Langkawi. They're looking for flight instructors, and the airline industry over here is expanding."

My first reaction wasn't excitement. It was loyalty. I remember thinking, Do you honestly expect me to come over there, meet your new Malaysian wife, and betray my mother? I wasn't angry with him. He was still my father. But I was also Mum's son. And the protective side of me surfaced immediately. I went to see Mum and told her what Dad had suggested. I expected her to dismiss the idea. Instead... she completely surprised me. She looked at me and simply said,

"Son, I think Malaysia will be good for you." "I think your dreams might finally come true there." I remember staring at her for a moment. I hadn't expected those words. Looking back now, I realise that moment tells you almost everything you need to know about my mother. She could have let her own feelings influence my decision. She could have told me to stay. She could have allowed the breakdown of her marriage to become my burden. Instead, she did what she had always done throughout my life.

She put my future before her own pain. She wanted me to chase my dream, even if it meant helping me travel to the other side of the world to live near the man who had left her. That takes a very special kind of love. At the time, I had no idea that one phone call would completely change the direction of my life once again. Malaysia was waiting. And with it... the next chapter of my journey.

Chapter 18: My Father

My Father

My father, Mohamed Barakat Senior, was born in Alexandria, Egypt. By training, he was a marine biologist, although he also studied accounting. Like many people of his generation, life eventually took him in a very different direction from the one he had originally imagined. He married his best friend's sister—my mother, Hasnaa. After working for Alexandria Petroleum, he left Egypt in search of a better future and moved to Britain. In the early years, he worked in hotels in central London before building his own company, BluePearl International.

The business imported Egyptian fruit and vegetables into the United Kingdom while exporting British cars and new technology back to Egypt. For a time, Dad became a very successful businessman. Then everything changed. Like so many family businesses, he trusted relatives more than he probably should have. Shipments began arriving spoiled after long journeys. Contracts were lost. Money disappeared. Eventually the business collapsed, and with it, the comfortable life we had once known.

As a family, we experienced both extremes. We knew what it was like to live with abundance. And we knew what it was like to struggle. Looking back, I'm actually grateful for that. It taught us lessons that money never could. If I had to describe my father's personality in one sentence, I would probably say this: He has

a very typically Egyptian confidence. Or perhaps, if I'm being completely honest... a very typically Egyptian stubbornness. In Dad's world, his opinion is usually the correct one.

Everyone else's opinion is there simply to be corrected. It can be incredibly frustrating. It can also be absolutely hilarious. Almost every British comedy that has ever exaggerated the stereotypical foreign father reminds me of him in one way or another. Dad was always much stricter with me than he was with my sisters. He genuinely believed that boys had to be raised differently. That hardship built character. That men became stronger through discipline rather than comfort.

Whether he was right or wrong... I honestly don't know. Earlier in this book I spoke about how seeing the darker side of humanity changed the way I looked at my parents. Today I can honestly say that I have nothing but respect for my father. Many of the qualities that helped me survive prison were qualities he tried to teach me long before I ever understood why they mattered. Eventually the difficult years came to an end when Dad accepted a position at the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates in London.

Life slowly became more stable again. There is one thing I can say about my family with absolute certainty. Whether we had money or not... whether life was easy or difficult... we always stayed together. The love within our family has always been one of the things I am most proud of. It is protective. It is unconditional. It forgives far more than it should. And, in my opinion, that is exactly what a family should be. Of course, no one is perfect. My father has a poisonous tongue.

He can say things that cut incredibly deeply, especially to me. If times are good, he is immensely proud of you. If times are bad, he has an extraordinary ability to remind you of every mistake you have ever made. That's simply who he is. He is also a deeply religious man. Like many religious people I have met throughout my life, he is exceptionally good at finding ways to bend the rules when those rules happen to apply to himself. That contradiction has always made me smile.

My father and I have disagreed more times than I can count. We have frustrated one another. Argued. Driven each other mad. But none of that changes one simple fact. He is my father. And despite all our differences, I love him and respect him for the life he fought to build for our family.

Chapter 19: A taste of Freedom

A Taste of Freedom

Prison isn't all bad. I know that probably isn't what you expected me to say after everything you've read so far. But life is rarely as simple as good or bad. Even in the darkest places, moments of light somehow find a way through. Yesterday was my friend S's forty-sixth birthday. Actually, his birthday was the day before, but his plans didn't quite work out. After years of darkness and

everything I have endured inside Kazakhstan's injustice system, I was eventually given a job at the prison's water supply station.

We'll come back to how I ended up there in a later chapter. For now, all you need to know is that this little corner of the prison became my sanctuary. There is a small garden. Two apricot trees. An apple tree. Every summer I grow tomatoes, cucumbers, bell peppers, aubergines, pumpkins, herbs and rocket. We eat fresh salad almost every day. It's strange how something as ordinary as picking a tomato from your own garden can remind you that you're still human.

S and another friend, whom I'll call Z, restored something I thought I had completely lost. My faith in humanity. After everything I had experienced, I had started believing that society around me had almost completely abandoned its moral compass. Then these two men came into my life. They reminded me that good people exist in every country. Sometimes they're just much harder to find. Kazakhstan has a curious relationship with rules. After a little negotiation—and, occasionally, a little encouragement for the guards— you can obtain almost anything inside prison.

The beauty of injustice... S had planned to cook one of my favourite Central Asian dishes: plov, the traditional rice dish made with meat and carrots that most people associate with Uzbekistan. Officially, cooking inside prison is strictly forbidden. Unofficially... we cook almost every day. The prison food is simply inedible. S ordered all the ingredients we needed. For reasons that nobody could properly explain, the administration refused to allow them through the gates.

The irony was impossible to ignore. S ran the prison's brick factory. Whenever the administration wanted bricks or cement, he made sure they got them. Yet somehow they still refused him a few bags of vegetables. Eventually, as always happens in Kazakhstan, another solution appeared. Somehow. Meat was found. Vegetables appeared. Nobody asked too many questions. Lunch was saved. Instead of plov, we prepared another traditional dish made with lamb and potatoes.

Alongside it we had fresh salad picked from our own garden. We sat together beneath a beautiful wooden shelter that S and Z had paid to build entirely out of their own kindness. For dessert we ate watermelon. Which, of course... is also prohibited. We washed everything down with sparkling grape juice. If you've never been inside a prison, all of this probably sounds rather ordinary. Believe me... it isn't. It reminded me of that famous scene in Goodfellas where the Mafia prepare their own feast inside prison while everyone else eats the standard prison meals.

For a few precious hours... we forgot where we were. That's the strange thing about prison. Even in the darkest places... even when you're living under constant pressure... life occasionally pauses just long enough to let you breathe. To laugh. To remember who you are. It was S who first encouraged me to write this book. He believed my story deserved to be told. If you're reading these words today... then part of the credit belongs to him. For that... I will always be grateful.

Chapter 20: Malaysia Calling II

Malaysia Calling II

If I'm honest, I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about moving to Asia. Especially Malaysia. Up until that point, my world had been fairly simple. Britain. Europe. The United States. And two countries in the Middle East that had become part of my identity—Egypt and Saudi Arabia. I don't think I've mentioned this before, but during my time in Egypt I performed the Islamic pilgrimage twice. Around the same time my father left Egypt, his brothers and sisters also emigrated to Saudi Arabia. In fact, for a short period he even held the position of Executive Director at Saudi Arabian Airlines.

Many of my cousins therefore grew up in Saudi Arabia and hold Saudi citizenship. In many ways, Saudi Arabia became an extension of our family home. Standing in front of the Kaaba in Makkah is one of those experiences that is impossible to describe properly. It reminded me who I was. It reminded me that my faith had never been something imposed upon me. It was something I had chosen to embrace with my own heart. I was born a Muslim. I will die a Muslim. And I say that with pride.

There have been times when it has felt as though much of the world has turned against Islam. That has never weakened my faith. If anything, it has strengthened it. I have made many mistakes throughout my life. Far more than I care to admit. But Islam has always been the compass that brings me back. It keeps me grounded. It teaches me patience. It reminds me that no hardship lasts forever. Earlier in this book I introduced my 40–40–20 philosophy. Work. Family.

Yourself. But there is one exception to that principle. Islam. Because Islam isn't twenty percent of my life. Nor forty. It is present in every part of it. If I were to simplify it, I would simply say this: Islam governs the entire principle. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the will of Allah runs constantly through my thoughts, my decisions, my veins and my soul. With those thoughts in my mind, I boarded my flight to Malaysia. I had absolutely no idea what to expect.

More than anything, I was anxious about meeting my father's new wife. Would it be awkward? Would I resent her? Would I feel as though I was betraying my mother simply by staying under the same roof? My father, on the other hand, could hardly contain his excitement. He met me at Kuala Lumpur International Airport and immediately drove me to a beautiful hotel and resort. The first thing that hit me wasn't the scenery. It was the air. The heat was unlike anything I had experienced before.

I had known hot weather in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. But this... this was humidity. The kind that wraps itself around your body the moment you step outside. And then there was the smell. Even today, when I think about Malaysia, I remember the scent of the rainforest. Yes, many forests have disappeared beneath concrete and modern development. But somehow, at least to me, that tropical fragrance still lingers in the air. It is unlike anywhere else I have ever visited.

The Malaysian people immediately impressed me. Their manners. Their kindness. The way they greeted complete strangers. There was something genuinely warm about them that didn't feel forced or rehearsed. At the time I don't think I appreciated it fully. That would come later. We spent two days at the resort. I remember swimming in the outdoor pool while warm tropical rain poured down from the sky. It was monsoon season. Back in Britain people ran away from rain.

In Malaysia... people often seemed to enjoy it. Afterwards we boarded a bus for the long journey to the small village where my father was living. The further we travelled, the greener everything became. Soon I began seeing animals that I had only ever seen in documentaries. Monitor lizards. Monkeys. Brightly coloured tropical birds. Wildlife wandering freely beside the road. It reminded me how different every continent really is. In America I had seen animals that had lived in my imagination since childhood.

Coyotes. Roadrunners. The landscapes I recognised from Hollywood films. The accents I had heard in television series like Dallas and countless westerns. And, of course, the unmistakable California habit of calling everyone "dude." Malaysia was completely different. It felt as though I had stepped inside one of Sir David Attenborough's documentaries. As a child I had spent hours glued to the television watching him explore the natural world. Now I was living inside one of those programmes.

Almost everyone spoke English, but with a wonderfully unique Malaysian accent. And every sentence seemed to end with one word. "Lah." The funnier the conversation became... the longer the "laaaaaah." Then came the food. My first impressions were... challenging. I wasn't used to sugar appearing in my main meals. Sweet and spicy together completely confused my taste buds. Indian and Pakistani curries made perfect sense to me. Malaysian cooking was something entirely different.

Dishes such as rendang often combined spices with coconut milk and subtle sweetness. At first... I honestly didn't enjoy it. But taste has a funny way of changing. Before long I found myself craving exactly those flavours I had once struggled to understand. Fortunately there was one thing I loved from the very beginning. The fruit. I had never seen such abundance. Mangosteen. Longan—what many locals called "cat's eyes." Durian. A fruit that many people around the world can't stand.

I absolutely loved it. Its rich, creamy texture and unique flavour fascinated me from the first bite. Then there were mangoes. Pineapples. Coconuts. Bananas. Papayas. Fruit seemed to grow everywhere. That was one of the biggest differences between Malaysia and Britain. When I was growing up in London, I remember apple and pear trees growing beside roads. Gradually they disappeared as councils cut many of them down. In Malaysia, wherever you travelled, banana plants and mango trees seemed to line the roads.

Nature wasn't something people visited. It was simply part of everyday life. And I was only just beginning to discover it.

Chapter 21: Island Life

Island Life

My father had settled in a small village called Kuala Kedah. He had found exactly the kind of community where he thrived. His Arabic heritage and knowledge of Islam earned him enormous respect among the local people, and he loved every minute of it. His wife absolutely adored him. To put it politely, she wasn't exactly the woman I had imagined my father ending up with. She was considerably overweight, and I struggled to understand what he saw in her. But one thing was beyond question—she worshipped the ground he walked on.

And if there is one thing my father has always enjoyed... it's being placed on a pedestal. Unfortunately, from the moment I arrived, she and I never really got along. Perhaps she saw me as a reminder of my father's previous life. Perhaps I resented the situation more than I realised. Whatever the reason, there was tension from the very beginning. I slept in a spare room that seemed to have collected years of dust. A tired old ceiling fan pushed warm air around the room, doing absolutely nothing to relieve the tropical heat.

It wasn't exactly the welcome I had imagined. Fortunately, there was something nearby that made everything worthwhile. Langkawi. Situated off Malaysia's north-west coast, between Penang and the Thai island of Phuket, Langkawi is one of the most beautiful places I have ever visited. From my father's home it was about a forty-five-minute ferry ride. Every crossing felt like a postcard. The emerald water. The jungle- covered islands. The limestone cliffs rising from the sea.

It was impossible not to fall in love with the place. I arrived in 2005, only a few months after the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami had struck parts of the region, including nearby Phuket and parts of Langkawi. The island still carried the scars. Many hotels were almost empty. Some looked abandoned altogether. Luxury resorts were charging prices that would have been unimaginable under normal circumstances. Our reason for being there was HM Aerospace. The school had only just opened its doors.

The aircraft hadn't even arrived yet. The company had taken over an old hotel, which must once have been magnificent before being transformed into a flight academy. There I met Major Razi, a former Malaysian Air Force pilot, and Captain Charles, a former Air France captain. Immediately I noticed the difference from America. In California, most of my instructors had been young commercial pilots building hours before moving on to the airlines. Here I was learning from men who had spent decades flying fighters and airliners.

It felt like stepping into a completely different league. They explained the process of converting my FAA licences into Malaysian licences, which closely

followed the British system inherited from the Commonwealth. That meant sitting the full set of UK theoretical examinations. The exams were sent from Britain, completed in Malaysia and returned to the UK for marking. After that, I would complete my instructor training. Then came the promise that changed everything.

Once I had gained experience as a flight instructor, they would recommend me to the owner of HM Aerospace, Halim Mazmin, one of Malaysia's most successful shipping entrepreneurs, and help me secure a position with an airline. For the first time, I could finally see a path towards the career I had dreamed about since childhood. There was only one problem. Money. By now my aviation training had already cost my family tens of thousands of dollars. California had emptied our savings.

Malaysia demanded even more. My parents had sacrificed everything they could. Even my sister had lent me a substantial amount of money to help keep the dream alive. I knew I couldn't keep asking. It was time to start earning my own living. The school told us the aircraft would arrive in two months. I returned briefly to Britain to collect everything I needed before flying back to Malaysia a month later. This time, I stayed on Langkawi itself. And that was when I truly discovered island life.

Chapter 22: Captain Barakat

Captain Barakat

Life on Langkawi moved at its own pace. Nobody seemed to be in a hurry. Everything happened "tomorrow." Or the day after. It was true island life. And I loved it. Did I mention that Langkawi is duty- free? Yes... you heard that correctly. Duty-free cigarettes. Duty-free alcohol. Tiny reggae bars. Retro beach bars built from wood and bamboo. Little huts overlooking the sea where you could sit for hours listening to the waves. Beer was often cheaper than bottled water.

A bottle of vodka that would have cost around £12 in Britain could be bought for about £2. Even in the bars, a full bottle with mixers and table service cost little more than £20. It almost encouraged you to drink. The island had a wonderfully lawless feel to it. Not dangerous... just free. And then there was the seafood. Fresh prawns. Crabs. Lobsters. Fish caught the same morning. I ate prawn fried rice almost every day for the equivalent of about one pound.

Sometimes I'd order a whole grilled sea bass for around £2.50. Coming from London... it felt unbelievable. Gradually more students began arriving. Many were cadets sponsored by Malaysia Airlines. At the same time, more instructors joined the academy. Captain Sayed, a former Boeing 747 captain. Captain Palta, a former Indian Air Force fighter pilot. Every instructor seemed to have an extraordinary aviation background. Training, however, was completely different from California.

In America, I had climbed into an aircraft almost immediately. Flying came first. Theory supported the flying. In Malaysia, following the British system,

everything happened the other way around. Nearly an entire year was spent sitting in classrooms studying ground school. At times it felt as though I had gone back to secondary school. Personally, I believe the American system made far more sense. An introductory flight allows a student to understand why they are learning the theory.

Without that experience, many students struggled to connect classroom knowledge with the real world. For me... it was frustrating. To make matters worse, I have to admit that I probably wasn't the model student. Langkawi had distracted me. Between the beaches, the bars and island life, I spent far more time enjoying myself than I should have. I was probably drunk for half of that year. Somehow... I still passed almost every examination. Almost. Performance B defeated me.

Not because I didn't understand it. I failed by a single question. That one question cost me another £700 to resit the examination. It was a painful lesson. Fortunately, I passed the resit. Now all that remained was to wait. The first aircraft finally arrived. Beautiful Austrian-built Diamond aircraft equipped with modern Garmin glass cockpits. Compared with the old, battered Piper Warriors I had flown in California, these machines felt as though they belonged to another generation.

Modern. Elegant. Sophisticated. Flying them over the emerald waters and jungle-covered islands of Langkawi remains some of the most beautiful flying I have ever experienced. My licence conversion instructor was a man called Cornell Nordin. To describe Cornell as unusual would be a spectacular understatement. He was completely insane. A former fighter pilot, Cornell believed that anyone lucky enough to fly with him also deserved constant abuse. Slaps around the back of the head.

The occasional punch on the arm. Endless swearing. Endless shouting. In Malaysia they have a word for it. "Ragging." Cornell considered it part of the training. To anyone watching from the outside... he probably looked like an absolute psychopath. But if you could survive his personality... you discovered something remarkable. His flying ability was extraordinary. Without question, he was one of the finest pilots I have ever flown with. As a former military instructor, he constantly pushed both the aircraft and his students to their limits.

Sometimes... if I'm completely honest... beyond the limits. Far beyond what the aircraft manufacturer probably intended. Some of the manoeuvres we flew would make safety inspectors faint. Looking back today... it was complete madness. And I loved every second of it. Before long, I had completed my conversion and instructor training. I finally became a flight instructor. My own students now climbed into the right-hand seat. They addressed me respectfully as "Captain Barakat."

The title still felt strange. Only a few years earlier I had been flying around California wearing jeans, trainers and a hoodie. Now I wore a crisp white pilot's shirt with four gold stripes on my shoulders. The uniform wasn't what made me a

pilot. The responsibility did. For the first time in my life, I wasn't just flying aeroplanes. I was shaping the next generation of pilots. And that was a responsibility I carried with enormous pride.

Chapter 23: Time to Spread My Wing's

Time to Spread My Wings

After almost four years on Langkawi—known as the Island of Eagles—I began to feel something I had never expected. I felt trapped. When I first arrived, the island had seemed like paradise. The beaches. The jungle. The flying. The slow pace of life. It had given me everything I needed at that stage of my career. But paradise has a strange way of becoming a prison if you stay there too long. By then I had logged more than 1,500 flying hours. That was the magic number needed to unlock my frozen ATPL.

There was still one important requirement remaining. I needed experience flying aircraft weighing more than 5,700 kilograms. That meant only one thing. It was time to join an airline. Over the years I had trained countless cadets from their very first lesson all the way to graduation. From zero to hero. One by one I watched them leave. Many of them joined Malaysia Airlines and other carriers throughout Asia. Sometimes I would hear their voices on the radio flying Boeing and Airbus aircraft while I remained behind, teaching the next generation.

I was proud of them. But I couldn't help wondering... when would it be my turn? Almost everyone important in my life had visited me on Langkawi. My mother came several times. My sisters visited. Friends. Cousins. Even a few well-known Egyptian actors and celebrities spent time on the island. By now I knew every beach, every restaurant, every hidden corner and every shortcut. I had become the unofficial tour guide for anyone who came to visit. Yet despite all of its beauty...

the island had started to feel small. I needed a new challenge. Every evening I searched the internet for airline vacancies. Application after application. Anything that might move my career forward. By this point many of the original instructors had already left HM Aerospace. Major Razi had moved to another academy. Others had continued their own journeys. I eventually sat down with Brigadier Ranjit, who had become the Chief Flying Instructor. I reminded him of the promise that had been made years earlier.

The promise that HM Aerospace would help me move into an airline once I had gained enough experience. His answer disappointed me. "We need you here." He explained that Halim Mazmin was far too busy to concern himself with requests like mine. Fortunately, Halim occasionally visited the academy. When I finally had the opportunity, I approached him myself. His answer was honest. Brutally honest. "Barakat," he said, "we have a two-year backlog of cadets waiting to graduate. Helping you leave for an airline would be like clipping my own

wings. I need you here. Sign another two-year contract and I'll give you a promotion and a bonus."

I looked at him in silence. His face showed no emotion as he broke the promise that had brought me halfway around the world. Perhaps he thought it was simply business. Maybe it was. But I have always believed that a promise is a promise. If I give someone my word... I keep it. Then, only a few days later, everything changed. An email arrived from CAE, one of the world's leading airline training organisations. AirAsia—Malaysia's first low-cost airline—was recruiting Airbus A320 First Officers through a pilot preparation programme.

The arrangement was straightforward. Candidates would pay for their own Airbus type rating, and successful graduates would receive employment with the airline. It was an expensive opportunity. But it was exactly the opportunity I had been waiting for. I attended the selection process. I passed. Shortly afterwards, the offer letter arrived. I walked straight back into HM Aerospace and informed the Chief Flying Instructor that I was leaving. My contract had only a few weeks left before it expired.

His reaction was immediate. "You have to give us three months' notice." I disagreed. "I haven't signed another contract," I replied. "My agreement expires in three weeks. After that, I'm free to leave." The discussion quickly became heated. Finally, he looked at me and said something I have never forgotten. "If you leave, Halim will make sure AirAsia never hires you." Apparently Halim Mazmin and AirAsia's founder and CEO, Tony Fernandes, were good friends.

It was intended as a warning. Perhaps even a threat. But by then my decision had already been made. I had spent four unforgettable years on the Island of Eagles. It had taught me how to fly. How to teach. How to lead. Now it was time to discover whether I truly belonged in the cockpit of an airliner. Goodbye, Langkawi. Hello, Kuala Lumpur.

Chapter 24: Promises Made, Promises Broken

Promises Made, Promises Broken

One thing has always fascinated me about human nature. People are remarkably good at breaking promises they've made to help you. But when they promise to hurt you... or take revenge... they almost always find the time to keep that promise. I've seen it happen far too many times. Halim Mazmin was one of those people. Years earlier, he had promised that if I worked hard and proved myself as an instructor, HM Aerospace would help me move into a commercial airline.

When the time came, he broke that promise without a second thought. But the moment I decided to leave... he made a different promise. He told me he would do everything in his power to stop me joining AirAsia. Unlike the first promise... this one he intended to keep. The first obstacle came almost immediately. While I was completing my Airbus A320 type rating at CAE, immigration officers suddenly

appeared claiming that I was working illegally in Malaysia. The accusation was ridiculous.

When I had left HM Aerospace, I had done everything properly. I exited Malaysia, allowed my work permit to expire and then returned on a new visa. There was nothing illegal about my status. It quickly became obvious that these immigration officers had not arrived by coincidence. Someone had sent them. I filed an official complaint. Nothing came of it. The second obstacle was more subtle. Halim contacted the Director of the Department of Civil Aviation and argued that there should be a mandatory six-month cooling-off period between leaving one aviation employer and joining another.

Whether the rule was interpreted correctly or not, it became yet another reason to delay my progress. But the biggest obstacle came when Halim personally contacted AirAsia's Chief Pilot. That single conversation brought my recruitment process almost to a complete standstill. Months passed. Then more months. Every morning I checked my emails. Every afternoon I waited for my phone to ring. Nothing. The uncertainty slowly became exhausting. By this time, my father's life had changed again.

He had separated from his second wife and moved to Kuala Lumpur after meeting Nur. I liked Nur immediately. She was intelligent, kind and genuinely wanted to help people. She happened to be the Director of Malaysia's Employees Provident Fund, one of the country's largest financial institutions—a position carrying responsibilities comparable to those of a government minister. She even helped me obtain a loan so I could pay for my Airbus A320 type rating. Without her support, I might never have completed it.

One day I explained everything that had happened. Nur listened carefully. Then she mentioned that her uncle worked within the Department of Civil Aviation. He made no promises. He simply said that if someone was unfairly interfering with my application, he would quietly make enquiries. A few weeks later, I decided I had waited long enough. Instead of sitting at home feeling sorry for myself, I walked directly into the office of the Director General of Civil Aviation.

His name was Dato' Yahya. I explained the entire story from beginning to end. He listened patiently. Then, without hesitation, he reached for the telephone. Right there in front of me, he called AirAsia. "The restriction is finished," he told them. "Mohamed Barakat is free to be interviewed for the position of First Officer." Just like that... after almost a year of waiting... the door finally opened. The day of my interview arrived. As I walked into AirAsia's headquarters, something unexpected happened.

Almost everywhere I looked, I recognised familiar faces. Former students. Cadets I had taught from their very first flying lesson. Many were now airline pilots themselves. One after another they came over to shake my hand, wish me luck and offer words of encouragement. Seeing them succeed filled me with enormous pride. The interview itself was brutal. Hour after hour of technical

questions. Scenario after scenario. Psychological assessments. Technical discussions.

By the end of the day I was convinced I had failed. The process had begun at six o'clock that morning. By nine that evening, I was mentally exhausted. Then Captain Raj looked at me and asked one final question. "Why should I hire you?" I looked back at him. Completely drained. But absolutely certain of the answer. "Because if you hire me," I said, "no one will ever question your judgement. I'll get through the training, I'll be online before you know it, and I won't cause you delays or failures."

For a brief moment he simply stared at me. Then a smile slowly appeared across his face. "Cocky," he said. He paused. "Congratulations." "You've just got your first airline job."

Chapter 25: Airline Life

Airline Life

I kept the promise I had made to Captain Raj. I completed my line training without causing a single delay and was released onto the line as quickly as possible. I had told him that if he hired me, he would never regret his decision. Now it was my turn to prove it. During line training I quickly realised that AirAsia had recruited pilots from all over the world. Several Europeans had joined around the same time, including a couple of English pilots. One of them was a man named Simon Miller.

Before long, Simon would become one of my closest friends during this chapter of my life. My line training paired me with a wide variety of captains. Some were former Malaysia Airlines commanders with decades of airline experience. Others had come from the Royal Malaysian Air Force. Flying with both groups taught me something that no textbook ever could. There is a world of difference between military and airline cockpits. The former airline captains generally had a calm confidence about them.

They didn't need to raise their voices. Their experience spoke for itself. There was almost a quiet celebrity aura surrounding some of them. The former military pilots, however, often carried the air force into the cockpit with them. Shouting. Swearing. Occasionally throwing things around the flight deck. To them, pressure was simply another training technique. Personally... I knew which environment I preferred. AirAsia was a low-cost airline, and that meant one thing.

Hard work. Very hard work. Six-sector days were common. Flying one short route after another from sunrise until late into the evening. Twenty-five minutes on the ground. Passengers off. Cabin cleaned. Passengers back on. Paperwork completed. Fuel checked. Briefing finished. Push back. Every turnaround felt like racing against a stopwatch. Back then almost everything was still done manually. Electronic flight bags and digital systems had not yet simplified the workload the way they do today.

By the end of a long day, fatigue could make even simple tasks feel demanding. The last thing anyone needed in that environment was unnecessary stress inside the cockpit. To be fair, I understood why some captains became frustrated. AirAsia was expanding at an incredible speed. Almost every week they were flying with another newly qualified First Officer. Training never really stopped. Still... there is a difference between being demanding and simply making life difficult.

After a few months, Simon completed his own line training. One day he told me he had been transferred to East Malaysia. Kota Kinabalu. I had heard the name before. But I had never been there. On my very next day off, I jumped onto a staff travel flight to see it for myself. The moment I stepped off the aircraft, I understood exactly why everyone spoke so highly of it. Kota Kinabalu. The South China Sea. Crystal-clear water. Spectacular sunsets. Towering mountains behind the city.

It was breathtaking. I smiled to myself. "Ladies and gentlemen..." "I think I've just found my next paradise."

Chapter 26: Life was Good

Life Was Good

There are two very different sides to life as an AirAsia pilot. The first is the side the passengers see. The immaculate uniform. The crisp white shirt. The gold stripes on your shoulders. Beautiful cabin crew in their striking red uniforms. Professionalism. Smiles. And hard work. Then there is the side passengers never see. Once the aircraft doors closed for the final time each day, pilots and cabin crew knew how to enjoy themselves. We worked hard. But we played just as hard.

AirAsia staff enjoyed heavily discounted travel across Southeast Asia, and many crews spent their days off exploring tropical destinations. The funny thing was... those of us based in Kota Kinabalu were already living in one. Often, while cruising at 35,000 feet, we'd already be discussing which bar we'd meet in after the flight. The routine was always the same. Land. Complete the paperwork. Drive home. Quick shower. Then straight to Jesselton Waterfront. It became our second home.

The seafood there was incredible. You chose your own fish, prawns or lobster while they were still swimming in the tanks. Before long a duty-free bottle of single malt whisky would appear on the table. Then the cabin crew would arrive. Without their famous red uniforms they somehow looked less glamorous... yet they were still stunningly beautiful. Dinner would slowly disappear. The whisky bottle would slowly empty. The conversation would become louder. The laughter would become contagious.

And before long everyone was in the mood to celebrate. That was life in Kota Kinabalu. Work. Laugh. Party. Repeat. On our days off, our friend Captain Juan from Spain—remarkably young for an airline captain and blessed with the

stereotypical Spanish good looks—would take us out on his speedboat. We would race across the crystal-clear turquoise waters of the South China Sea. Huge grouper drifted beneath the boat. Sea turtles surfaced beside us. Octopus hid among the reefs.

Small tuna, known locally as tenggiri, darted through the water. Every trip felt like something from a travel documentary. Most of us were members of Sutera Harbour, where every Sunday they served one of the finest seafood buffets I have ever experienced. Our apartments overlooked swimming pools, palm trees and the sea. Life genuinely felt like living in a luxury holiday resort. Of course, there was another side to airline life. The romances. Many of the cabin crew dreamed of marrying a pilot.

Quite a few managed to do exactly that within their first year. Our group developed something of a reputation. People jokingly referred to us as the "Playboys." Life was wonderful. There was only one disappointment. The salary. Compared with airline pilots elsewhere in the world, we were significantly underpaid. But by then, money had become secondary. I was doing exactly what I had dreamed of doing since I was a little boy. By my third year with the airline, I had already begun command training.

Flying had never felt like work. It felt like it was what I had been born to do. I've always believed I have a natural connection with any machine capable of speed. Cars. Motorbikes. Speedboats. Jet skis. Anything that moved quickly fascinated me. But aeroplanes... they were always my greatest love. One particular day remains crystal clear in my memory. I was rostered to operate an early morning flight to Phuket before spending two nights there. That morning I drove my car to the airport.

I flew an Airbus A320 to Thailand. After landing, I rented a motorbike at the airport. I rode it to the harbour. Then hired a speedboat. Finally, I swapped the speedboat for a jet ski. By air. By land. Or by sea. I didn't care how I travelled... as long as I was moving. At that moment, I genuinely believed every dream I had ever had had come true. I felt mature. Independent. Successful. I believed I had done justice to myself and to my parents for every sacrifice they had made to help me reach that point.

I also lived with a simple belief. That if I lived my life honestly, worked hard, and never deliberately hurt or disturbed anyone else... then life would continue to reward me by allowing me to pass through it in peace. Malaysia gave me that belief. Later, Singapore would reinforce it even further. Without realising it, I had begun living inside an unrealistic bubble. I came to believe that the whole world was as safe, as honest and as predictable as the life I was living there.

Those happy years slowly lowered my guard. They made me trust too easily. They made me believe that fairness would always prevail. Little did I know that, years later, Kazakhstan's legal system would prey upon exactly that naïve way of thinking. The very innocence that had brought me happiness... would one day become one of my greatest weaknesses.

Chapter 27: Hello Singapora

Hello Singapore

During my years in Malaysia, I was fortunate enough to experience some of the most incredible wildlife and landscapes on Earth. I walked through the rainforests of Kuching, home to enormous pythons and countless other creatures that reminded me just how powerful nature really is. In Langkawi I encountered cobras and giant flying foxes gliding silently across the evening sky. In Sandakan I came face to face with orangutans in their natural habitat. For those of you trying to picture East Malaysia...

if you've ever watched Survivor, you'll have a good idea of what it feels like. Dense tropical rainforest. Remote islands. Crystal-clear seas. A place where nature still rules. My travels also took me into neighbouring Thailand. At the famous Tiger Temple, I found myself sitting beside a fully grown tiger, with its enormous body resting across my lap. It was both terrifying and humbling. In Chiang Mai, I rode elephants through rivers and forests. Experiences like these gave me an enormous respect for the natural world.

They also reminded me how small we really are. Professionally, life was progressing exactly as I had hoped. I was well on my way to becoming an AirAsia captain. It was the career I had spent years working towards. But life has a strange way of changing your priorities. By then, most of my expatriate friends had already moved on. Although the salary at AirAsia provided a comfortable life in Malaysia, it was nowhere near the market value for an airline pilot.

One by one, my closest friends accepted jobs elsewhere. Simon was one of them. He had moved to Singapore to join Tiger Airways. Every time we spoke, he told me the same thing. "You've got to come over here." He absolutely loved it. After spending so many years surrounded by tropical islands, beaches and rainforest, I found myself surprisingly attracted to the idea of returning to city life. Singapore offered something completely different. Tiger Airways also offered a salary that was difficult to ignore.

A First Officer there earned almost the same as an AirAsia Captain. Even more attractive was the roster. Six weeks of intensive flying. Followed by three weeks completely off. That kind of lifestyle opened up a whole new world of possibilities. I had a difficult decision to make. Stay in Malaysia. Sign another five-year command bond. Become a captain. Or... start a completely new chapter. Over the years I had learnt one very important lesson. It isn't the place that makes life special.

It's the people. Was I really going to stay in Malaysia after nearly all my closest friends had left? Remain tied to another five-year commitment? Continue flying for an airline that offered very few overnight layovers and none of the international privileges enjoyed by pilots at larger carriers? Simply for the title of Captain? The decision wasn't easy. So I flew to Singapore to visit Simon. It only

took two days. Those forty-eight hours reminded me that genuine friendship and a sense of belonging are worth more than any promotion.

The Tiger pilots welcomed me as though I had always been part of the team. They made me feel at home. By the end of that trip, my decision had already been made. Before flying back, I stopped by the Tiger Airways recruitment office. They wasted no time. I was immediately invited to begin the selection process. After eight unforgettable years... my time in the country I had grown to love was drawing to a close. Malaysia had given me friendships, adventure, experience and memories that would stay with me forever.

Now it was time for something new. Goodbye, my beloved Malaysia. Hello, Singapore.

Chapter 28: A Letter to Malaysia

A Letter to Malaysia

Before I leave Malaysia behind and begin the next chapter of my life, I want to write a few words to a country that will always hold a special place in my heart. The truth is... I never really left. Even after moving to Singapore, I continued returning to Malaysia to visit my father, and whenever I had the chance, I found myself back in Langkawi for a few days of peace and relaxation. Some places never truly leave you. Malaysia is one of those places. During the years when Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad led the country, the national slogan was "Malaysia Boleh" — "Malaysia Can."

And you really could. You taught me lessons that no classroom, no university and no airline ever could. You taught me patience. I often think about the elderly gardener who looked after the gardens beneath my apartment in Langkawi. Every single day he carefully trimmed each plant. Patiently removed every weed. Never rushing. Always taking pride in even the smallest task. One evening I accidentally left my wallet on the seat of my car. Inside was around one thousand dollars in cash.

When I returned, I discovered that the same gardener had stood beside my car throughout the entire night, making sure nobody touched it. I tried to reward him with one hundred dollars. He politely refused. The only thing he would accept was a simple plate of chicken rice that cost just three ringgit. That moment has stayed with me ever since. It taught me more about honesty than a thousand speeches ever could. For years I hardly worried whether I had locked my front door or my car.

Life simply felt safe. Disagreements rarely ended in violence. Instead, I would often hear the same gentle advice. "Calm down." "You should forgive each other." Those words stayed with me. So did the smiles. And the handshakes that always ended with a hand resting gently over the heart. Such a simple gesture. Yet it carried such sincerity. Malaysians always seemed willing to stop, smile and have a conversation. People genuinely wanted to know who you were.

To me, Malaysians possess a remarkable balance in life. They work hard. They value family. They treat others with kindness. What impressed me most was that, despite Malaysia being a predominantly Muslim country, I rarely felt judged for my own imperfections. People knew I wasn't perfect. They knew I enjoyed a drink from time to time. They knew I enjoyed nightlife. Yet when Friday prayers came, or during the holy month of Ramadan when I fasted, I was never made to feel like I didn't belong.

There seemed to be an unspoken understanding. Each of us is responsible before God for our own choices. As long as we treat others with respect... Work honestly. Care for our families. And do not harm those around us... The rest is between ourselves and God. That outlook left a lasting impression on me. Malaysia gave me far more than a career. It gave me friendships. It gave me confidence. It gave me memories that will remain with me for the rest of my life.

So before I turn the page and begin the Singapore chapter... Allow me to simply say— Terima kasih, Malaysia. Thank you for believing in a young British pilot. Thank you for welcoming me as one of your own. And thank you for giving me eight of the happiest years of my life.

Chapter 29: The Singapore Formula

The Singapore Formula

The very first thing you notice about Singapore is Changi Airport. Before you've even left the terminal, you already have the feeling that you've arrived somewhere different. Everything is immaculate. Everything works. Everything is organised. What impressed me most wasn't the beautiful architecture. It was the attention to detail. Even the taxi rank left an impression on me. In the basement, uniformed attendants wearing white gloves directed passengers towards spotless, almost new taxis with military precision.

There was no confusion. No pushing. No shouting. No chaos. And despite the level of service, the fares were remarkably affordable. From the very first moment, Singapore made one thing clear. This country takes pride in doing things properly. Having spent so many years in Malaysia, I couldn't help comparing the two countries. Malaysia had always felt relaxed. Its attitude was almost always, "Don't worry, we'll help you get there." There was patience. Warmth.

Understanding. Singapore, however, had a completely different mindset. The message here was simple. "Keep up... or get out of the way." Singaporeans even have their own word for it. Kiasu. Literally, "afraid to lose." But after living there, I realised it meant much more than that. It meant striving to be better. To improve. To compete. To never become complacent. That philosophy seemed to run through every part of the country. Everything had been designed with the people who lived there in mind.

East Coast Park offered cycling paths, rollerblading tracks and even cable wakeboarding. The famous hawker centres served food worthy of Michelin stars at

prices almost anyone could afford. The city somehow managed to combine luxury with practicality. I moved into Bayshore Park with Simon, an impressive residential complex only fifteen minutes from the airport. Very quickly, I noticed something else. Singapore wasn't just organised. It expected everyone else to be organised too.

Disorganisation wasn't simply inconvenient. It was unacceptable. People looked after themselves. The country encouraged healthy living. Without even trying, I found myself smoking less. The environment almost pushed you towards making better decisions. Singapore was also unapologetically strict. Personally... I liked that. Everything was clean. Everything functioned exactly as it should. Cars could only remain on the road for a limited number of years before being exported.

Every vehicle carried an electronic NETS card, allowing drivers to move effortlessly through car parks and motorway tolls without stopping. The same system could be used almost everywhere. Fast. Simple. Efficient. That seemed to describe the entire country. My first experience with the Singaporean government confirmed exactly the same thing. By the time I arrived for my company orientation, all my work permit paperwork had already been prepared. I barely had to ask a single question.

Everything had already been processed. I simply signed where necessary and waited for the email telling me when to attend for my biometric registration. It was only later that I realised what had actually happened. While I thought I was interviewing with Tiger Airways... the Singapore government had quietly been interviewing me too. Every document I submitted was assessed. Every background check completed. They weren't simply deciding whether the airline wanted me.

They were deciding whether Singapore wanted me. Only after receiving approval was I issued my FIN number. That single number changed everything. It became my identity inside Singapore. One afternoon, after leaving the office, I walked into a bank carrying nothing more than my employment contract. Within ten minutes, I had opened a bank account and my new credit card was already on its way. After leaving the bank, I wandered into a furniture showroom. Before the end of the day, I had purchased high-quality branded furniture at prices I could hardly believe.

Everything seemed to work. Nobody complicated simple things. Singapore was quickly becoming the country of "Yes." If you met the requirements, the answer was usually yes. The government already knew who you were. Your FIN number connected everything. There was very little bureaucracy for the sake of bureaucracy. People followed the rules because they knew the system was fair, efficient and consistently enforced. Crime remained low because everyone understood that breaking the law carried real consequences.

For the first time in my life, I found myself wondering... What was the secret? How had this tiny island managed to build one of the most efficient societies on

Earth? I was about to discover the answer. And I would find it in the last place I ever expected.

Chapter 30: The Price of Success

The Price of Success

Singapore was luxurious in almost every imaginable way. It was clean. Modern. Efficient. Beautiful. But behind all of that luxury was an extraordinary work ethic. Working for Tiger Airways was demanding. The six weeks on duty could be absolutely brutal. Without question, the hardest flights were the overnight sectors to India. We would sign on around eight o'clock in the evening and often wouldn't return to Singapore until nine or ten the following morning.

There was always something about those flights that stayed with me. The aircraft would be full of passengers arriving from India carrying little or no luggage. As soon as we landed, many of them would rush towards the public telephones to call home and tell their families they had arrived safely. Most of these passengers worked on Singapore's construction sites. It slowly dawned on me that many of the spectacular skyscrapers and luxurious buildings that made Singapore so beautiful had been built by men like these.

I would often see them sleeping beneath construction sites or living in extremely basic accommodation. They worked incredibly hard. Months later I would fly many of the same men home. This time the aircraft looked completely different. Large widescreen televisions. Mobile phones. Electrical goods. Duty-free whisky. Cigarettes. Everything they were legally allowed to take home after months of saving Singapore dollars. To them, what might have seemed an ordinary salary in Singapore represented a small fortune back home.

As I sat in the cockpit watching it all unfold, I often found myself asking one question. Was I flying a modern-day slave ship... or was this simply an opportunity these men had willingly chosen because, despite the hardship, it still offered a better future for their families? Even today... I'm still not sure I know the answer. My own life in Singapore was improving dramatically. The Singapore dollar was a strong currency and the lifestyle was unlike anything I had experienced before.

One of the first things I received was an HSBC Visa Infinite card. Black in colour, it remains the finest credit card I have ever owned. The benefits were extraordinary. Complimentary chauffeur-driven airport transfers in a brand-new Mercedes E-Class. Expedited immigration services. Airport lounge access around the world. Excellent exchange rates overseas. Golf club privileges. Generous air miles. Before long I found myself travelling Business Class on many of my long-haul journeys back to Britain.

It wasn't just a credit card. It felt like a membership to an entirely different way of living. On my three weeks off, I rarely stayed still. Using ID90 staff travel, which allowed airline employees to buy tickets at around ninety per cent off the

normal fare, I travelled constantly. Phuket. Boracay in the Philippines. Jakarta. Bali. Cambodia. China. The Mekong River. The Killing Fields. The Terracotta Warriors. Almost every period of leave became another adventure.

Those three weeks weren't simply holidays. They were recovery. After six weeks of continuous flying, operating through the night, eating aircraft meals and airport fast food while constantly fighting against my body's natural clock, I needed time to recover. Long walks on the beach. Fresh seafood. Traditional massages. Sunshine. Silence. It was finally time for some proper rest and relaxation. Travelling throughout Southeast Asia also taught me something else.

Many of these countries shared similar climates. Similar landscapes. Similar histories. Yet their levels of prosperity were completely different. The greatest difference I personally observed was corruption. After living in Singapore, I came to believe that its greatest achievement wasn't simply building spectacular skyscrapers. It was eliminating corruption from everyday public life. Singapore didn't mind doing business with neighbouring countries where corruption still existed.

In fact, I believe they understood that, outside their own borders, business sometimes required dealing with systems that didn't operate to the same standards. But inside Singapore... there was absolutely no room for corruption. Judges. Senior civil servants. Government officials. They were paid exceptionally well and held to exceptionally high standards. Personally, I believe they were paid so well that there was simply no reason to degrade themselves by accepting bribes.

Whether that is the entire explanation or not, I came to believe that this was one of Singapore's greatest competitive advantages. Western companies could confidently establish their regional headquarters there. Singapore would deal professionally with the complexities of the surrounding region while offering something invaluable. A clean legal system. Reliable contracts. A government that honoured its word. It was, in my opinion, a winning formula. But despite everything Singapore offered...

I often found myself asking another question. Were people truly happy? The competition never stopped. Everyone seemed to be striving to get ahead. To achieve more. To become more successful. Malaysia had shown me genuine happiness. Singapore showed me determination. Neither was right. Neither was wrong. They were simply different. Looking back now, I often think about the expressions in people's eyes. In Malaysia... I saw happiness. In Singapore... I saw determination.

Years later, in Kazakhstan... I would look into people's eyes and see something entirely different. Desperation. But that chapter is still to come... when I take you inside one of the darkest legal systems you are ever likely to read about.

Chapter 31: A Captain at Last

A Captain at Last

Within a year of joining Tiger Airways, I achieved another lifelong ambition. I was promoted to Captain. It was a moment I had worked towards for years. Countless hours of study. Years spent instructing. Thousands of hours in the air. Everything had led to this point. When I first joined Tiger, the airline was staffed predominantly by expatriate pilots. The rapid expansion of low-cost airlines across Asia had created an enormous demand for experienced flight crew, and Tiger had recruited talent from all over the world.

The workload was intense. As a result, pilot turnover was also high. During my first months, I was so focused on settling into Singapore, converting my licences and preparing for my command upgrade that I paid very little attention to what was happening around me. I occasionally heard pilots complaining about changes within the company. At first, I ignored it. Only later did I begin to understand what they meant. More and more of the pilots I flew with were former Singapore Airlines crew.

The explosive growth of the low-cost sector had created unexpected consequences. While Tiger Airways was expanding rapidly, the traditional full-service airlines suddenly found themselves with more pilots than they needed. Singapore Airlines naturally wanted to retain as many Singaporean pilots as possible. Many of those pilots began transferring across to Tiger Airways. From Singapore's perspective, it made perfect sense. If local pilots were available, they should be given priority over expatriates.

I understood that. But it also meant that the balance inside Tiger Airways was beginning to change. The reality became impossible to ignore when some of my First Officers began asking me unusual questions on the flight deck. They wanted me to teach them as much as possible about the Airbus A320. As much as I could. As quickly as I could. Eventually, one of them explained why. The Director of Flight Operations had apparently told them that they needed to learn fast because many of the expatriate captains would soon be leaving.

Not long afterwards, Tiger Airways officially announced that it needed to reduce pilot numbers. To the company's credit, nobody was forced to leave. Instead, expatriate pilots were offered generous voluntary separation packages. It was a fair approach. The package was attractive. And many pilots accepted it. By then, I found myself doing some serious thinking. The salary in Singapore was good. But Singapore itself was expensive. Despite earning more money than ever before...

I wasn't actually saving very much. The work remained relentless. Six weeks of intensive flying. Three weeks off. Then the cycle started all over again. For the first time in a long while... I began looking towards the horizon again. Perhaps another adventure was waiting. Perhaps another country had something new to teach me. Before long... I had made my decision. Goodbye, Singapore. Hello, Vietnam.

Chapter 32: Who am I?

Who Am I?

It was during these years that I found myself asking a question I had never seriously considered before. Who am I? Was I British? An Egyptian born and raised in London? An Egyptian who had simply enjoyed opportunities that many Egyptians never had? Was I a Muslim, as people often identified me in Malaysia? A British Muslim, as I had frequently been described in America? Or was I now simply another expatriate, just another foreign pilot building a life in Singapore?

Wherever I went, people seemed to see me differently. My identity was no longer defined by who I believed myself to be. Instead, it was often defined by how others chose to see me. The more I travelled, the more I realised that something as small as a passport could completely change the course of a person's life. A simple document. A small booklet that fits into your pocket. Yet it has the power to open doors for some while closing them for others. Citizenship can determine how governments treat you.

It can determine the opportunities available to you. Sometimes, it can even determine whether your rights are respected. I began to appreciate that when a country stands firmly behind its citizens on the international stage, those citizens often carry a degree of protection wherever they travel. They are treated differently. People think twice before abusing their rights. But for those unfortunate enough to come from countries where corruption has become part of everyday life, that same protection may not exist.

The difference can be profound. At the time, these were simply thoughts that occupied my mind during long flights and quiet moments alone. I had no idea that one day they would become deeply personal. Because eventually another question would present itself. What happens when a British Muslim finds himself trapped inside a corrupt legal system? What happens when the passport that once seemed so powerful is suddenly no longer enough? The answers to those questions would change my life forever.

They would force me to question governments. Diplomacy. Justice. The influence of politics. And the role the media plays in shaping what the world chooses to believe. Those answers awaited me in Kazakhstan.

Chapter 33: Hello Vietnam

Hello Vietnam

Vietnam wasn't a carefully planned decision. In truth, I was simply looking for a stepping stone while waiting for interviews with some of the major legacy airlines. By now, I felt that years of contract flying had done exactly what I had hoped they would do. Every move had accelerated my career. California had taught me to fly. Malaysia had made me an instructor. Singapore had made me a

captain. Now it was time to think about where I really wanted to spend the rest of my career.

I was getting older. The days of being the "Playboy Pilot" were slowly coming to an end. My sisters were all married. They had children. Their own homes. Their own families. For years I had devoted myself almost entirely to my career. Whenever my parents needed financial help, I was there. Every debt I had ever accumulated had been paid off. I had built the career I had always dreamed of. But somewhere along the way... I had forgotten about myself. When was I going to settle down?

When would I start my own family? And who on earth would want to build a life with someone whose office was thirty-seven thousand feet above the ground? The Middle East seemed the obvious next step. The legacy airlines there offered excellent careers, and I began submitting applications. While I waited, a few friends mentioned a Vietnamese airline called VietJet. "They're desperate for captains," they told me. After spending a few relaxing weeks at my father's home in Malaysia, I decided I had nothing to lose.

I'd fly to Ho Chi Minh City—still affectionately known by many as Saigon—and have a look for myself. Sometimes the best decisions in life begin without any plan at all. As soon as I landed, I switched on my phone and searched for VietJet's headquarters. To my surprise, it was less than a five-minute walk from the airport. Perfect. Backpack over my shoulder and dressed casually, I walked straight into reception. The young receptionist looked up, smiled warmly and asked,

"Can I help you?" She was beautiful, and her smile suggested she certainly wasn't expecting what happened next. I placed a neatly organised folder on her desk. Inside were my curriculum vitae, copies of every licence I held, my FAA qualifications, Malaysian licences, Singaporean licences, my partially completed UK CAA conversion, the last ten pages of my logbook and reference letters from every airline I had worked for. She looked from the folder to me. Then back at the folder again.

"I'm looking for Captain Neil," I said, referring to the Chief Pilot from the Philippines. She disappeared into the back office. Barely a minute later she returned. "Can you do an interview now?" I smiled. "Of course." Behind the rows of office cubicles was a small office where Captain Vee sat casually smoking a cigarette. He welcomed me in. For about five minutes we talked about my career. Then he leaned back in his chair. "I need instructors," he said. "Can you go to France and complete the Airbus instructor's course?"

"I certainly can." He nodded. "Good. Miss Mai will process your paperwork." He paused. "Where are you staying?" "I honestly don't know yet." "When can you start?" I laughed. "Whenever you need me." "Tomorrow," he replied without hesitation. "You'll fly to Hanoi, obtain your Vietnamese licence and complete your medical." Just like that. The interview was over. We shook hands. I had a new job.

As I walked back towards reception, I noticed two familiar faces standing beside Miss Mai's desk.

Something about them seemed strangely familiar. Then it hit me. Craig. And Blair. Two friends I hadn't seen since flight school in California almost fifteen years earlier. Miss Mai smiled politely. "Please take a seat, Captain." Craig looked across at me with his unmistakable Australian grin. "Don't worry, mate," he laughed. "They call everyone 'Captain' around here." Miss Mai immediately looked at him. "He is your captain." I stared at Craig for a second before bursting into laughter.

"Craig, you twat... ...it's me! Moe! From flight school!" The look on his face was priceless. A second later we were hugging each other, laughing in complete disbelief that we'd somehow ended up working together again on the other side of the world. Life really is extraordinary sometimes. Miss Mai then explained that she was about to go on her lunch break and would personally take me to a serviced apartment nearby where many of the pilots lived. "Only on one condition," I replied.

"I get to buy you lunch." She smiled. Within just a few hours of landing in Saigon, I had somehow managed to find a new job... a promotion... rediscover two old friends from California... and arrange a lunch date with a beautiful Vietnamese lady who I would later affectionately nickname "Miss Saigon" after she spent the next couple of weeks showing me around her wonderful city. Moments like these reminded me that the world is full of opportunities. Whenever I think back to that day, I'm reminded of one of my favourite lines from the Sylvester Stallone film Over the Top that I watched as a boy.

"The world meets no one halfway. If you want it... you have to go and get it."

Chapter 34: Chaos Theory

Chaos Theory

If I had to describe my time in Vietnam's aviation industry in just two words, they would be Chaos Theory. Even today, I struggle to understand how the system avoided far more major air disasters than it did. Vietnam is a remarkable country. A nation that endured decades of war and years of communist hardship before opening itself to international trade. Once foreign investment began pouring into the country, everything changed. The economy expanded at an astonishing rate.

A growing middle class wanted to travel. Demand for air travel exploded almost overnight. VietJet was born to meet that demand. Ironically, my previous airline, AirAsia, had spent years trying to establish itself in Vietnam without success. Now Vietnam had created its own low-cost giant. But growth came much faster than experience. The airline desperately needed pilots. More importantly... it desperately needed captains. From my very first months there, I found myself in constant conflict with Flight Operations.

The aviation industry has strict flight time limitations for a reason. Those regulations weren't created by bureaucrats sitting behind desks. They were written because accidents had happened. Every limitation exists because somewhere, at some point in history, fatigue killed people. Yet at VietJet those limits were routinely ignored. It became normal for pilots to exceed one hundred hours of flight time each month. Every week I found myself arguing with Flight Operations because they wanted me to accept duties that exceeded those legal limits.

Every week I refused. To them I was becoming difficult. To me I was simply doing the job I had been trained to do. A captain's first responsibility is not to the airline. It is not to the shareholders. It is not to the schedule. A captain's first responsibility is to the safety of the people sitting behind the cockpit door. The pressure never stopped. I regularly had First Officers arrive on the flight deck telling me they had slept for only three hours. Flight Scheduling had called them repeatedly, asking them to "help" by accepting another flight.

Many agreed. Some because they didn't want to disappoint the company. Others because accepting extra flying brought financial rewards. After exhausting days of flying, I watched pilots arrive at the hotel and head straight to the bar. They drank heavily. Slept for only a few hours. Then climbed back into the cockpit to do it all again. It was the worst example of pilots behaving badly that I had ever witnessed. What disturbed me even more was how normal it all seemed.

Then I began to understand why. Some First Officers privately told me they had paid enormous sums of money to obtain their jobs through a pilot recruitment company connected to the airline. Whether every story was true or not, one thing became obvious to me. Several pilots arrived with only the minimum understanding of the Airbus A320. Many depended almost entirely upon automation rather than understanding what the aircraft was actually doing. Long before I officially became an instructor, I felt as though I already was one.

Almost every flight became another lesson. Within only a few months I was selected to attend Airbus Industries in Toulouse, France, to complete my Airbus Instructor qualification. I was proud of the opportunity. I believed I could help improve standards. Instead... the pressure increased. Because of the enormous backlog in training, I was informed that I would be rostered to fly approximately one hundred and forty hours each month while conducting line training.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. One hundred and forty hours. Forty hours above the legal monthly limit. Then came the part that shocked me even more. I was told I would only be paid for one hundred and twenty of those hours. The remaining twenty hours would go to the owner of Atran Aviation, the recruitment company that managed many of the expatriate pilots. At the time, I didn't even realise that other instructors had already accepted this arrangement.

I simply knew one thing. It was wrong. Every instinct I had as a professional pilot told me that none of this should be happening. I argued. Again. And again. And again. The more I objected, the more uncomfortable life became. I also raised concerns with senior management. During one meeting, attended by Madam

Nguyễn Thị Phương Thảo, the founder of VietJet, several expatriate pilots expressed their concerns about the culture that was developing inside the airline.

Safety. Professional standards. Corruption. We spoke openly because we believed lives were at stake. Her response has remained with me ever since. As I remember it, she looked at us and said: "Vietnam is a corrupt country. That's our way of life. If you don't like it, you should leave." I walked out of that meeting deeply disappointed. We weren't asking for higher salaries. We weren't asking for easier lives. We were asking for safer skies. Years later, after everything I experienced in Kazakhstan, I often reflected on those words.

I still profoundly disagreed with them. But at least they were honest. There was no pretending corruption didn't exist. Kazakhstan would teach me something different. There, the people I believed were part of the problem repeatedly asked the same question. "What corruption?" Sometimes denial is more dangerous than admission. Because if a system refuses to admit its faults... it can never hope to correct them. For me, the decision eventually became simple. No salary...

no promotion... and no career... was worth compromising the principles I had spent my entire life building. One afternoon I had finally had enough. Within an hour, I had packed my bags. I left Vietnam behind. I have never regretted that decision.

Chapter 35: The First Rule

The First Rule

When I left Egypt, I knew in my heart that it wasn't a country where I wanted to build my future. As much as I loved my family, my culture and my heritage, I knew I didn't want to raise my own children there. Years later, when I left Vietnam, I felt exactly the same. It wasn't the country itself that drove me away. Vietnam is beautiful. Its people are warm, hardworking and resilient. It was something else that troubled me. It was the acceptance of corruption.

Over the years I came to believe something very simple. Civilisation is built upon rules. I once read that it is the law that makes us civilised. Even animals live by rules. Wolf packs have hierarchies. Birds migrate together. Nature itself depends upon order. Human societies are no different. Some of you reading this might disagree with me. You might say, "But Mohamed, weren't you happy to use expedited immigration in Singapore? Isn't that simply another way of jumping the queue?"

At first glance, perhaps it appears that way. But I don't believe they're the same thing. Expedited immigration was an official service. It was available openly. Everyone could see it. It existed within the rules. Nobody had to secretly pass money under a desk. Nobody was asked to break the law. Nobody left feeling they had done something dishonest. Corruption is different. Those who corrupt others usually know, deep down, that what they're doing is wrong.

Over time they begin to justify it. Eventually they stop feeling guilty altogether. Then something more dangerous happens. They become comfortable with it. Sometimes even proud of it. That is when corruption becomes culture. I've always been the sort of person who stands patiently in a queue. I dislike people pushing to the front. Perhaps that comes from growing up in Britain. We are taught simple rules from an early age. Stay in your lane. Mirror. Signal.

Manoeuvre. Stop at zebra crossings. Wait your turn. They're such ordinary things that we rarely think about them. But those little rules are what organise daily chaos. Travel to other parts of the world and, in some places, the roads can feel like complete pandemonium. Cars weaving in every direction. Motorbikes squeezing through impossible gaps. Everyone trying to reach the front first. For me, those roads became a metaphor. When enough people stop respecting small rules, eventually larger rules begin to lose their meaning as well.

That same mentality worried me in aviation. How could I honestly expect a safe flight if everything around it was slowly being neglected? The flight plans were disorganised. Cockpit equipment wasn't always functioning as it should. Aircraft waited for maintenance. Runway lighting defects remained unresolved. Pilots were exhausted. Cabin crew were sick. Yet everyone was expected to look the other way and hope nothing happened. Hope is not a safety system. Professionalism is.

That, to me, is the true danger of corruption. It teaches people to ignore today's small problem because tomorrow's consequences belong to someone else. The societies that have impressed me most throughout my life weren't necessarily the richest. They were the ones where people collectively accepted that the rules applied equally to everyone. Not because rules are perfect. But because without them, trust disappears. And once trust disappears... justice usually isn't far behind.

It took me many years, and many countries, to understand that the first rule of every successful society isn't wealth. It isn't power. It isn't technology. It's something much simpler. People must first decide that some principles are never for sale. Everything else is built upon that foundation. And yet, despite everything I witnessed elsewhere, nothing prepared me for what lay ahead. Kazakhstan would, in my eyes, become the gold standard for corruption. There, I would come to believe that corruption had crossed a moral line I never imagined possible—where, in my own case, I felt people were willing to profit from the death of an infant and demand what I can only describe as blood money.

That is the story I am about to tell.

Chapter 36: Hello Hong Kong

Hello Hong Kong

When I left Vietnam, I didn't feel sadness. I felt relief. For the first time in many years, I had absolutely no idea where my career was heading. And strangely... I didn't care. Imagine becoming so exhausted by a place that you

simply walk away from half of your belongings. That's exactly what I did. I left clothes, household items and personal possessions behind in my serviced apartment. They weren't worth carrying anymore. At the airport, after buying a one-way ticket back to Malaysia, I discovered the cost of excess baggage.

Standing in the check-in queue, I opened my suitcases and started giving things away to complete strangers. I wasn't trying to save money. I simply wanted to leave. The possessions meant nothing anymore. What mattered was getting on that aircraft. I had reached my limit. No matter how many times I explained that I wouldn't exceed legal flight time limitations... No matter how many times I refused to reduce mandatory rest periods... No matter how many times I objected to operating aircraft that, in my opinion, should first have received the maintenance they required...

nothing ever seemed to change. Throughout my career there had always been one phrase repeated more than any other. "Safety First." In Vietnam, I often felt those words had become little more than a slogan. Many people were too frightened to challenge their superiors. Those at the top seemed interested in only one question. "How much more can we squeeze out?" Every shortcut was explored. Every limit was pushed. Every possible corner seemed capable of being cut.

Eventually I realised I couldn't change the system. The only thing I could change was whether I remained part of it. I flew back to Malaysia and stayed with my father while I recovered physically and mentally from everything that had happened. Then, out of nowhere, my phone rang. A pilot friend had a simple question. "Do you want to come to Singapore? Hong Kong Airlines are holding a recruitment roadshow." I already had friends living in Hong Kong. But if I was honest, the airline itself wasn't what attracted me.

I simply thought it would be a good excuse to catch up with old friends in Singapore and see what opportunities might exist. I arrived at the assessment completely unprepared. To my surprise, everything felt familiar. For several years I had been preparing myself for interviews with the world's legacy airlines. Hong Kong Airlines followed almost exactly the same selection process. One stage after another, I moved effortlessly through the assessments. By the end of the day, I had a job offer.

For the first time in my career, I had the opportunity to move into long-haul aviation. Until then I had flown almost exclusively narrow-body Airbus aircraft. Hong Kong Airlines operated the Airbus A330, with the brand-new Airbus A350 and Boeing 787 Dreamliner due to join the fleet. The prospect was exciting. Perhaps there was time for one final step in my aviation career. I returned to my father's house in Malaysia with an employment offer in my pocket and an important decision to make.

Little did I know that the decision I was about to make would become the final chapter of my flying career... before the story took a direction that no one could have imagined. Hello, Hong Kong.

Chapter 37: Moral Disengement

Moral Disengagement

Before we move on to Hong Kong, I want to take a moment to discuss a psychological concept that I believe explains much of what I have witnessed throughout my life. It is called moral disengagement. Moral disengagement is the process by which ordinary people convince themselves that actions which would normally be considered wrong, shameful or even cruel are somehow acceptable. It answers a question that has fascinated me for years. How does a prison officer justify beating an inmate?

How does a prosecutor ignore evidence and assist an investigator in fabricating evidence to secure a conviction? How does a judge further assist prosecutors and investigators by creating courtroom conditions that appear blatantly biased and seemingly predetermined to secure a conviction, regardless of the evidence and arguments presented by the defence? How does a pilot knowingly fly while dangerously fatigued? How does an airline manager place commercial pressure ahead of passenger safety?

At what point does a human being stop seeing the consequences of their own actions? The more I travelled, the more I realised that very few people wake up in the morning intending to be evil. Instead, something much more subtle happens. People slowly disconnect themselves from the moral consequences of what they do. Responsibility is shifted to somebody else. Rules become "flexible." Language changes. Excuses replace principles. Over time, behaviour that would once have horrified them becomes completely normal.

Looking back over my life, I now realise I witnessed this process in different forms across several countries. I saw it in aviation. I saw it in business. I saw it in politics. And later, I would witness it inside a legal system. Throughout my career I constantly found myself in situations that made me deeply uncomfortable. I watched pilots exceed legal flight time limitations. I watched exhausted crews continue flying because they felt unable to refuse. I watched commercial pressures slowly become more important than safety.

Every person involved seemed to have their own justification. "We're helping the company." "Everyone else is doing it." "It's only this once." "Nothing will happen." History has shown us that this is how dangerous systems develop. Very rarely does catastrophe begin with one enormous decision. It usually begins with thousands of small compromises. One shortcut. One ignored rule. One excuse. Then another. And another. Until eventually nobody remembers where the line was supposed to be.

What frightened me most was not simply that people were doing these things. It was how comfortable they had become doing them. That, to me, is moral disengagement. Looking back now, I believe I encountered it in many different countries and cultures. But nowhere did I see it become so deeply embedded as I would later experience in Kazakhstan. There, I would witness ordinary people

participating in extraordinary injustice while appearing to believe they had done absolutely nothing wrong.

Understanding moral disengagement does not excuse corruption. It does not justify injustice. But it does help explain how otherwise ordinary people can become part of systems that destroy lives without ever seeing themselves as the villains. With that thought in mind... let me take you to Hong Kong.

Chapter 38: Even Bigger Money

Even Bigger Money

The longer I spent inside, the more I watched what people did when they became desperate. People making calls. People selling property. People asking their families to sell property. People begging friends for money. People beating others to extort money from them. Money. Money. Money. And the more I watched it, the more I began to realise how ridiculous I must have looked walking around here telling everyone: I'm not paying. I'm not playing their game. I remember a conversation with someone I met inside. His name cannot be mentioned here, so let's call him TAK.

TAK understood what he believed to be the fundamental principle of Kazakhstan's legal system down to a T. One day I was complaining to him about all the problems in my case. He looked at me. “Mohamed, nobody cares if you're innocent or not. Everything can be solved with money. They've got you. And if it cannot be solved with money, then it can be solved with big money. And if it cannot be solved with big money, then it can be solved with even bigger money.”

I stopped talking. I sat there and thought about what he'd just said. It reminded me of something else I'd once read. Todd's Political Principles First Principle: No matter what they're telling you, they're not telling you the whole truth. Second Principle: No matter what they're talking about, they're talking about money. And after all these years inside, those words have become increasingly difficult for me to ignore. At the end of the day, if I had a million dollars to spare, no matter how far my case had gone, I believe I'd most likely find myself sitting at home.

That's the absurdity of it. Freedom has a price. And once you start thinking about it that way, you start seeing the same principle everywhere. Like I said before, once they've cut down all the fruit trees, you need to go to the supermarket to buy fruit. Once the streams are polluted, you need to buy bottles of water. Take something that once belonged naturally to everybody. Make it unavailable. Then sell it back to them. And once all of that has become normal, why stop there?

Throw them in prison and sell them their freedom. What could possibly be more valuable? A man will sell his car for freedom. His house. His business. His land. His family will empty their savings. His mother will borrow. His father will sell property. His friends will be asked for help. Because when you're sitting behind a locked door, suddenly almost everything you spent your life accumulating becomes less valuable than the ability to walk through that door.

Perhaps that's why prison changes your understanding of wealth. Three Places I think there are three places everyone should visit regularly if they want to remain grounded. The first is a hospital. Walk through one and look at the people fighting for their lives. People praying for healing. People who would happily exchange everything they own for another year, another month, sometimes another day. Then ask yourself what being healthy is worth. The second is a prison.

Look at the people desperate for freedom. Watch what a person will sacrifice just to go home. Watch a grown man waiting for a telephone call from his mother. Watch someone counting the days, the months, the years. Then ask yourself what freedom is worth. And the third is a cemetery. Walk between the graves. Look at the ground beneath your feet. Because eventually that's the ground that will cover you too. The rich. The poor. The powerful. The prisoner. The judge.

The prosecutor. The businessman. The man with a million dollars and the man without a tenge to his name. Eventually the ground makes no distinction between any of us. Maybe if we visited those three places more often, we'd understand things differently. A hospital to remind us of the value of health. A prison to remind us of the value of freedom. And a cemetery to remind us that none of it lasts forever. Maybe then we'd understand what a healthy life and freedom really mean.

And maybe we'd remember something else: The ground you walk so proudly upon today will one day swallow you up.

Chapter 39: My First Glimpse of Kazakhstan

My First Glimpse of Kazakhstan

Arriving in Hong Kong felt like stepping back into the civilised world. Everything was organised. Everything had been planned in advance. Everything simply worked. During our month-long orientation, the company accommodated us at the Auberge Discovery Bay Hotel. Situated on the waterfront, surrounded by restaurants, supermarkets and cafés, it was the perfect place to settle into a new life. For that first month we had only one job. Convert our licences to Hong Kong Civil Aviation Department standards and complete the company's training programme.

Everything else had already been arranged for us. The buses arrived on time. The MTR was one of the finest metro systems I had ever used. Hong Kong International Airport was exactly what you would expect from one of the world's leading aviation hubs. After Vietnam, it felt as though normality had returned. The only real adjustment was giving up the commuting roster I had enjoyed in Singapore. I was back to flying a full-time airline schedule with regular overnight stops, many of them throughout mainland China.

China impressed me enormously. The scale. The infrastructure. The ambition. Many of my friends eventually joined Chinese airlines because the salaries were exceptionally good. Personally, however, I never felt completely at home there. It

simply wasn't the place for me. Shortly after joining Hong Kong Airlines, I began my conversion onto the Airbus A330. At last I had reached the world of wide-body aircraft. The routes became longer. The flying became more technical.

And I absolutely loved it. Gone were the exhausting six-sector days I had experienced in the low-cost airlines. Instead, I found myself flying across oceans. Hong Kong to Vancouver. Hong Kong to Auckland. Long-haul aviation was everything I had imagined it would be. Except for one thing. Jet lag. People often ask what it's like to be an airline pilot. Imagine waking up almost every morning in a different hotel. A different bed. A different pillow. A different time zone.

Sometimes even in a different season. Your body eventually has no idea what time it is supposed to be. Sleep slowly becomes a distant friend. We still met occasionally... but mostly we just stayed in touch. I tried everything. I trained in the gym whenever I could, hoping physical exhaustion would help me sleep. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes it didn't. If I'm being completely honest, more often than not it was a couple of glasses of whisky together with an antihistamine for my allergies that eventually persuaded my brain to switch off and let me drift into dreamland.

During orientation I met Carlos, a First Officer from Brazil with one of the best personalities you could hope to meet. Along with Mike from Switzerland, he made line training enjoyable from the very beginning. Both were experienced pilots, intelligent, professional and the sort of people who made every flight a pleasure. Carlos also converted onto the Airbus A330 and one day mentioned something that immediately caught my attention. "There's a three-week cargo rotation in Kazakhstan," he said.

"Flying the A330 freighter between Almaty and Istanbul. It might be fun." I contacted Rostering. Apparently very few pilots wanted the assignment. Almost immediately I found myself paired with Carlos for a three-week rotation. Without realising it... I was about to fly into my first former Soviet country. Growing up in Britain, my image of that part of the world had been shaped by James Bond films, Cold War thrillers and endless stories about communism. I remembered the fear surrounding Chernobyl when I was a child.

The Soviet Union had always seemed mysterious. Distant. Almost mythical. By then, of course, Kazakhstan was an independent nation. For many people in the West it was probably best known because of Borat. But for me... it was simply another unknown corner of the world waiting to be discovered. As our Airbus A330 descended through the freezing winter air, I looked out of the cockpit windows. A blanket of cold fog covered the land below, climbing only halfway up the mountains before giving way to the clear night sky above.

From the air, the old Soviet apartment blocks looked grey and lifeless. The streetlights seemed strangely dim. This wasn't one of the great world cities I had become accustomed to flying into, yet my curiosity had been ignited once again. I had absolutely no idea what to expect. The thick Russian accents on the radio

immediately brought back childhood memories of Cold War films, James Bond movies and documentaries about the Soviet Union. Everything felt unfamiliar.

As we lined up on final approach, the runway lighting appeared surprisingly poor, and after touchdown I noticed that many of the surface markings were badly faded and in need of repainting. With the aircraft's anti-icing systems still running, we slowly taxied towards the terminal. Everything seemed underlit. At times it was difficult even to make out the Follow Me vehicle leading us to the stand. This was the Siberian winter I had imagined as a child. Snow.

Vodka. Thick woollen hats. A mysterious corner of the world that, until that moment, had existed only in books, films and my imagination. Now I was finally here.

Chapter 40: First Impressions

First Impressions

You can tell a great deal about a country from your very first impressions. Arriving at Almaty International Airport felt almost like stepping into post-war Vietnam. Old military aircraft sat disembowelled on the apron, slowly rusting away as though they had simply been abandoned and forgotten. The terminal itself reminded me of the domestic airports you find in some developing countries—the sort that see only one or two flights a week. Inside, things were no more impressive.

The customs officer had only one task at that moment: to check our passports. Instead, he spent the next five minutes chatting to the officer in the neighbouring booth before even acknowledging that we were standing in front of him. Eventually he looked up. The oversized Soviet-style uniform. The enormous peaked cap. The expressionless face as he slowly looked each of us up and down, almost deliberately making us feel unwelcome. I'm not suggesting immigration officers around the world go out of their way to make airline crews feel at home.

They don't. But there is usually a sense of mutual professional respect. Here, I felt none of it. A cigarette burned quietly in the ashtray beside him as he lazily stamped our passports without saying a word. Outside the terminal, I caught my first glimpse of old Soviet vans and ageing cars crossing a dull concrete bridge, vehicles that looked as though they belonged in a Second World War documentary rather than on modern roads. Our crew transport was a Mercedes Sprinter van.

As we drove through the city, I noticed small restaurants with Russian signs lining the streets. I found myself wondering what food I was about to discover. I had heard that horse meat was considered a delicacy in Kazakhstan. Would I be able to eat it? The faces around me appeared, at least to my eye, to reflect the region's rich mix of Central Asian peoples. Many people greeted us warmly with "Assalamu Alaikum," instantly reminding me that Islam still formed part of the country's identity despite its Soviet past.

Eventually we arrived at the InterContinental Almaty. It felt like an international hotel that had long since lost its glory. The rooms looked tired. The carpets were stained. The wallpaper reminded me of my childhood during the 1980s. The television barely worked. The mattress seemed to have seen far better days. The receptionist, however, was cheerful, friendly and openly flirtatious. Another thing immediately caught my attention. Many Arabic names had been adapted into Russian forms.

Mohamed became Mohamedov. Ibrahim became Ibrahimov. It seemed as though an "ov" had simply been attached to countless names, leaving visible reminders of the long Soviet influence over the region and its peoples. Standing by my hotel window, I looked across at a huge dark building with the word Nurbank glowing across the top. It looked as though it had been lifted straight out of Gotham City. The irony made me smile. "Nur" means light in Arabic and is also a popular girl's name throughout the Muslim world.

Yet there was nothing light about the building standing before me. Outside, the mountain air carried a faint smell of diesel. Even so, it felt noticeably cleaner than the air I had become used to breathing in Hong Kong. The streets seemed unusually quiet for a city of this size. Almost subdued. Everything felt slower. Different. Unfamiliar. I was exhausted. The flight, the cold and the unfamiliar surroundings had finally caught up with me. For now, sleep was more important than sightseeing.

Almaty would still be there when I woke up. And in a few hours... I would begin exploring a city that, at that moment, I believed was simply another fascinating stop on my journey around the world.

Chapter 41: Discovering Almaty

Discovering Almaty

It was October 2017. The early afternoon air in Almaty was crisp and cool. I'd showered after the flight and changed out of my uniform. A pair of Armani jeans. A hooded top. Armani trainers. A quick spray of Chanel Allure, my favourite fragrance for years. Old habits die hard. Down in the hotel lobby I met Carlos and Tayar, two Brazilian pilots. The plan was simple. We would walk through the park opposite the hotel and make our way to Dostyk Plaza. The park immediately caught my attention.

The trees and wildlife felt like a mixture of Europe and Asia, just as Kazakhstan itself seemed to be. The colours of autumn blended beautifully with patches of snow that were slowly melting beneath the afternoon sunshine. As we walked, we passed a monument dedicated to Soviet soldiers. At its centre burned an eternal flame. Nearby, a few drunks shared a bottle of cheap vodka on a park bench, completely absorbed in their own conversation. The contrast fascinated me.

History. Pride. Poverty. Life simply carried on around them. The walk itself was peaceful. Soon we arrived at Dostyk Plaza. I have to admit... I wasn't

expecting it. The shopping centre was modern, bright and every bit as impressive as many I had visited elsewhere. Our first stop was the Kcell shop. I'd been using international roaming since landing. Normally my provider gave excellent international rates. Apparently Kazakhstan wasn't included. By the time I received a text message asking me to top up my account, I had somehow spent almost two hundred US dollars simply browsing the internet.

I couldn't believe it. I checked the international dialling code. Kazakhstan uses +7, just like Russia. Naturally, I assumed the same roaming tariffs applied. They didn't. Lesson learned. Next came something much more enjoyable. Tayar led us into a salon he already knew. Within minutes we found ourselves enjoying what can only be described as a complete grooming session. Haircuts. Black facial masks. Ear waxing. Nose trimming. The works. A Turkish stylist and several young women working in the salon transformed three tired airline pilots into respectable-looking human beings again.

By this point Kazakhstan was beginning to feel like a country I was really going to enjoy. Downstairs in the supermarket we began exploring the local products. Without hesitation, Tayar picked up a bottle of Beluga vodka. "You have to try this," he insisted. I trusted his judgement and grabbed one as well. Next came the refrigerated section. Black caviar. I'd enjoyed it many times before, but never at prices like these. I kept reaching for the currency converter on my phone.

Compared with Hong Kong, everything felt unbelievably cheap. Premium products that would have cost a small fortune elsewhere were sitting on the shelves at prices that almost seemed too good to be true. Then came our next challenge. Ordering an Uber. The app worked. The communication didn't. Our driver repeatedly phoned us, speaking rapid Russian that none of us understood. As we stood there looking completely lost, I noticed local women simply raising a hand towards passing cars.

The cars stopped. A price was agreed in seconds. They climbed in and drove away. So we copied them. Within moments an old Mercedes C-Class pulled over. The elderly driver looked at us for a second before smiling. "Where, my friend?" "Zayafet Steakhouse." "Ahhhh... two thousand tenge." For him it was probably expensive. For us, it was unbelievably cheap. So far we'd enjoyed first-class treatment at the salon, bought premium vodka, black caviar and still spent very little compared with a normal afternoon in Hong Kong.

Things just kept getting better. The steaks at Zayafet were outstanding. I ordered a 400-gram ribeye. Carlos chose the tomahawk. Tayar went for the sirloin. Everything arrived perfectly cooked over open flames. These people really understood meat. We washed it all down with cold beers. By now I was beginning to like Almaty. Very much. Everywhere we went the women smiled and flirted with their eyes. There was a warmth about the city that I hadn't expected. Back at the hotel, the receptionist, Dina, smiled as I handed over my room key.

She glanced at the Beluga vodka I was carrying. "I'm finishing work in thirty minutes," she said. "Would you like some company while you try your vodka?"

Thirty minutes later there was a knock on my door. Dina was still wearing her hotel uniform. We sat talking over a few drinks while she told me about Almaty's nightlife, the best restaurants and the bars the locals loved. By the end of the evening I found myself thinking something I never expected to think after only a single afternoon.

Almaty was rapidly becoming exactly my kind of city.

Chapter 42: Cracks in the Façade

Cracks in the Façade

Looking back now, Kazakhstan felt to me like a totalitarian country. One thing that immediately struck me was the sheer visibility of the internal security forces. There always seemed to be police everywhere. It gave me the impression that the authorities were less concerned about defending the country from an external invasion than they were about maintaining control from within. If I had to describe Kazakhstan using an analogy, I would compare it to a beautiful villa viewed from the outside.

Elegant. Impressive. Inviting. But once you walk through the front door, you discover walls infested with insects, rats running through the corridors and a building slowly decaying from within. From the outside it appears beautiful. Inside... it feels as though it has lost its soul. The system had drained not only the country but many of the people living inside it. Despite these thoughts, I genuinely continued to enjoy my visits to Kazakhstan. I loved the fresh shashlik.

The Uzbek samsa. The pilaf. I often walked to a nearby coffee house where I'd order freshly squeezed orange juice, relax with a shisha and simply watch the world go by. People frequently approached me, especially when they heard me speaking English on the phone. Many dreamed of travelling abroad. Many wanted to practise their English. The conversations were almost always friendly. Our first real sign that something wasn't quite right came during one of our routine airport transfers.

One afternoon our crew driver simply failed to collect us from the airport. As with any airline operation, incidents like this are immediately reported to the company. What happened next stunned me. The driver somehow obtained the hotel room number of one of our First Officers and phoned him, threatening to beat him for making the complaint. In all my years of flying around the world, I had never experienced anything remotely like it. The company immediately replaced the transport provider.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the end of it. Our new crew transport seemed to attract the attention of the police almost every time we travelled through the city. At first I assumed these were ordinary traffic stops. Then I noticed something strange. Each time the driver reached into his pocket, not for his driving licence, but for cash. The money quietly changed hands. The police waved us on. It happened so regularly that it no longer looked unusual to anyone except us.

One evening, after dinner at Barmaglott, things became even stranger. A car carrying several young men began following our taxi. Throughout the journey they remained on the phone with our driver. Eventually both cars stopped. We were asked to get out. The men demanded money. When we asked why, they casually replied that they needed ten thousand tenge for fuel. Carlos and I looked at one another and laughed. The amount wasn't particularly large, and perhaps because Carlos came from Brazil and remained remarkably calm, the situation never escalated further.

But it left us wondering what had just happened. The most disturbing incident occurred on a night when I had already returned to the hotel. I was flying the following morning, so after dinner I left while the rest of the crew continued enjoying the evening. Earlier they had met two female customs officers at the airport, who later joined them for drinks. The women suggested going to a karaoke bar. The following morning I woke to several messages from the crew.

According to them, the evening had been a trap. Police officers suddenly appeared at the karaoke venue and threatened to arrest two of our Mexican First Officers. Instead of taking them to a police station, they drove them from one cash machine to another until they had withdrawn the equivalent of approximately two thousand US dollars. Only then were they allowed to leave. By this stage my view of Kazakhstan had begun to change. The city still fascinated me.

I still enjoyed the food. I still enjoyed meeting local people. But I had started to understand that there was another side to the country. One that tourists rarely saw. From then on, I made a simple decision. I would keep my evenings quiet. Dinner with the crew was fine. But after that... I preferred to be back at the hotel, ready for the next day's flight.

Chapter 43: A Whirlwind Romance

A Whirlwind Romance

One thing I noticed very quickly about Kazakhstan was how easy it was to talk to people, especially the women. Everywhere I went I seemed to be exchanging phone numbers and arranging dates. Conversations flowed naturally. Unlike in many other places I had travelled, I rarely experienced the awkwardness of trying to start a conversation only to be ignored or brushed aside. You could simply stop, introduce yourself and begin talking. If she spoke English, the conversation usually continued effortlessly.

If she didn't, we found another way. Google Translate became one of my closest companions during those trips. It wasn't perfect, but it was more than enough to bridge the language barrier. Then I met Madina Abdullayeva. The attraction was immediate. I introduced myself. "Mohamed." She smiled, extended a gentle, feminine handshake and replied in her thick accent, "Madina." To my ears it sounded more like "Mat- tina." For some reason, the name immediately caught my attention.

In Arabic, Madinah means city, but to Muslims it represents far more than that. It is the city with which the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is most closely associated, the place where he lived for around ten years and where his mosque stands today. I had never thought of it as a woman's name before. Yet hearing it spoken by her, it sounded incredibly feminine and elegant. We exchanged numbers and began talking through WhatsApp. Over the following days I invited her out several times for lunch or dinner.

She politely declined each invitation. Eventually... she said yes. Madina was tall, elegant and strikingly beautiful. Our first date went wonderfully. After that, things moved very quickly. She seemed to attach herself to me almost immediately. There was something about her that made me feel she needed rescuing. Even now, I can't fully explain why I felt that. She spoke openly about the difficulties in her life and the problems within her family. I'd heard similar stories before from other women I'd dated around the world, and on more than one occasion I'd later realised I had been emotionally manipulated.

With Madina, however, things felt different. This was her country. I could see the environment she was describing. The struggles she spoke about appeared genuine. She fascinated me. And, somehow, I seemed to fascinate her too. Every time she knew I had returned to Almaty, she would arrive at the hotel almost immediately. It didn't matter what she was wearing. Jeans and boots. A simple dress beneath a long overcoat. To me, she always looked beautiful. Very quickly I realised something.

I wanted this woman in my life. Before either of us really had time to think about where things were heading... we found ourselves caught up in a whirlwind romance.

Chapter 44: A Decision Made Simple

A Decision Made Simple

There was an eighteen-year age difference between Madina and me. By then I was thirty-eight years old. I looked after myself. I ate well. I exercised regularly. I took pride in my appearance and, if I'm honest, I think I looked good for my age. Madina, however, had a very possessive and jealous character. Almost as soon as we started dating, she seemed determined to make it clear to every other woman that I was no longer available. The first person to discover this was the receptionist at the hotel.

One morning she simply smiled and said, "Good morning, Mr Barakat. How can I help you today?" Before I had the chance to answer, I watched Madina's whole expression change. She practically leaned halfway over the reception desk and immediately took control of the conversation in Russian. I never even had the opportunity to speak. Later, over lunch, I gently teased her about it. I explained that, in my profession, I worked every day with women who were arguably far more beautiful than the hotel receptionist.

Cabin crew were part of my everyday life. If she was going to become jealous every time a woman spoke to me, life would become very difficult. She didn't want to hear any of it. She simply looked at me and said, "You belong to me. Nobody is going to take you away." At the time... I thought it was cute. The decision to marry Madina became surprisingly simple in my own mind. Part of the reason came from something I had once read in a book about relationships.

For years I had overcomplicated love, constantly searching for the perfect partner. The book challenged that way of thinking. I can't remember the exact words, but the message stayed with me. "Don't overcomplicate relationships. Sometimes you simply have to let go of your expectations and allow people to be who they are." That advice stayed with me. So I made a very simple mental checklist. She was Muslim. That mattered to me more than anything else. She was also a liberal Muslim, much like me.

She never judged me if I occasionally had a beer. She was beautiful. Full of energy. She wanted to experience the world with me. She didn't spend weeks analysing every decision. One day I said, "Let's move to Hong Kong." She simply smiled. "Okay." She was deeply attracted to me. She was forever taking photographs of me and proudly showing them to her friends and family. I stopped overthinking everything. In Islam, marriage begins with the Nikah. Wanting to respect both her faith and her family, I simply said,

"Let's get married." Without hesitation she phoned her mother. Within a few hours her family had told me the amount of the Mahr they wished to receive. Five million tenge. Around fifteen thousand US dollars at the time. I agreed immediately. I withdrew the money in several transactions from cash machines and paid it without negotiation. In my mind I was keeping everything simple. Soon afterwards they invited me to their village. We had dinner together in a nearby restaurant before making our way to the mosque.

The Imam spoke Arabic. Thirty minutes later... we were husband and wife according to Islamic law. That mattered enormously to me. Now I could proudly introduce Madina to my family, knowing she would be welcomed with the respect that comes with marriage in our faith. The civil marriage would come later. For now, the plan was simple. Madina would leave Kazakhstan and begin a new life with me in Hong Kong. Everything was happening incredibly quickly. But the speed matched the intensity of what we both felt.

It seemed as though Madina had become completely immersed in my world... and I was more than happy to let her in.

Chapter 45: Entering the Darkness

Entering the Darkness

How does a whirlwind romance that, in my eyes, became the perfect family end with me serving a twenty-year sentence in one of the harshest prisons in Kazakhstan? How did my life arrive at the point where, after serving more than

seven years, I now sit inside a prison writing this book? I have written this book in stages. Every time I get closer to describing what happened, I become emotionally distressed. Some memories are simply too painful to relive all at once.

What happened to me here goes beyond cruelty. Most religions teach forgiveness. I understand why. But there are some things I cannot forgive. I cannot forgive the recklessness. I cannot forgive the lies. I cannot forgive the suffering that was inflicted, not only upon me, but upon those I love. Almost every day I look up and see the skies filled with ravens, crows and black birds. They circle endlessly above the prison. Hundreds of them. Sometimes they never seem to leave.

To me they have become the symbol of this place. Whenever I watch them, I remember a scene from Blood Diamond. Leonardo DiCaprio's character says: «"Sometimes I wonder... will God ever forgive us for what we've done to each other? Then I look around and realise... God left this place a long time ago."» Those words have stayed with me ever since. They capture emotions that, I believe, many innocent people imprisoned throughout Kazakhstan understand only too well.

I will also never forget the desperation in the translator's voice when she said to me: "Maybe Sophia died so that the world can see what Kazakhstan is." At the time those words made me furious. How could there possibly be any purpose in Sophia's death? How could anyone suggest that something so beautiful had been taken away for some greater reason? Today... I still struggle with that question. But I pray that my beautiful little daughter's face... those eyes that lit up my heart...

that smile that melted every worry... those tiny fingers she used to place gently on my head... may somehow become a beacon of hope for everyone suffering under injustice here. Let the world know who these people are. Let the world know what they are doing. For those of you who know little about Kazakhstan, it is the largest landlocked country in the world and the ninth largest country by land area. It became independent after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The Kazakh people have a proud history as nomads, and modern Kazakhstan is home to many different communities, including Kazakhs, Russians, Uighurs, Tatars, Chechens, Turks, Germans and Jews. Although the country has a Muslim majority, it also has significant Christian and Jewish communities. Kazakhstan sits between Russia and China. Looking back on everything I experienced, I came to believe that its legal system had inherited many of the worst characteristics of both.

Throughout my own case I repeatedly heard people blame "the old Soviet system." Nothing works. Only corruption. Justice, I was led to believe, could be bought and sold. In my experience, investigators, prosecutors and judges often appeared more interested in protecting the system than discovering the truth. The country possesses enormous natural wealth, particularly from the oil fields around the Caspian Sea. Yet despite those resources, corruption allegations have surrounded powerful figures for decades.

Kazakhstan has repeatedly faced criticism from international human rights organisations over allegations of torture, restrictions on political opposition, suppression of independent media and the treatment of civil society. In 2022, during nationwide unrest, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev publicly ordered security forces to "shoot to kill without warning," a statement that attracted international condemnation. Opposition politician Zamanbek Nurkadilov was found dead in 2005 with three gunshot wounds. His death was officially ruled a suicide, a conclusion that many critics rejected.

Opposition leader Altynbek Sarsenbayuly was later found murdered alongside two associates, another case that intensified fears about political violence in Kazakhstan. In 2024, journalist and government critic Aidos Sadykov was shot in Kyiv and later died of his injuries. Ukrainian investigators identified two Kazakh suspects, while the case attracted international attention. Independent journalists have also continued to face intense pressure. The treatment of the editor-in-chief of Orda.kz and legal actions against the publication have, in my view, become another warning sign for anyone attempting to report independently.

To me, this book is not simply the story of one man. It is the story of what can happen when a legal system stops protecting the innocent and begins protecting itself. Everything you are about to read... is how I came to that conclusion.

Chapter 46: Welcome to Hong Kong

Welcome to Hong Kong

Madina had never travelled abroad before. In fact, she didn't even own a passport until I paid for one to be issued in Kazakhstan. By then I had already returned to Hong Kong. I booked her a business-class ticket on Air Astana and spent several days explaining exactly what she needed to do at the airport. She was understandably nervous. Fortunately, during the flight she met a kind lady who smiled and said, "Don't worry... just stay with me and follow me through the airport."

Sometimes that's all a person needs. A little reassurance. As I waited in the arrivals hall, I kept watching the passengers come through the doors. Then I saw her. The moment our eyes met she broke into a run. Before I could even react, she threw herself into my arms. Her arms wrapped tightly around my neck. Her legs wrapped around my waist. For a few seconds it felt as though the entire arrivals hall had stopped to watch. Families smiled. People waiting for loved ones turned to look.

I didn't care. Seeing how excited she was simply to be with me touched my heart. By then I was renting a small one-bedroom apartment in Chianti, Discovery Bay. Like most homes in Hong Kong, it wasn't large. The apartments there were exclusive, beautifully maintained and expensive, but space came at a premium. I think Madina's first reaction was one of surprise. The apartment was much smaller than anything she had imagined. But once she saw the building itself, the facilities

and the breathtaking view across the mountains, I think that first impression quickly disappeared.

She stood by the window for quite some time, simply taking it all in. I don't think she was fully prepared for the lifestyle of an airline pilot. It's a life of constant movement. Constant contracts. Constant change. Every few years you leave one country, one apartment and one chapter of your life behind before starting all over again somewhere else. Over the years I had become completely detached from possessions. I never bought anything I couldn't walk away from within twenty-four hours if a new opportunity appeared.

In fact, I spent so little time at home that there was really only one possession I truly cared about. My bed. Everywhere I lived, the single biggest purchase I made was always the bed. In Singapore I waited six weeks for a chrome-reinforced bed frame that didn't make a single sound. Not one squeak. Then I bought a Sealy Posturepedic mattress. Together they cost several thousand dollars. Some people thought I was crazy. I didn't. You could jump up and down on that bed without hearing the slightest noise.

For an airline pilot, sleep isn't a luxury. It's part of the job. Fatigue is real. It affects judgement. It affects safety. After everything I had experienced throughout my career, I understood that good sleep was one of the greatest investments I could make. The mattress itself was fifteen inches thick with individually pocketed springs. The moment my body touched it... I was asleep. I never even owned a television. Just a laptop. But I also realised something.

Madina would spend many evenings alone while I was away flying. She needed something to make Hong Kong feel like home. The following morning we walked to one of Hong Kong's enormous electronics shopping centres. We wandered through the television department. I smiled and said, "Choose your welcome gift." She looked at me, confused. "You mean... a television? For me?" "Yes." "Choose whichever one you like." At first she hesitated. There were televisions everywhere.

Eventually I gently guided her towards the larger displays. The seventy-inch models. She looked at one and laughed. "Very big!" I stopped in front of the newest Sharp television. Quad-dot display. Full-array LED. 4K. Internet connected. Whatever the latest technology happened to be that year. The picture quality was breathtaking. I stood there quietly without saying a word. She looked at the screen. Then back at me. "Wow..." There was something in the way she said it.

Almost as though she couldn't imagine owning something like this herself. I smiled. "Do you like your new gift?" "It's important that you do because I'm not buying it for me." "I hardly watch television." "It's for you." "So when I'm away at work... you won't feel so alone." She looked at me with that smile I was beginning to know so well. "Yes, hayatım." Hayatım. In Turkish and Arabic, it means... "My life." Those two simple words were worth far more to me than any television ever could be.

Chapter 47: Building a Life Together

Building a Life Together

Madina arrived in Hong Kong carrying a small fake Louis Vuitton handbag she had bought at a bazaar in Kazakhstan. It made me smile. She had never really experienced the world of international brands before. From that moment on, wherever my flights took me, I was always looking for something special to bring home for her. If I flew to Europe, I'd visit the boutiques. If I flew somewhere in Asia, I'd browse through the shopping centres before heading back to the hotel.

I genuinely enjoyed spoiling her. The first time I bought her something from Tory Burch and another outfit from Massimo Dutti, she looked completely unimpressed. She had never even heard of either brand. I laughed as she politely thanked me before reaching for her phone. A few minutes later I watched her expression completely change. She had searched the brands online. Only then did she realise they were actually well-known designer labels. I couldn't help laughing.

Little by little, her whole wardrobe changed. Her phone became the latest iPhone. Her shelves filled with perfumes from all over the world. Designer handbags slowly replaced the fake one she had arrived with. Watching her excitement gave me just as much happiness as buying the gifts themselves. Whenever I was rostered to destinations such as Bali or the Maldives, Madina would often travel with me. She would sit in Business Class just behind the cockpit. Before departure, the cabin manager would make a special announcement welcoming her on board by name.

She loved those little touches. She was living the life she had always dreamed about. And I was genuinely happy to be the one giving it to her. Her family called frequently asking for financial help. At first this surprised me. Later I came to understand that, in many Kazakh families, this was considered perfectly normal. You don't simply marry the daughter. You marry the entire family. For our honeymoon we spent two wonderful weeks in Boracay, staying in my apartment overlooking the sea.

Those memories remain some of the happiest of my life. About six weeks after arriving in Hong Kong, Madina took a pregnancy test. Alhamdulillah... She was pregnant. I smiled immediately. For some reason I was convinced I knew exactly when it had happened. The night of our Nikah. Madina still insists I was wrong. Maybe she was. Maybe I simply wanted to believe it. Either way, none of it mattered. All I knew was that I was going to become a father. And I had never been happier.

Madina immediately phoned her mother. Then she began to cry. They didn't look like tears of happiness. She looked genuinely upset. At the time I couldn't understand why. I assumed she was overwhelmed by the thought of how much her life—and her body—were about to change. I didn't question it any further. Looking back today... I see those moments very differently. The woman I believed

I had married and the woman I would later come to know were, in my mind, two completely different people.

What happened afterwards would reveal a side of Madina that I could never have imagined. A side so dark that I still struggle to comprehend it. But at that moment, I knew none of it. As far as I was concerned, Madina was my wife. Our baby was on the way. Our future seemed limitless. The mask she wore so well would later come off. For now... I remained completely convinced that I had found the perfect family.

Chapter 48: Sophia

Sophia

The second time I saw Madina cry during her pregnancy was after one of our ultrasound appointments. She desperately wanted a boy. When the sonographer smiled and told us we were having a girl, she looked genuinely disappointed. I, on the other hand, couldn't have been happier. I already knew exactly what her name would be. Sophia. During the pregnancy Madina's hormones seemed to change from one day to the next. She became incredibly sensitive. Looking back now, those were probably the purest months I ever experienced with her.

She would hide under the duvet while watching horror films, leaving only half her face peeking out whenever something frightening happened. It always made me laugh. Eating became another challenge altogether. Morning sickness seemed to control everything. One week she would eat nothing except watermelon. The next she wanted only half-fried eggs. Then suddenly all she could manage were fried potatoes with onions. I spent my spare time searching for anything she could keep down without being sick.

For Sophia's development I found the best pregnancy vitamins I could. Sometimes I had to remind her constantly to take them. Late in the seventh month everything suddenly changed. Madina went into premature labour. She was rushed to Princess Margaret Hospital in Hong Kong. At first I didn't fully understand how serious the situation was. Then the doctors sat me down and explained the risks Sophia faced if she were born that early. That conversation terrified me.

I immediately changed my flying roster to overnight flights. Every morning after landing, instead of going home, I drove straight to the hospital. Before visiting hours I crossed the road to the shopping centre. Fresh orange juice. Croissants. Fruit. Yoghurts. Anything I thought Madina might actually be able to eat. I spent my one hour beside her making sure she finished as much as she could. I felt desperately sorry that she had no family with her. I wanted her to know she wasn't alone.

After the morning visit ended, I realised I didn't have enough time to go home before evening visiting hours. So I found a bench outside the hospital. That became my bed. I would sleep there until it was time to visit again. Before going upstairs I bought dinner for Madina, spent another hour with her, then rushed

straight to the airport to prepare for another night flight. That became my routine for an entire week. Thankfully... the doctors managed to stop the labour.

Wanting Madina to have more support, I asked my mother to fly to Hong Kong for the remainder of the pregnancy. She agreed immediately. Madina was incredibly grateful. The two of them became very close. My mother listened patiently to all of Madina's stories about her childhood, her parents and the struggles she had faced growing up. Sophia's due date was the 8th of October 2018. My sister joked that it would be better if she arrived two days later. "10/10," she laughed.

"That's an easier birthday to remember." Sophia had other plans. On the evening of the 5th of October, Madina kept me awake talking until almost four o'clock in the morning. At around eight, my mother burst into the bedroom. "Wake up!" "Your wife is in labour!" Half asleep, I muttered something completely ridiculous. "Don't worry... we've probably got another twelve hours." Then Madina walked into the room. One look at her face and my brain switched on. The baby was coming.

I called the ambulance. Once again, Hong Kong reminded me why I considered it one of the best healthcare systems in the world. Everything happened calmly. Professionally. Quickly. Back at Princess Margaret Hospital I stood beside Madina, helping her breathe through each contraction. At around half past ten that morning I saw what I can only describe as a white balloon appear. I immediately called the midwife. Within minutes... Sophia entered the world. The two midwives and I were the first people ever to see her.

She made me laugh immediately. She had the grumpiest little expression imaginable. Madina's first words were, "Where's Sophia?" The midwife gently placed her onto her mother's chest. Almost instantly she curled herself into Madina as though she had finally found home again. It remains the most beautiful moment of my entire life. When the nurses eventually asked me to leave, I walked outside. I hugged my mum. Then I sat quietly on the hospital steps. I couldn't quite believe it.

I was finally a father. I messaged my family. Then Madina's family. The next surprise came when I returned with my mother to see Sophia. The babies were lying side by side in the nursery. I confidently pointed towards one. "Mum... that's Sophia." Then I looked at the baby beside her. She looked exactly the same. I stared in complete confusion. Every baby looked like Sophia. My mum burst into laughter. "That's perfectly normal," she said. "They all look alike."

I felt slightly embarrassed. Apparently every new father goes through the same thing. Two days later I brought Madina and Sophia home. Our little angel hardly cried at all. For almost two weeks she was unbelievably quiet. She slept. She fed. She slept again. What I remember more than anything from those first days wasn't the lack of sleep. It wasn't the nappies. It wasn't even the feeding. It was her smell. Every parent knows exactly what I mean. That beautiful newborn smell that somehow fills an entire home with happiness.

Sophia weighed only 2.35 kilograms. She was so tiny she fitted comfortably into the palm of my hand. Many nights I would lie in bed with her sleeping against my face, breathing in that beautiful newborn scent and wondering how anyone could possibly love another human being this much. Later, my father told me a story. Apparently I had frightened my own parents in exactly the same way. During my mother's pregnancy I had also caused premature labour. And when I was finally born...

I too had been tiny. Perhaps Sophia had inherited more from me than I realised.

Chapter 49: My Little Angel

My Little Angel

For the first few weeks after Sophia was born, I barely slept. Not because she cried. Quite the opposite. I would constantly wake up just to check that she was still breathing. Every new parent worries. I was no different. Sophia hardly ever cried. She was fed exclusively on breast milk and almost always fell asleep while still latched onto her mother's breast. She loved sleeping on her side. Very quickly she became what I can only describe as the smiling baby.

Wherever we went, she smiled. At strangers. At lights. At trees. At life itself. She seemed to find happiness in everything. Looking back now, I personally only ever heard Sophia cry twice. The first time was when we began introducing solid food. We were in Dubai. I let her try rice, molokhia and a traditional Egyptian herb soup. Her tiny stomach wasn't ready. She developed painful wind and cried until she finally managed to pass it. Madina later told me that Sophia had also cried during the flight to Dubai and after arriving there.

They had travelled one day ahead of me using my staff travel benefits while I followed on the next day's flight. When I heard that, my heart broke. In my mind, I imagined my little girl crying because she couldn't understand where her father had gone. The moment I walked through the hotel room door and she heard my voice... she stopped crying. The second time I personally heard Sophia cry... was on the morning she died. The 24th of October 2019. One year and eighteen days after she was born.

That memory will stay with me for the rest of my life. Sometimes I find myself wondering whether Allah gave her such a peaceful, happy little life because it would be so painfully short. I don't know the answer. It's simply one of the thoughts that still passes through my mind. She never seemed to suffer the problems so many new parents talk about. We didn't experience endless sleepless nights. She was, quite simply... an angel. No matter how exhausted I was after work, the moment I heard her little voice I was awake.

I would take her outside, leaving Madina to rest after caring for Sophia while I was flying. Then we'd prepare her breakfast. Porridge. I'd change her nappy. We'd settle down together in front of the television. Usually Frozen. Sometimes Moana.

She would slowly eat her porridge while resting one tiny hand gently on my head as though she simply wanted to make sure I was still there. Those are the moments I miss most. I miss her more than words could ever describe.

In my mind, I had already planned her future. Sophia was going to study psychology. At weekends I was going to teach her how to fly. She would wait excitedly for Papa to come home from another trip, running to the front door to see what little surprise I had brought back from whichever country I had visited that week. She could have asked me for absolutely anything. I don't think I would ever have been able to say no. Sometimes I still ask myself... How can you love someone so completely...

protect them with everything you have... dream endlessly about their future... and still lose them? Life can be unbearably unfair. No matter what dreams I had for Sophia... No matter what dreams I had for us... God had a different plan.

Chapter 50: The End of One Life, The Beginning of Another

The End of One Life... The Beginning of Another

There are countless memories from that one year and eighteen days that Sophia, Madina and I shared together. I could fill an entire book with them. Every one of those memories is precious to me. Looking back, I had built the life I had always dreamed of. A career that I loved. A beautiful wife. And the greatest gift God had ever given me... Sophia. The only way I have ever been able to describe my daughter is with three simple words. Pure unconditional love.

That is how I will remember you forever, Sophitushki. I pray that your memory will help expose this broken system for what it truly is. Nothing can ever lessen the pain of losing you. Nothing ever will. But if the memory of one beautiful little girl can shine the brightest light into the darkness that, in my experience, surrounds Kazakhstan's legal system... if your story helps protect even one innocent family from suffering what we have suffered... then your short life will already have changed the world more than many people ever do in a lifetime.

Everything you have read up to this point has been the story of my life before 24 October 2019. Everything after this moment... is the story of how that life was taken away. --- 24 October 2019 I wake up inside Bostandyk Police Station in Almaty. I am slowly regaining consciousness. My entire body hurts. My head is pounding. I know I have been beaten. The strangest part is... I remember being on my feet when it happened. As consciousness slowly returns, it feels as though darkness is lifting like a theatre curtain from the bottom of my vision upwards.

Everything gradually comes back into focus. Then I remember collapsing. My wrists are handcuffed. One cuff is attached to my wrist. The other is attached to the wrist of a uniformed police officer sitting beside me. They pull me to my feet. My legs barely work. They drag me a few steps before dropping me heavily into a chair. In front of me stands an elderly, grey-haired Russian man wearing a doctor's

white coat. Without saying a word, he pulls open one of my eyelids and shines a bright torch directly into my eye.

I remember a corner of the room where the wall turns sharply into the corridor. Everything is blurred. As my vision slowly clears, I vaguely recognise a man standing there. It takes me a few moments to realise who he is. It is my wife's uncle. Madina's mother's brother. He is staring at me with an expression I cannot understand. Then, from around the corner, Madina slowly appears. I am drifting in and out of consciousness. She looks at me and quietly says,

"Hayatım... Sophia is dead." Standing beside me, the investigator turns to the translator and instructs her to tell me that Sophia has died. The translator looks at him with visible surprise before turning back towards me. "Sophia is dead," she says. Then, almost unable to hide her confusion, she quietly adds, "I'm not really sure why I have to tell you this." Even in that moment... the absurdity of it stays with me. I hear the words. But my mind refuses to accept them.

I keep repeating the same sentence over and over again. "This is a dream... this is a dream..." Everything fades back into darkness. I lose consciousness once more. What happened after that morning will be told later in this book. But before I can explain how I lost my daughter... before I can explain how I came to receive a twenty-year prison sentence... you first need to understand the legal system that, in my experience, decided my fate. So before we return to the events of 24 October 2019...

let me introduce you to Kazakhstan's legal system.

Chapter 51: Inside the Prison System

Inside the Prison System

During more than seven years inside Kazakhstan's prisons, I developed my own understanding of how the system operates. This chapter is based on what I personally witnessed, the people I dealt with every single day and the conversations I had over many years. In my experience, the ordinary prison police officers were generally poorly educated, yet extremely cunning. They followed orders. Many survived by constantly begging prisoners for cigarettes, instant noodles, sweets and even toilet paper.

Finding a mobile phone inside the prison was one of the quickest ways for them to impress their superiors and improve their standing. The more experienced and calculating individuals were usually found higher up the chain of command. From everything I personally witnessed and came to understand, the government turns a blind eye to the way many officers give themselves "bonuses." The higher an individual climbs through the ranks, the more money they appear to need to collect in order to pay the person protecting and promoting them.

Take your cut... and send the rest to the person above you. That, in my experience, is how the system works all the way to the top. Twice every day, at approximately nine in the morning and again at five in the afternoon, prisoners

stand for roll call. The officers carry laminated cards showing each prisoner's photograph and name. What surprised me most was that many of them could barely read or write. Very often they were accompanied by another prisoner who helped them identify inmates and read the names on the cards.

These prisoners are known as Kozyols. In Russian, kozyol (козёл) literally means "goat." Across the former USSR, related prison slang includes suka (сука), sherst' (шерсть), sherstyanoy, vyazanny, aktivist and kumovka. Within the prison system, however, a Kozyol is a prisoner who carries out many of the jobs that prison officers themselves should be doing. As this story unfolds, I will gradually introduce you to the different prison groups, because understanding them is essential to understanding life inside Kazakhstan's prisons.

When a new prisoner first arrives, he is placed in quarantine. That is where, according to everything I personally experienced and witnessed, the sorting process begins. New arrivals are beaten extremely heavily. After that they are assigned to the group in which they will spend the rest of their sentence. The first group is known by several names: Garem, neprikasaemye or opushennye. Prisoners also call them golubye, meaning "sky blue." The numerical label changes by prison: "69" in Prison 99, "108" in Prison 71 and "64" in Prison 103.

They live completely separately from everyone else. Prisoners who are homosexual, believed to be homosexual or simply labelled as such are immediately placed into this group. Other prisoners are forbidden from touching them or even shaking their hands. It reminded me of being a child when someone would shout that another child had germs and suddenly nobody wanted to go near them. Members of this group are usually given the prison's dirtiest jobs, cleaning toilets and sewage systems.

The next group is the Muzhiki (мужики), often described as seryi, or grey. Then come the Blatnoi, the chorny, or black. These are generally career criminals and gangsters who often knew one another before entering prison. Inside, they regroup and rebuild their criminal hierarchy. Then come the Akhis, also called namazhan or Muslims, associated with zelyony, or green. Many are imprisoned for extremism or terrorism- related offences. Others simply become part of the group while serving their sentences.

Whatever brought them there, they form another major power structure inside the prisons. Finally come the Kozyols, the prisoners aligned with the administration—the red side of the prison system. They act as the bridge between the prison administration and the prisoner population, carrying out many of the daily functions that prison staff should perform themselves. Make no mistake about it. No matter which group appears to control the prison, they are all ultimately controlled by the prison authorities.

Their purpose is simple. To control the other prisoners. To collect money. And to beat whoever they are instructed to beat. They do this extremely effectively. In return, they receive privileges and take their own percentage. Sometimes the Kozyols appear to control the prison. Prisoners refer to these periods as regime

conditions. At other times the Blatnoi hold the greatest influence. During those periods they meet with prison officials to discuss the daily running of the prison.

According to everything I witnessed, they are told who should be left alone and who should be beaten. When the Akhis become the dominant group, prisoners generally refer to those periods as Khout. During these periods the guards largely keep to the perimeter while the internal order of the prison is maintained through the inmate hierarchy itself. Whatever the arrangement happens to be, one thing never seems to change. Every month there are key individuals within each group who have the amount of money requested by the prison chief and the prosecutors ready to hand over.

In return, they receive favours. Mobile phones. Alcohol. Drugs. Privileges. Whatever arrangements have been made. The more money they collect... the more privileges they receive. That was the prison system I entered. Before long... I would discover exactly where I fitted into it.

Chapter 52: One System

One System

You may be thinking, "Hold on a minute, Moe... are you talking about prison guards, police officers, army officers, prosecutors, judges or government ministers?" In my experience, they are all part of the same system. The prison guards are generally recruited from the army. The prison police come from the regular police force. They are usually among the lowest-ranking government officers. Sometimes prison police are fortunate enough to transfer into the local police force.

Above the police sit the prosecutors and the judges. After everything I have experienced, it is difficult for me to say which of the two holds more real power. On paper they are separate institutions. In reality, my own experience led me to believe that they operated hand in hand. Judges have the power to imprison prosecutors. Prosecutors have the power to prosecute judges. Rather than acting as independent checks on one another, I came to believe that this relationship encouraged cooperation.

From everything I witnessed during my own case, I concluded that the purpose of keeping the institutions formally separate was to create the appearance of an independent judicial process while allowing outcomes to be coordinated behind the scenes. The closest historical comparison I could think of was the Nazi People's Court (Volksgerichtshof) under Roland Freisler. Historians have described those proceedings as show trials in which guilt was effectively predetermined and the courtroom served primarily to give legal form to decisions that had already been made.

That is exactly how my own trial felt. More than once, my defence complained that there was no prosecutor present in court. There was literally nobody standing before the judge arguing the case against me. It raised an obvious question. If there

was no prosecutor... who exactly was the judge deciding between? One moment during my trial has remained with me ever since. My former wife, Madina, stood before the court and began telling the judge that I was innocent and that she had made false statements under pressure.

Instead of carefully examining what she was saying, the judge became visibly irritated. He looked directly at her and asked, "Whose side are you on anyway?" At that moment, I no longer believed I was watching an impartial court searching for the truth. I believed I was watching a process whose outcome had already been decided before the trial had even begun. That single question from the judge confirmed everything I had already begun to suspect. It was no longer about discovering the truth.

It was about preserving a predetermined outcome. That is why, throughout this book, I describe the proceedings against me as resembling a show trial rather than a genuine search for justice. Whether you ultimately agree with that conclusion is for you, the reader, to decide. As I continue telling this story, I will show you why I came to that conclusion.

Chapter 53: When the System Cannot Admit it's Wrong

When the System Cannot Admit It Was Wrong

Before I take you through every door I have knocked on during more than seven years of fighting my conviction, I want to explain something that took me years to understand. In a functioning justice system, being convicted is not supposed to mean that the state can never admit it made a mistake. Investigators make mistakes. Experts make mistakes. Prosecutors make mistakes. Witnesses lie. Evidence changes. New evidence appears. Judges make mistakes. That is precisely why appeals exist.

It is why independent review mechanisms exist. It is why developed legal systems spend enormous amounts of time examining miscarriages of justice. The strength of a justice system should never be measured by its ability to claim: “We are never wrong.” Its strength should be measured by what happens when someone produces evidence that it might have been wrong. That distinction became increasingly important to me as I began studying Kazakhstan's own statistics.

Kazakhstan's courts themselves acknowledge that acquittals are extremely rare. In 2024, a senior representative of Kazakhstan's Supreme Court publicly explained that acquittals account for only around 1.5 to 2 per cent of court outcomes. In 2023, according to Kazakhstan's own Committee on Legal Statistics and Special Accounts, only 97 people were acquitted by courts nationwide. During the same year, prosecutors said that they themselves terminated unjustified criminal prosecutions against 254 people before cases reached their conclusion.

Stop and think about what those numbers mean. An acquittal is not even the same thing as overturning a wrongful conviction. An acquittal occurs before the

system has finally condemned you. The more relevant question for someone like me is: What happens after the machine has already declared you guilty? Kazakhstan's General Prosecutor provided one extraordinary answer. Over a period of three years, the General Prosecutor reported that the Supreme Court acquitted 67 people following protests submitted by the Prosecutor General.

Sixty-seven. Across an entire country. Across three years. And those were cases where the General Prosecutor himself intervened. That number stayed in my mind because by then I understood something horrifying. Getting convicted was one problem. Convincing the system to admit afterwards that it had convicted the wrong person was an entirely different battle. What happens elsewhere? Then I started looking abroad. Britain does not pretend wrongful convictions do not happen.

It created an institution specifically because they do. The Criminal Cases Review Commission, or CCRC, exists for one reason: to investigate possible miscarriages of justice after the normal appeals process has already failed. Between April 1997 and the end of May 2026, the CCRC received 35,331 applications. It referred 921 cases back to appeal courts. Of the 878 referred appeals that had been determined, 618 succeeded. Six hundred and eighteen successful appeals after an independent body looked again at cases that the ordinary justice system had already finished with.

That statistic does not make Britain look weak. It makes Britain look capable of admitting that human beings sometimes get things terribly wrong. Even before conviction, the contrast is striking. In the Crown Court in England and Wales during 2024–25, 3,979 defendants were acquitted following trial, with another 233 judge-directed acquittals where the prosecution case was considered insufficient to continue. During the same period, 5,188 defendants who contested their cases were convicted following trial.

That does not mean Britain is perfect. Far from it. British miscarriages of justice have destroyed lives too. But a judge saying “not guilty” is not treated as evidence that the entire state has somehow lost face. Sometimes the prosecution simply failed to prove its case. That is what courts are supposed to determine. America counts the innocent people it convicted The United States goes even further. It has the National Registry of Exonerations. As of 2026, the Registry records 3,842 exonerations since 1989 and more than 35,983 years lost by people who were subsequently cleared.

Read that number again. More than thirty-five thousand years. Years inside cells. Years away from children. Years away from parents. Years that no government can ever return. The remarkable thing is not simply that America wrongfully convicted those people. The remarkable thing is that researchers, lawyers, universities and institutions openly catalogue those failures. They study false confessions. Mistaken identifications. Police misconduct. Prosecutorial misconduct.

Bad forensic science. Perjury. Official misconduct. They ask: How did we get this wrong? Because if you never ask that question, you guarantee that you will make the same mistake again. Europe is beginning to do the same Europe has now developed the European Registry of Exonerations. By May 2026, researchers had documented 144 European exoneration cases, representing approximately 927 years of wrongful imprisonment. The average exoneree in those cases had spent around six years and five months imprisoned, while the average time between conviction and eventual exoneration was almost twelve years.

Twelve years. Imagine knowing the truth and having to fight for twelve years before anyone listens. I don't have to imagine it. Even Russia Then there is Russia. Kazakhstan regularly blames its problems on its Soviet inheritance, so Russia provides an interesting comparison. Russian judicial statistics for 2024 recorded 512,845 convictions and only 990 acquittals. That works out at roughly 0.19 per cent acquitted among those either convicted or acquitted. That is where the figure approaching 99.8 per cent becomes relevant.

It is a figure that can legitimately be derived from the recent Russian conviction-versus-acquittal statistics. I cannot honestly tell you that Kazakhstan has an identical national rate because the available Kazakh statistics are calculated and reported differently. And I will not manipulate figures simply because they make my argument look better. I don't need to. Kazakhstan's own figures are troubling enough. What about dictatorships? At one point I had heard that even regimes such as Pol Pot's Cambodia, Saddam Hussein's Iraq or Idi Amin's Uganda had better rates of reversing convictions.

I looked into it. I cannot responsibly make that claim. The comparison is statistically meaningless. Under systems such as the Khmer Rouge, huge numbers of victims were detained, tortured, disappeared or executed without anything resembling an independent modern criminal trial. You cannot calculate a meaningful wrongful-conviction reversal rate where many victims never received a genuine judicial process to begin with. And that taught me something useful. I don't need exaggerated comparisons.

Kazakhstan can be judged against the standards it has voluntarily accepted for itself. It has ratified international human-rights treaties. It has a Supreme Court. It has prosecutors. It has an Ombudsman. It has constitutional guarantees. It claims to operate under the rule of law. So let us judge it by those standards. And then the United Nations started saying the same things I had been saying In 2023, the United Nations Committee against Torture examined Kazakhstan.

The findings were extraordinary. Kazakhstan itself told the Committee that approximately 3,880 torture cases had been registered between 2018 and 2022. Around 90 per cent were closed, mainly for supposed lack of evidence. Only 53 cases reached court, resulting in convictions of 68 officials. Ninety per cent closed. That statistic immediately caught my attention. Because I knew exactly what a closed torture complaint looked like. I had been living through it.

The Committee also examined the aftermath of the January 2022 events. Out of 329 cases concerning torture or abuse of authority, 236 had been closed as supposedly unsubstantiated, lacking evidence, or because suspects could not be identified. The UN expressed concern about the low number reaching trial, difficulties obtaining evidence, alleged cooperation between officers and medical professionals to conceal abuse, and investigators effectively shifting the burden onto victims to prove that they had been tortured.

Again... I recognised the system being described. The Committee went further. It said torture complaints could be referred for preliminary verification and then closed without criminal proceedings. It criticised cases where law-enforcement bodies investigated allegations involving their own officers. It specifically called for torture to be investigated according to the Istanbul Protocol, the international standard for investigating and documenting torture.

Then, in 2025, the UN Human Rights Committee said something that could almost have been written about my own experience. It expressed concern that Kazakhstan had not taken meaningful steps to investigate credible allegations of torture and ill-treatment made by people who had subsequently been prosecuted and convicted. It called for independent, impartial and effective investigations and restoration of the fair-trial rights of convicted persons where violations had occurred.

The Committee also said Kazakhstan's judiciary appeared effectively subordinate to the executive branch, pointing to the role of the President in judicial appointments and calling for the independence of the Supreme Court and judicial institutions to be strengthened. It separately expressed concern about defendants being denied full access to case files. This is not Mohamed Barakat saying it. This is the United Nations. Bloody January After the violence of January 2022, the European Parliament also issued an extraordinary resolution concerning Kazakhstan.

It described excessive and lethal force, torture allegations, arbitrary detention and restrictions on independent media. It demanded independent investigations. It called for accountability. And it called on the European Union to consider targeted sanctions against officials responsible for serious human-rights violations. The UN Human Rights Committee later noted that 29 police officers had been convicted of torture connected with those events, but remained concerned that many other investigations had simply been closed as unsubstantiated.

Its recommendation was unambiguous: torture allegations must be investigated promptly, thoroughly, transparently and independently in accordance with the Istanbul Protocol. All of this was happening while I was sitting in prison. Reading reports. Writing complaints. Writing appeals. Sending evidence. Receiving refusals. And slowly realising that the problem I was facing was much bigger than my own criminal case. A justice system should be able to say three words

There are three words every functioning justice system must be capable of saying: “We were wrong.” Those words do not weaken justice. They strengthen it. Britain established an organisation whose entire purpose is to discover whether its own courts got cases wrong. America publicly catalogues thousands of exonerations. European researchers are building databases to understand why innocent people are convicted. None of those countries is admitting that its entire legal system is illegitimate.

They are admitting something far simpler. Human beings are fallible. The dangerous system is the one that cannot admit that. Because once protecting the conviction becomes more important than discovering whether the conviction was correct... justice stops being justice. It becomes self-preservation. And that brings me back to my own case. Because statistics are one thing. Living inside those statistics is something completely different. For more than seven years I have tried virtually every door available to me.

Courts. Prosecutors. The Supreme Court. The General Prosecutor's Office. The President's Administration. The Human Rights Commissioner. The Ombudsman. Kazakhstan's human-rights organisations. British diplomats. International lawyers. International human-rights organisations. And eventually the United Nations. One door after another. One letter after another. One rejection after another. So let me show you what happens when one convicted man actually tries to make a system like this admit:

“Maybe we got it wrong.”

Chapter 54: Seven years of Closed Doors

Seven Years of Closed Doors

People sometimes ask me a question that sounds perfectly reasonable. “If the evidence is as strong as you say it is, why don't you just appeal?” I almost laugh when I hear it. Not because the question is stupid. Because I once believed exactly the same thing. I grew up in Britain. If a serious mistake happened in a criminal case, my instinct was simple: Get a lawyer. Gather the evidence. Go back to court. If that court refuses to listen, appeal higher. Eventually somebody independent will look at the evidence.

That belief survives only until you encounter a system where every door appears to lead back into the same building. I have been fighting my conviction since the moment it was imposed. The first-instance court sentenced me to twenty years. The appeal failed. Further attempts at review failed. New lawyers struggled even to obtain full access to the case materials. At one stage, the General Prosecutor's Office itself identified an error in my sentence and corrected it through its own review mechanism.

Think about the contradiction. The state was capable of recognising that part of the judgment was legally wrong. Yet that same system would not meaningfully reopen the questions going to the heart of whether I should have been convicted at

all. Then came the newly discovered circumstances. New recordings. New statements. New forensic questions. The voice recordings attributed to my former wife. Questions over fingerprints. Questions over DNA. Questions over the repeat forensic examination.

Questions over evidence that had disappeared. Questions over statements witnesses said they had signed without properly reading. And again... we followed procedure. Applications were filed. The General Prosecutor's Office ordered a review under the procedure for newly discovered circumstances. For a moment I believed: Finally. Someone is going to investigate. Instead, the review eventually refused to reopen my case. Among the things my lawyers repeatedly requested was something so basic that I still struggle to understand why it became controversial.

A face-to-face confrontation with Madina. If the prosecution was now claiming that her later admissions had somehow been produced through manipulation or pressure, then put us in the same room. Ask her. Ask me. Record it. Investigate. That confrontation never happened. We requested her interrogation video. We requested further interrogation. We requested fingerprint and DNA comparisons. We requested disclosure of the investigative actions actually performed.

Again and again, the answer was effectively: No. Then we went to the Supreme Court. An extraordinary review application was made under Article 498-1. Rejected. Not after a new trial. Not after hearing witnesses again. Not after resolving all the forensic contradictions. The door simply remained closed. Another motion was filed under Article 491 Part 3, arguing that the law had been wrongly interpreted or applied. That was rejected too. Then the President's Administration.

The General Prosecutor. Regional prosecutors. The Ombudsman. The Human Rights Commissioner. Different offices. Different letterheads. Different signatures. But repeatedly the same experience. A complaint would be sent somewhere. That office would forward it. The receiving office would send an answer. Another complaint. Another referral. Another refusal. Paper travelling around the country while I remained in exactly the same cell. Torture Then there is the subject of torture.

I have repeatedly described what happened to me. The beating after my arrest. The injuries. The treatment in detention. The allegations of forced medication. The conditions in which I was held. The subsequent violence and mistreatment I experienced inside the prison system. Reports were written. Complaints were submitted. The British Embassy became involved. British officials raised my treatment with Kazakhstan's authorities and were in communication with the country's human-rights structures, including during the period when Elvira Azimova served as Human Rights Commissioner.

Yet despite the volume of complaints, I have never seen what I consider a genuine investigation capable of answering the obvious question: What happened

to Mohamed Barakat? The international standard already exists. It is called the Istanbul Protocol. The United Nations says allegations of torture should be investigated promptly, effectively, independently and impartially, and that medical documentation should be conducted according to internationally accepted standards. Kazakhstan has been explicitly reminded of this obligation repeatedly.

Yet that is not what happened to me. Instead I repeatedly received conclusions that there was insufficient evidence. No proper reconstruction. No genuine attempt, in my view, to establish how the injuries occurred. No process that resembled the independent Istanbul Protocol investigation I had spent years asking for. And here is what makes that especially difficult to accept: in 2023 the UN Committee against Torture reported that Kazakhstan itself said 90 per cent of approximately 3,880 registered torture cases from 2018–2022 had been closed, mainly for lack of evidence.

Suddenly my experience did not look exceptional. It looked familiar. The Ombudsman For years we also tried Kazakhstan's human-rights institutions. Complaints reached the Human Rights Commissioner. Later the Ombudsman's structures became more actively involved. There were attempts to visit me. There were problems gaining access. Eventually a special prosecutor came to see me. Every time something like this happened, my family felt hope. Maybe this person will finally investigate.

Maybe this institution will finally ask the questions everyone else avoided. But hope becomes exhausting when it repeatedly produces another piece of paper rather than a result. The UN itself has raised concerns about the independence of Kazakhstan's Human Rights Commissioner and National Preventive Mechanism. In 2025, the Human Rights Committee noted that the Human Rights Commissioner retained only B status internationally and expressed concern about presidential involvement in the Commissioner's appointment and dismissal process. It also raised concerns about the operational independence of the National Preventive Mechanism.

Again... I had spent years experiencing the practical consequences before ever reading the international criticism. KIBHR and the human-rights organisations Then came the NGOs. The Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights. The Coalition Against Torture. International organisations. Lawyers. Campaigners. People who genuinely wanted to help. I am grateful to anyone who has tried. But gratitude does not require me to pretend the result has been effective.

KIBHR has received material relating to my case and my treatment. The Coalition Against Torture has been engaged. Yet as I write these words, after years of complaints, I remain in prison and I still do not have what I consider an effective investigation into the torture allegations. That is not necessarily because the people involved do not care. It tells you something about how little power independent organisations possess when the state itself refuses to move.

Britain Then there is my own government. I am British. For years the British Embassy in Astana has been involved in my welfare. Consular officers have visited me. They have contacted Kazakhstan's authorities. They have raised prison conditions. They have raised mistreatment. They have communicated with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and other state bodies. More recently the Embassy formally registered its interest in my legal proceedings and maintained contact with my lawyer.

My case has reached the office of my Member of Parliament. The FCDO has accumulated years of correspondence. There is now a paper trail stretching between prisons, ministries, prosecutors, diplomats, lawyers and my family. And still I remain here. The British position has traditionally been that Britain cannot interfere with the judicial process of another sovereign state. I understand the principle. But after seven years I am forced to ask: At what point does diplomatic non-interference become diplomatic acceptance?

If a British citizen says he was tortured... if international bodies describe systemic failures to investigate torture in the same country... if serious new evidence appears after conviction... if every domestic mechanism sends the case back into the same institutions accused of mishandling it... then how long can another government continue saying: “You must follow the local legal process”? What happens when the local legal process is the problem? Kate O'Raghallaigh and the United Nations

Eventually the fight moved beyond Kazakhstan. British barrister Kate O'Raghallaigh became involved in preparing my case for the United Nations Human Rights Committee. That process itself demonstrates the scale of what had happened. You do not simply write: “I am innocent. Please release me.” Every domestic remedy has to be documented. Every decision. Every refusal. Every legal argument. Every allegation. Every procedural step. The failures of the domestic system become part of the international case.

And there is a bitter irony in that. For years every rejection felt like another defeat. Eventually I began to understand that each rejection was also evidence. The Supreme Court refusal. Evidence. The prosecutor's refusal. Evidence. The torture complaint closed without meaningful investigation. Evidence. The refusal to conduct the confrontation. Evidence. The unanswered forensic questions. Evidence. The missing material. Evidence. The endless forwarding of complaints from one authority to another.

Evidence. Not necessarily evidence of my innocence by itself. Something different. Evidence of whether Kazakhstan gave me an effective domestic remedy capable of examining the substance of my complaints. What chance does one prisoner have? This is where the statistics from the previous chapter stop being numbers. I am one of the people trying to climb backwards through that system. A prisoner trying to convince the institutions that convicted him to examine whether the institutions that convicted him were wrong.

I have reached a painful conclusion. Without meaningful international intervention, I believe my chances of overturning this conviction domestically are extremely small. That does not mean I stop fighting. Quite the opposite. It means the fight changes. My letters are no longer written only because I believe the next official will suddenly discover justice. I write because every answer creates a record. Every refusal creates a record. Every contradiction creates a record.

Every complaint forwarded back to the organisation complained about creates a record. Every promise followed by silence creates a record. Paper by paper... year by year... they have built something they never intended to build. A history of their own refusal to investigate. People sometimes ask me why, after more than seven years, I still write. Because eventually there comes a point when the question is no longer: “Can Mohamed prove something went wrong?”

The question becomes: “How many opportunities did the state have to investigate whether something went wrong—and why did it refuse every one?” That is why Britain now matters so much to me. That is why the United Nations matters. That is why independent journalists matter. That is why human-rights organisations matter. That is why this book matters. Because when every door inside a system remains closed... sometimes the only option left is to make enough noise that someone outside finally hears you knocking.

Chapter 55: Justice for Sale

Justice for Sale

The previous chapters may have felt technical. Statistics. United Nations reports. Appeal procedures. Conviction rates. Acquittal rates. Judicial independence. For some readers, they may even have been the most difficult chapters in this book. But there was a reason I wanted you to understand them. This is not simply Mohamed Barakat's opinion. This is a system that has been criticised by international organisations, human rights bodies and even by people who once worked inside it.

What I am about to tell you is based on something much simpler. Seven years of living inside it. Behind every statistic is a human being. Every percentage represents a family destroyed. Every rejected appeal represents another person who believed someone, somewhere, would eventually listen. I have lived beside those people. I have shared cells with them. Shared meals with them. Shared hopes with them. Shared disappointments with them. I have watched men who had once been successful businessmen, ministers, lawyers, judges, police officers, accountants and ordinary fathers slowly realise that, once they entered this system, they were all simply prisoners.

One of the very first questions I was repeatedly asked after entering detention was never: "What evidence do they have against you?" It wasn't: "Did you get a good lawyer?" It wasn't even: "Are you innocent?" The question was always the same. "Have you paid?" At first I didn't understand. Paid who? Paid for what?

Eventually I realised everyone understood the question except me. Justice, they believed, had a price. Freedom had a price. House arrest had a price.

A reduced sentence had a price. A change of charge had a price. A successful appeal had a price. Even an acquittal supposedly had a price. I watched families sell their homes. Sell their land. Borrow from relatives. Empty lifelong savings. Beg friends for money. Inside prison I watched inmates extort other prisoners, gamble, borrow and even use violence trying to raise money because somebody outside had promised that the right payment could solve their case.

An entire underground economy exists around hope. And hope is the easiest thing to sell to a desperate family. Every prison has them. Fixers. People who claim to know prosecutors. People who claim to know judges. People who claim to know officers inside the KNB. People who claim to know someone close to the President's Administration. Everyone seems to know somebody. Many of these people are nothing more than professional fraudsters. They understand one simple fact.

When someone is facing ten, fifteen or twenty years in prison... their family will pay almost anything. The money disappears. The conviction remains. The fixer finds another victim. You do not have to believe me. Kazakhstan's own criminal courts have convicted people for operating exactly these types of schemes. The mother of former minister Kuandyk Bishimbayev became the victim of people claiming they could influence legal proceedings surrounding her son's case.

In one case, almost one million US dollars was taken under false promises. In another, enormous sums of money were allegedly requested in exchange for influencing appeal proceedings. Even the family of one of Kazakhstan's most famous defendants became prey for people selling hope. Then there is the case of Ruslan Erdenaev, the former chairman of Kazakhstan's Unified Accumulative Pension Fund. Ruslan is not someone I know from newspapers. He is my friend. As I write these words, only an hour ago we had dinner together inside this prison.

His former deputy is also imprisoned here. I first met him years ago in Prison No. 99. I have spent countless hours listening to Ruslan explain every detail of his case. The public knows his conviction. I know the man. According to Ruslan, the prosecution alleged that billions of tenge had been stolen from the pension fund. Yet he has shown me court documents and repeatedly explained that the money the prosecution claimed had disappeared was ultimately found to have remained inside the banking system.

Despite that, he continues serving a twelve-year sentence. His family also paid approximately 150,000 US dollars to lawyers after being led to believe that his case could be resolved. It wasn't. One of those lawyers was Alexander Blok. Alexander Blok is also not simply somebody I researched. I sat with him. I spoke with him. I listened to him. Before becoming a prisoner, he had been both a judge and one of Kazakhstan's best- known defence lawyers. He understood the justice system from every possible angle.

Judge. Lawyer. Prisoner. Years later I read his interview with Orda.kz. Nothing in that interview surprised me because I had already heard much of it from Alexander himself. He openly described what he alleged were the unofficial prices circulating inside Kazakhstan's justice system. Ten thousand dollars. Thirty thousand. Fifty thousand. One hundred and fifty thousand. Then came the figure that made me stop reading. One million dollars. According to Alexander, that was the unofficial amount discussed for overturning convictions and obtaining an acquittal through the Supreme Court.

One million dollars. I stared at that sentence for a long time. Because it was the same figure that had been spoken about around my own freedom. Coincidence? Perhaps. Perhaps not. I leave that for you to decide. What I know is this. I have personally sat face to face with prosecutors. During one conversation I was told there were simply too many mistakes in my criminal case. According to them, the problems themselves were not difficult to correct. Then came the sentence I have never been able to understand.

"Your problem is that your case is political." Political? I was an airline captain. My one-year-old daughter was dead. My wife had become the central witness against me. I had lost everything. What possible political significance could my case have? Over the years I asked that question repeatedly. Different people offered different explanations. Some pointed towards tensions between Kazakhstan and the United Kingdom. Others referred to investigations surrounding members of Kazakhstan's former ruling elite and their wealth abroad.

Britain itself obtained Unexplained Wealth Orders over London properties linked to members of former President Nursultan Nazarbayev's family before those orders were later discharged by the High Court. Tony Blair's advisory relationship with Kazakhstan also became the subject of considerable public discussion. Did any of those events have anything whatsoever to do with my prosecution? I honestly do not know. And I will not pretend otherwise. But when prosecutors themselves tell a British prisoner that obvious mistakes cannot be corrected because his case is political, then naturally one question follows.

Political for whom? And why? After seven years inside Kazakhstan's prisons I have reached one conclusion. Justice has become a commodity. People no longer ask whether someone is innocent. They ask how much his freedom costs. Some pay and succeed. Some pay and fail. Some are simply cheated. Many lose everything trying. I have watched elderly parents sell the homes they spent their entire lives building. I have watched wives exhaust every family saving. I have watched children grow up while their parents searched for money they believed might buy justice.

The greatest tragedy is not only the corruption itself. It is what corruption does to hope. Hope becomes a currency. Desperation becomes a marketplace. Justice becomes a business. And once a justice system reaches that point, innocent people stop being seen as human beings. They become customers. That is the greatest corruption of all.

Chapter 56: The Price of an Arrest

The Price of an Arrest

When I was arrested in 2019, I was immediately cut off from everything and everyone I knew. I couldn't speak Russian. I knew exactly two words. Spasibo. Thank you. And: Privet. Hello. That was essentially the full extent of my ability to communicate with the world that had suddenly swallowed me. Madina and her family were different. They had grown up inside this system. They understood the language. They understood the mentality. And, in my view, they immediately understood what needed to be done.

The message was simple: Take him. He's a rich British-Arab pilot. Suddenly money began disappearing. There had been $10,000 in the hotel safe, money I had put aside as a deposit towards the apartment I was buying. Gone. The investigator had possession of my wallet and bank cards. Those cards, according to everything I later discovered, were handed to Madina. While I was detained, isolated and unable even to understand what was being said around me, she was able to move around Almaty and access my money.

I would later come to believe that this money formed part of the negotiations taking place around my case. At the time, however, I understood almost none of it. I was still trying to understand one thing. Where was Sophia? Madina's behaviour inside the police station was something I could not process. Every so often I would catch a glimpse of her in a corridor. She would suddenly run towards me. Kiss me repeatedly. "Don't worry, hayatim." My life. "You won't go to prison."

She told me they were discussing three years in some kind of camp. She described it almost casually. According to her, I would be free during the day and simply return there to sleep at night. Then she said something that my mind simply rejected. "Don't worry, hayatim. We will have another Sophia." She would make little heart shapes towards me with her hands. I couldn't understand what I was looking at. Another Sophia? I kept repeating the same questions. "Where is Sophia?"

"What happened to Sophia?" "How can there be another Sophia?" There is only one Sophia. My Sophia. If Sophia was dead, how had neither of us died first trying to protect her? At least one of us should have died before her. That was how my mind worked in those first hours. Nothing made sense. Then I started looking at Madina. And something else didn't make sense. I had been beaten black and blue. My injuries were visible. My face and body showed what had happened to me.

And there stood Madina. Not a scratch that I could see. Not a bruise. Her clothes appeared intact. Even the thin diamond necklace around her neck was still sitting perfectly in place. Yet I would later discover what she had alleged. According to her account, I had thrown her onto the bed. I had climbed on top of her. I had beaten her heavily. She had somehow escaped. Then, according to the allegation, I caught her again at the door. I strangled her. I punched her repeatedly.

Now look again at the woman standing in that police station. Madina weighed around 55 kilograms at the time. I weighed approximately 120 kilograms. I trained several times a week. And after the violent assault she was describing, there she stood before me looking, in my eyes, as though she had simply awakened from a long sleep. Like Snow White. At one stage even the people around her appeared to confront the obvious question: Where exactly are the injuries?

The police initially said that she needed to undergo a medical examination. That made perfect sense to me. If someone says she has been violently assaulted, document the injuries. Photograph them. Examine them. Establish when they occurred. Compare them with the story being told. That is evidence. Then investigator Nurlan Bolatov intervened. His position, as I remember it, was straightforward: "This woman is not under investigation. She is the victim. She has the right to refuse examination."

Fine. She has the right to refuse. But what about me? Do I not have the right to expect the state to prove the accusation it is making against me? If I am accused of violently beating and strangling someone, shouldn't the investigation establish where I injured her? What injuries did I supposedly cause? Where are the photographs? Where is the medical evidence? Where are the marks around her neck? Where are the bruises from the punches? Where is the physical evidence supporting this extraordinary description of violence?

Or had we already reached a point where Madina's words were considered stronger than physical evidence? I didn't understand the system yet. My sisters were about to receive their introduction. They flew into Almaty after learning that Sophia was dead and that I had been arrested. Imagine their state of mind. Their niece, whom they adored with all their hearts, was dead. Their brother was sitting in police custody. They arrived in a foreign country expecting, perhaps, to find another grieving family.

Instead, according to what they subsequently told me, they were taken almost immediately to a dark restaurant. There, members of Madina's family and the man who was about to become my lawyer began discussing something completely different. Money. How much could my sisters obtain? How quickly could they obtain it? Who supposedly needed to be paid? Police. Prosecutors. People who could "help." My sisters had barely arrived. They hadn't even had time to understand how Sophia had died.

And already somebody was calculating the price of my freedom. This was my family's introduction to the same question I would hear repeatedly throughout the years that followed: "Have you paid?" My sisters arrived in Kazakhstan grieving for a little girl they loved with all their hearts. Instead of finding another family united with them in mourning, they found themselves, as they later described it to me, surrounded by people discussing money. To them it felt like being surrounded by hyenas.

Sophia was dead. I was covered in injuries. My sisters were devastated. And somewhere amongst all of that grief, somebody had already discovered a business

opportunity. I had been inside Kazakhstan's criminal justice system for barely a matter of hours. I just didn't understand yet that I had already entered the marketplace.

Chapter 57: Convicted Before Trial

Convicted Before the Trial

During my first week after arrest, I was thrown into one of the grittiest cells you could possibly imagine, underneath the Bostandyk Police Department. I had been heavily beaten. My head was swollen. My back and legs were black and blue from repeated blows from what would later be described during my medical examination as a “blunt object.” A blunt object. Let me translate that into ordinary language. A police baton. My wrists had been sliced open by the old Soviet-style handcuffs.

Everywhere they took me, I was dragged around in those cuffs, with blood repeatedly dripping from my wrists. I was exhausted. Disoriented. Grieving. In pain. Unable to understand the language being spoken around me. And completely isolated from the outside world. What I didn't know was that while I was sitting underneath that police station, a media frenzy had already begun above ground. Within twenty-four hours, I wasn't a British man whose daughter had died and who had been detained while police investigated what had happened.

I had already become: The British man who killed his daughter. Not allegedly. Not suspected. Not according to investigators. Fact. At least that was how much of the reporting appeared to me. Kazakhstan's media began publishing extraordinary details about what supposedly happened inside that hotel room. Some outlets even reported the supposed mechanism of Sophia's death as though the investigation had already established it. Tengrinews was among the media reporting details of the prosecution narrative at an extraordinarily early stage.

Rumours were moving faster than evidence. And what disturbed me most later was that reports presented information as having come from investigative authorities. Police. Prosecutors. The Ministry of Internal Affairs. While I was locked underneath Bostandyk Police Department without even knowing what was being said about me, the state narrative was already escaping into the media. The investigation had barely begun. Yet somehow the story already had an ending.

Mohamed killed Sophia. I had not been tried. The forensic evidence had not been properly tested. Witnesses had not been challenged. Contradictions had not been examined. A court had heard nothing. But outside that cell, the public was already being introduced to me as the man who had killed his daughter. My lawyer During those first days I was interrogated repeatedly. Sometimes by police. Sometimes with my own lawyer present. At least I believed he was my lawyer.

His name was Hizbullam. Only later did I begin discovering things about the man supposedly protecting my interests. I learned that he had previously been a police officer. Not simply a former police officer. According to the information I

subsequently received, he had connections to the very same police department handling my case. Then came another coincidence. He was also a neighbour of Madina's family. And another. He shared their Uyghur background. Ethnicity itself means absolutely nothing to me.

But when you are a foreign defendant who cannot speak the language, surrounded by people who already know one another socially and professionally, those connections become relevant because your lawyer is supposed to be the one person in that room whose loyalty is unquestionably to you. Increasingly, I became convinced that his priority was not defending me at all. In my view, he was assisting Madina. One of the things he appeared particularly concerned with was helping her obtain an official document confirming that she was innocent.

That confused me. I had never heard of anything like it. If Madina was officially being treated as the victim... innocent of what? Why did a victim need an official document declaring her innocent? And why was my lawyer involved in helping her obtain it? These were questions I did not yet know how to ask. I couldn't even speak Russian. Then something happened that required no translation whatsoever. $65,000 One day during that first period of detention, investigator Nurlan Bolatov and my lawyer came down to the cell beneath the police station.

They told me they needed to take me for a blood test. I was removed from the cell. But instead of this simply being a medical procedure, I was taken towards another area at the end of the corridor, away from where I understood the cameras to be. Then the conversation changed. There was apparently a problem with the journalists. The media coverage needed to change. According to what I was told, journalists would have to be paid in order to change the headlines and reporting about me.

The amount required? $65,000. Sixty-five thousand US dollars. Think about the absurdity of what I believed I was hearing. I was sitting inside a police station. The investigator responsible for my criminal case was there. My own defence lawyer was there. The same authorities were supposedly providing information about my case to the media. And now I was being told that money was required to change what the media was saying. Perhaps they expected me to panic.

Perhaps they expected the rich British-Arab airline captain to open his wallet. Perhaps they thought grief, isolation and fear would make me easy to manipulate. They had seriously misunderstood me. Did they honestly believe I was going to hand over $65,000 to the very people I was beginning to suspect were exploiting the catastrophe around me? I looked at them and thought: You have got to be joking. They had beaten me. They had isolated me. My money was disappearing.

My daughter was dead. My name was being destroyed publicly before I had even entered a courtroom. And now they wanted sixty-five thousand dollars to supposedly repair the headlines? No. Not one dollar. Not sixty-five thousand. Not six thousand. Not six hundred. Nothing. If this was how justice worked here, then I wanted no part in buying it. At the time I still believed that evidence would

eventually save me. I still believed that once independent experts looked at everything, once a proper lawyer arrived, once a real judge saw the contradictions, common sense would prevail.

I still believed courts existed to discover the truth. Looking back now, there is something almost painfully naïve about that confidence. Because the people around me were already teaching me the first lesson of Kazakhstan's criminal justice system. I simply wasn't ready to learn it yet. The evidence and I were preparing for a trial. Everyone else appeared to be negotiating a price.

Chapter 58: Where's the Justice

Where Is the Justice?

I was being dragged from one place to another and put on display. Everything was happening around me, yet I had absolutely no control over any of it. That feeling was almost impossible for me to comprehend. Throughout my adult life, I had been the person other people depended upon. I was an airline captain. I was an instructor. I was responsible for aircraft worth millions of dollars, for crews, for passengers, for decisions where hesitation or a mistake could have serious consequences.

People looked to me for answers. And suddenly I couldn't control the smallest detail of my own existence. Where I went. When I slept. When I ate. Who I spoke to. What was being said about me. What documents were being put in front of me. Whether I could see my own family. Whether I could see my daughter. I had become completely helpless. And they were tearing my life apart with what felt like absolutely no care or consideration whatsoever. I was beginning to understand something about Kazakhstan's criminal justice system.

Once you become the suspect, you are treated as though you are already guilty. The remaining question seems to be how that guilt will be packaged and presented to the court. And whether you are prepared to play the game. Is he cooperating? Is he paying? Is he selling everything he owns to feed the system? My first court hearing felt like something from a terrible movie made in the 1960s. Except the acting was so bad that I was struggling to understand the mentality of the people around me.

Everything seemed so obvious. Nobody even appeared particularly concerned with hiding it. Before the hearing, I could see a police officer standing in the corridor whispering to the judge. Then the translator came inside and sat beside me. She leaned towards me. "The police officer told the judge you were on drugs." I looked at her. "What?" How was that even possible? "I don't know," she said. During my interrogation I had explained that I had suffered what I described as a seizure.

I will tell you later exactly how that happened. The translator, despite what I believe were genuinely good intentions, simply wasn't qualified for the level of interpretation required in a murder investigation involving a foreign national.

Somewhere in the translation, the word "seizure" became "epilepsy." Now the police officer was standing outside whispering to the judge: He's a pilot and he wants us to believe he has epilepsy. I remember watching all of this and thinking:

What kind of performance is this? Then my supposed lawyer, Hizbullam, stood up. Suddenly he became an actor. He dramatically waved his hands. Turned his face towards the corner of the courtroom as though performing Shakespeare. And cried: "Where is the justice?" I watched him. I looked around the room. And something inside me sank. I'm doomed. I knew it. Eventually I was allowed to stand and speak. I wasn't thinking about legal arguments. I wasn't thinking about bail conditions.

I wasn't thinking about criminal procedure. I was thinking about Sophia. I begged them to let me go and see my daughter. I needed to see her. I needed to hold her one more time. I needed to kiss her. I needed to say goodbye. Anything. Just give me one final moment with my child. Investigator Nurlan Bolatov had already made me a promise. There was a statement written in Russian that they wanted me to sign. I couldn't read it. My translator and my lawyer gave me only a brief explanation of its contents.

The important assurance they gave me was: "There is no admission of guilt here." Bolatov promised me that if I signed it, he would take me to see Sophia. That was all I needed to hear. I signed. I wanted my daughter. He lied. By then Sophia was already in Shelek. She was being buried beside her grandfather. I didn't know. While I was begging strangers in a courtroom to allow me to see my little girl one final time, she was already being placed into the ground.

I never got to hold her. I never got to kiss her goodbye. I never got to touch those tiny fingers again. I never got to tell her Papa was there. Her grandfather, I am told, was a good man. I hope they keep each other company. I hope that wherever they are, there is only light around them. I hope Sophia's beautiful laugh fills that place. I hope that smile I remember so clearly is all her grandfather ever sees when he looks at her. And I pray that they remain together until the day I am allowed to see her again.

Back inside that courtroom, none of those thoughts mattered to the people deciding what happened to me. Looking back, I don't believe that judge was ever going to release me on bail. I don't believe that hearing was genuinely about determining whether detention was necessary. The police had already decided who I was. The media was already telling Kazakhstan who I was. And now the court was simply becoming the next part of the process. I had entered believing I would be given an opportunity to defend myself.

Instead, the doors closed again. The handcuffs went back on. And once more I was dragged away. This time there was another destination waiting for me. Detention Centre C18, Almaty. I had no idea what was waiting behind those walls. I thought the police station had shown me how bad things could become. I was wrong.

Chapter 59: Safe Hands

Safe Hands

Very early on, I realised there was a serious problem with the translation. But poor translation was only part of it. What disturbed me far more was the growing realisation that it didn't seem to matter what I actually said. My words went in one direction and somehow came out meaning something else. Details changed. Meanings shifted. And investigator Nurlan Bolatov seemed so consumed with constructing his own version of events that nothing I said appeared capable of interfering with the story already forming in his mind.

Eventually, I would discover something even more disturbing. The witness statements themselves appeared to have been written by the investigator and then presented to witnesses for their signatures. Later, some of those witnesses would say they had signed statements prepared for them without properly reading or understanding what they contained. I was beginning to realise that I wasn't participating in an investigation searching for an answer. I felt as though I had entered a story whose ending had already been written, and everybody around me was simply filling in the pages.

The British Embassy in Astana was informed of my detention. They travelled to Almaty to see me. There was something almost surreal about that. Only about a week earlier, I had been in Astana myself, visiting the British Embassy. I had flown there to complete documentation for myself and Sophia connected with our long-term status in Kazakhstan, so that whenever we wanted to spend extended periods in the country there wouldn't be a problem. Technically, Sophia didn't really need the same process.

The Kazakhstan Embassy in Hong Kong had already issued her a Kazakh identification number. But because she had entered Kazakhstan using her British passport, the authorities began insisting that her paperwork should be completed alongside mine. So I went to Astana. Behind the glass cubicle at the British Embassy was a Kazakh woman who helped process my documents. Everything was completed within a few hours. As I walked out of the Embassy, a man passed me. I immediately assumed he worked there too.

There was something unmistakably British about him. I thought nothing more of either of them. Why would I? I had just completed some paperwork for myself and my daughter. I had a life. A family. A career. Sophia was alive. And I walked away. About a week later, I saw them both again. This time in Almaty. And this time I was a prisoner. Their names were Derek and Aigul. Before I was taken into the room to meet them, my lawyer Hizbullam pulled me aside. The translator explained what he was telling me.

"Don't mention anything about police brutality. We need the police to help solve your problem. If you report them, they won't help us." Think about that advice. My own lawyer was effectively telling me not to tell my Embassy what had happened to me because we needed to remain on good terms with the very

police officers responsible for investigating my case. At the time, however, I was frightened, confused and completely dependent on the people around me. So I walked into the room.

The moment I saw Derek and Aigul's faces, I could tell they were concerned. They introduced themselves. Derek didn't waste much time. One of his first questions was direct. "Have they beaten you?" I shook my head. No. But it was obvious I was lying. My injuries were visible. My face was injured. My body had been battered. There was only so much a shake of the head could conceal. I had no idea, standing there looking at those two people, that the man and woman I had casually seen at the British Embassy in Astana only days earlier would become such a significant part of my life in the years that followed.

I remember looking at them and saying: "I'm innocent. I've done nothing wrong and nobody wants to listen to me." They told me: "Mohamed, we're in contact with your family. We're here to support you." For the first time since my arrest, I felt something I had almost forgotten. Relief. The British Embassy knew. My government knew where I was. They could see what condition I was in. They were speaking to my family. Surely Britain wasn't simply going to stand by and watch these people destroy me.

That was genuinely what I believed. I'm in safe hands now. Then I told them the thing that was hurting me more than anything else. "They didn't let me say goodbye to my daughter." Neither of them immediately answered. They both looked towards the floor. My eyes were red. I was trying desperately to hold myself together. There wasn't much more to say. Less than five minutes later, the meeting was over. I was taken away again. Another door. Another set of hands.

Another vehicle. They put me into a van and drove me towards the detention centre. I watched whatever I could see of Almaty disappear through the vehicle as we drove. Only days earlier I had been walking freely through this city. Only a week earlier I had walked out of the British Embassy in Astana after completing documents so that Sophia and I could spend more time together in Kazakhstan. Now Sophia was buried. I was handcuffed. And I was being transported to a place whose official name was a detention centre.

I would eventually come to know it by another name. Torture Centre 101.

Chapter 60: Torture Centre 101

Torture Centre 101

Before they transferred me from the police station to the detention centre, I was ordered to strip completely naked. A prison nurse examined me and photographed my body. For perhaps the first time since my arrest, I saw someone in an official position look at my condition and react like a normal human being. She was visibly angry. She began shouting at the guards. She grabbed one of my arms and lifted it towards them. My wrists were still badly cut from the old Soviet-style handcuffs. Blood was dripping from the wounds.

She pointed at my wrists. Then at the guards. Then back at me. She shouted something in Russian. They answered her. I couldn't understand a word they were saying. So in my head I imagined their response: He's the baby killer. Who cares? Maybe that isn't what they said. I don't know. But by then it was certainly how I felt I was being treated. They put me into the transport van. Calling it a van makes it sound more comfortable than it actually was. It was basically a metal box filled with other detainees.

The radio was playing the news. Then suddenly I heard words I recognised. "Britanski..." "Pilot..." British pilot. I knew immediately. They're talking about me. One of the guards said something in Russian. Again, I couldn't understand him, but judging from what happened next, I imagined he had said something like: "This is him." Almost immediately, the other detainees turned towards me. Several of them began smashing one fist into the palm of the other hand.

I didn't need a translator for that. It was a Russian prison gesture whose meaning was perfectly clear: You're fucked. I knew I was in trouble. The frightening thing was that I didn't really care. Sophia was gone. What exactly was I supposed to be frightened of anymore? Death? At that moment, death didn't seem particularly frightening. Part of me thought I would probably be joining her soon anyway. I was dangerously close to not wanting to live. How was I supposed to live without her?

What exactly was I supposed to live for? Then the doors opened. Welcome to the detention centre. Or, as I would eventually come to call it: Torture Centre 101. Almost immediately they placed me inside a cell with a man who had been cutting his arm with a razor. His wounds were fresh. At the time, I didn't understand what I was looking at. I would soon learn that inside Kazakhstan's detention centres and prisons, cutting your own body could become a language.

When complaints weren't heard, some prisoners cut their arms. Some cut their necks. Some sliced open their abdomens. Others sewed their mouths shut. It sounds almost impossible to believe. But this wasn't prison folklore. It wasn't something I invented after spending years inside the system. Years before my arrest, the suffering inside Kazakhstan's prisons had already attracted international reporting. The BBC had reported on Kazakhstan's prisoners and allegations of torture and brutal treatment, including coverage under titles such as “Kazakhstan prisoners' cry for help” and “Kazakhstan's Living Gulags.”

And the contemporary record is horrifying. In 2010 alone, official reporting recorded 87 incidents of prisoner self-mutilation involving 174 inmates, including 27 group incidents. In July of that year, prisoners at an Almaty pretrial detention facility cut open their abdomens amid allegations that inmates had been severely beaten. Relatives gathered outside demanding access, and dozens of prisoners submitted complaints to the Prosecutor General.

Refworld

Just days later, approximately 300 prisoners at another institution participated in a group self-mutilation protest. Two prisoners died amid the ensuing unrest,

around 100 were injured and 70 hospitalised. Refworld Separate contemporary reporting described six detainees in an Almaty detention centre cutting open their abdomens after prisoners contacted relatives and journalists alleging mass beatings and torture by guards. Prison officials denied those torture allegations, while human-rights activists were subsequently allowed inside.

RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty Elsewhere that same year, prisoners at Dolinka also slashed open their stomachs while protesting their treatment.

RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty By October 2010, reporting described more than one hundred prisoners mutilating themselves within only two months, with photographs of inmates with their stomachs cut open reaching the media. Former prisoners and campaigners alleged beatings, torture, rape and humiliation inside the penal system; Kazakh authorities disputed allegations of widespread torture and said complaints were investigated.

Global Issues So when I tell you that Kazakhstan's detention centres and prisons are full of men whose arms and sometimes necks are striped with scars like tigers, understand what those scars can represent. They are not decorations. They are stories. Sometimes they are complaints written into human flesh because paper complaints went nowhere. Imagine reaching a point where you believe that the only way to make somebody outside those walls pay attention is to cut open your own body.

That was the world I had just entered. And on my first day, they put one of those men in front of me. He looked at me aggressively. "Ey, Americanski..." Then came a stream of Russian words I couldn't understand. He was clearly trying to provoke me. I was exhausted. I was injured. My daughter was dead. And I had absolutely no interest in being intimidated. "Fuck off." I stepped towards him. The door immediately opened again. They pulled me out. I don't know whether he had deliberately been placed with me to see how I would react. That was certainly how it felt to me.

Whatever they were expecting, apparently the experiment was over. I followed the other detainees through processing. Each man was given the basic items he would need. A metal cup. A metal plate. A spoon. A mattress. Then came my turn. Nothing. No cup. No plate. No spoon. No mattress. I simply continued walking behind everyone else. We moved through some of the dirtiest corridors I had ever encountered in my life. The walls themselves seemed stained with misery.

You could almost feel how many frightened people had passed through those corridors before you. How many had been beaten there. How many had cried there. How many had screamed there. How many had begged somebody to listen. And how many had eventually realised that nobody was coming. Too many ghosts of pain and anguish lived inside those walls. Eventually they brought me to the quarantine cell. They had been waiting for me. The first time one of those enormous metal prison doors slams shut behind you, the sound travels straight through your body.

CLANG. It shakes your soul. Everyone inside immediately sat up. "Ey! English! English!" "Yes." A heavily built man looked at me. He had the body of somebody who spent his time training. "Ey. Me big boss here." I looked at him. "Good for you, Big Boss." His posture changed. I knew that stance. He was getting ready to punch me. I saw it coming and immediately got onto my feet, driving forward into him with all my weight. The metal doors flew open. Guards rushed inside and pulled me away.

As they dragged me out, Big Boss was laughing. There was no anger on his face anymore. Nothing personal. This was simply prison. His hands appeared at the top of the bars. He was smiling. "Ey! English! English! Cigarettes give!" I looked at him. Then I laughed. I reached into my pocket and pulled out about six cigarettes. He took them. "Good, good, brother. Good. Need money." Of course. Even here. Money. They took me farther down the corridor. By then I had completely lost my sense of direction.

Left. Right. Another corridor. Another steel door. Eventually they put me inside an empty cell. This one was different. You couldn't even touch the walls. There was a cage constructed inside the cell itself. They opened the cage. I stepped inside. It closed behind me. There was a sink that I had to reach through the bars to use. There was a window that I had to stretch through the bars to open or close. And that was it. Nothing else. No bed. No mattress. Nothing.

Just the floor. I sat there for a while. Eventually I put my hoodie on and lay down. I fell asleep. Some time later I heard the door open. A bowl containing some kind of slop was placed on the floor. Outside the cage. I looked at it. Even with my arm stretched fully through the bars, I couldn't reach it. The guard walked away. It didn't really matter. I had no appetite. I smoked constantly. When I became thirsty, I reached through the cage towards the sink, collected water in the palms of my hands and drank from them.

I hadn't eaten for around two days. My body had almost stopped asking for anything. Then something moved. A mouse. It ran towards the bowl they had left for me. Stopped. Sniffed. And began eating. I watched it. At least somebody was enjoying dinner. After roughly two days, they moved me again. This time upstairs. The door opened onto a small room packed with around ten men. I walked inside. Immediately something felt different. Nobody appeared hostile. In fact, they seemed pleased to meet me.

A tall, slim man approached me and extended his hand. I shook it. "Madi," he said. "Mohamed." His expression changed. "Oh. Are you Muslim?" "Yes." Apparently that required verification. He asked me to recite some basic verses from the Qur'an. So I did. Test passed. They gave me a metal bed frame. Still no mattress. Still no spoon. Still no plate. Still no cup. I owned nothing except the clothes I had been arrested in. And by now those clothes were beginning to stink.

After a while, Madi looked at me and made a strange movement. He started thrusting his hips backwards and forwards. I stared at him. He looked like he was dry-humping the air. "No, no, no." I immediately shook my head. Then I stopped.

I looked around the room. Looked back at Madi. And suddenly understood what he had been trying to tell me. Oh. Wonderful. **This was the sex offenders' room.**

Chapter 61: The Waiting Was Worse

The Waiting Was Worse

Here is the thing about mental and physical torture. It rarely begins with the worst thing they can do to you. It happens in stages. First comes the action. A beating. Pain. Humiliation. Then comes the warning: “If you don't do this, things will get worse.” And then they leave you with those words. That space between the threat and whatever might come next becomes part of the punishment. You wait. You imagine. You listen for footsteps in the corridor. You hear keys.

A door opens somewhere. Voices. Then silence again. Your mind begins doing their work for them. What does worse mean? Another beating? Something else? How long until they come back? For me, the worrying in between was often worse than the thing itself. Because once the pain actually begins, at least the waiting is over. And if you overcome the fear of their threat, the person threatening you has a problem. The threat has stopped working. So, in my experience, the pressure has to increase.

Action. Threat. Waiting. Then another action. And another threat. Except there was something profoundly different about me by then. My daughter was dead. They were trying to frighten a man who, at times, no longer particularly cared whether he survived. Sometimes I found myself thinking: Hopefully this time they push it too far. Hopefully this time it will all be over. And then, instead of imagining death, I imagined Sophia. I pictured myself holding her again.

An endless hug. My arms wrapped around her little body. My lips kissing those chubby cheeks over and over again. And her smell. That beautiful smell babies have. In my imagination it completely consumed me. There would be no police. No investigators. No handcuffs. No prison. No accusations. Just me and Sophia. Papa and his little girl. Together again. I was beginning to lose my grip on reality. I remember looking down at the floor of the cell and seeing Sophia.

Not imagining her deliberately. Seeing her. She was crawling towards me. For one brief moment she seemed completely real. I instinctively reached down to pick her up. And she disappeared. There was nothing there. Just the floor. I looked through the window. The first snow of the year had begun to fall. Once again my mind went directly to Sophia. She was buried in Shelek. All I could think was: How cold must her tiny body be under the ground? I couldn't stop thinking about it.

Snow falling above her. Cold earth surrounding her. My little girl alone in the ground while I was locked inside this place unable even to visit her grave. The other prisoners could see that I was falling apart. There was no hiding it anymore. Eventually the prison psychologist was called. There was no proper interpreter for

the conversation. Another detainee acted as translator, trying to explain my words to her. That morning I had received a large blue plastic bag containing food, clothes and basic necessities.

Inside was something far more important. A photograph of Sophia. Madina had also written a message on the inside of the plastic bag: “I'm with you, hayatim, and I love you. Be strong for me!” Hayatim. My life. I sat there holding Sophia's photograph. I couldn't stop crying. I showed it to the psychologist. “This is my daughter.” Again. “This is my daughter.” Again. “This is my daughter.” It was as though if I repeated it enough times somebody might finally understand what had happened to me.

Not the suspect. Not the British pilot from the television. Not the man in the criminal case. A father. This is my daughter. The psychologist took out a strip of purple tablets. Through the other detainee translating for us, I understood that I was supposed to take one tablet every two hours. I understood them to be sedatives. And then I was back inside the cell. Time stopped moving normally. Minutes felt like hours. Hours disappeared into one another. And every single time that metal door opened, my heart reacted.

I expected to hear my name. Mohamed Barakat. They're coming for me. They've realised. Someone has finally looked at the evidence. Someone has understood that this is all one enormous mistake. Because surely they know. They know I would never hurt Sophia. They know how much I loved her. More than my own life. So I waited for the door. Every sound in the corridor became hope. Every set of approaching footsteps might be somebody coming to tell me it was over.

Every key turning in a lock might finally be my key. And whenever the footsteps continued past my cell, the hope disappeared again. Then I waited for the next sound. The next footsteps. The next opening door. Because somewhere inside my shattered mind, one thought continued repeating itself: They know I'm innocent. They have to know I'm innocent. They'll come for me soon.

Chapter 62: Could I Have Done It?

Could I Have Done It?

Inside the cell, I had time to think. Far too much time to think. There was noise everywhere. Men talking in a language I couldn't understand. People shouting from cell to cell. Arguments. Laughter. Metal doors. Keys. Voices travelling along the corridors. There were holes knocked into the walls on either side of our cell. Prisoners used them to communicate with neighbouring cells and pass cigarettes backwards and forwards. Everybody around me seemed able to communicate.

Except me. And inside my head, one question was becoming unbearable. Could I possibly have done it? I had suffered a seizure. There was a period I couldn't remember. And however desperately I wanted to reject the possibility, my mind kept returning to the same brutal logic: If I can't remember what happened,

then there is a possibility that I did it. I needed my memory back. I searched my mind constantly. What was the last thing I remembered? What happened next?

Was there an image somewhere? A sound? A movement? Anything? I would replay fragments over and over, desperately trying to force my brain across that blank space. Nothing. And then I would think about Madina. Because her behaviour didn't make sense either. How could she be sitting there telling me she loved me? How could she be telling me not to worry? How could she tell me: "We'll have another Sophia." Another Sophia? Then I remembered those two minutes. During one of the interrogations, investigator Nurlan Bolatov had, for whatever reason, left Madina and me alone together in the room.

Only briefly. I immediately turned to her. "What happened?" She looked at me. "What happened, Madina?" Her answer came in broken English. "You start to beat me." My mouth fell open. I knew Madina. I knew how she looked when she wasn't telling me the truth. And something about her expression immediately felt wrong. "But... but I can see you." I looked at her face. Her neck. Her arms. "I'm looking at you now. Where are the marks? You have nothing." She couldn't look me in the eyes.

Something was terribly wrong. Then the question that mattered. "What happened to Sophia, Madina?" She began to stutter. "I don't know. I left, and when I returned she's dead." Then: "I'm afraid of you." Those words shocked me almost as much as everything else. Afraid of me? Since when? "Since when have you ever been afraid of me, Madina?" Look at me. It's me. Mohamed. The man who looked after you and Sophia. The man who took you safely around the world. The man who stood beside you and held your hand while you gave birth to our daughter.

The man whose home you shared. The father of your child. And now you're telling me you're afraid of me? "Just tell me what you've done." Suddenly the door flew open. Nurlan Bolatov walked in. His movements immediately caught my attention. He went towards the books and appeared to check behind them. It made me suspect that we had deliberately been left alone and that there had been a hidden camera recording us. Then Madina took my hands. Tears began rolling down her face.

She looked at me. "Do you still love me?" And for a moment, everything around me disappeared. I looked at her and didn't see a witness. I didn't see an accuser. I didn't understand yet what she had told the investigators about me. I saw the mother of my child. I saw the woman who used to wait for me when I came home from a flight. I would open the door and there she would be, dressed beautifully, holding Sophia in her arms. "There's Papa," she would tell her.

And Sophia's entire little body would come alive. She couldn't contain her excitement. She would bury her face in Madina's long hair as though suddenly shy. Then she would look at me again. And launch her tiny body forward. Both little arms stretched out as far as they could reach. Papa was home. Sitting in that interrogation room, all of those images were colliding with what was happening in

front of me. And when I later replayed those first days again and again, I began identifying moments when something in Madina's eyes seemed to tell me what her words never did.

I've sacrificed you. The moment in the corridor when she stood some distance away and formed a heart with both hands... but her eyes remained fixed on the floor. The moments when I could hear her shouting at the investigator, apparently begging him to release me. I had absolutely no idea that she had already testified against me. I had no idea of the extent of the allegations she had made. So when she sat in front of me crying and asked: "Do you still love me?"

I looked into her eyes. "I will love you until the day I die." I reached forward with my fingers and wiped the tears from her face. Nurlan Bolatov stood in the corner looking shocked. Even the translator seemed unable to make sense of what she was witnessing. "I don't understand what's happening here," she said. "Something is wrong." She was right. Something was terribly wrong. But I still didn't know what. --- Then I was back inside C18. Back to the noise.

Back to the walls. Back to the holes connecting one cell to another. And suddenly, through one of them, I heard a familiar voice. "Where's my money?" I laughed. Big Boss. Apparently our relationship had survived. "You sound like Jerry Maguire." Silence. "Who is he?" Of course. So I gave him my best impression from the film: "SHOW ME THE MONEY!" He burst out laughing. "You funny Arab." Progress. I was no longer Americanski. Apparently I had been upgraded. Now I was Arab.

Then his voice became quieter. "You need phone?" Now he had my attention. I desperately needed a telephone. I needed to hear my family's voices. I needed to know what was happening outside. I needed somebody to tell me what the hell was happening to my life. "Yes." "$1,000." A thousand dollars. It was ridiculous. But at that moment I would have paid almost anything to speak to my family. For the first time, however, one of the men in my own cell reacted. Until then I hadn't realised he understood much English.

He began shaking his head urgently. "No. No. No." I called back through the wall: "Let me think about it." Then I turned towards the man in my cell. His name was Meisha. "What?" He lowered his voice. "Only police sell phone here." I stared at him. What? He continued: "Let me speak to our corridor oper." The oper was the officer responsible for our corridor. And there it was again. Another lesson. I had assumed that contraband entered a detention centre by being smuggled past the authorities.

I was beginning to learn that inside C18, some things apparently worked very differently. I wanted a telephone. Big Boss wanted a thousand dollars. And according to the prisoner sitting beside me, the person who could actually arrange it wasn't a criminal hiding from the guards. It was the guard.

Chapter 63: The First Call

The First Call

Heavy knocking suddenly started against the wall from Room 58. Then I heard my name. “Mohamed!” Again. “Mohamed!” The men in our cell immediately began moving. Fast. Everyone seemed to know exactly what was happening except me. Madi went to the window. From behind the bars, he produced a thin piece of thread pulled from an old sweater. He tied something like a small sugar sweet to the end to give it enough weight to travel. Then he stretched his arm through the bars and flicked it out of the window.

Once. Twice. On about the third attempt, a voice called back: “Doma!” Home. The line had reached its destination. Now they attached a much thicker piece of string, handmade by weaving several individual threads together to make it strong enough to carry something. At the end they tied a sock. “Kurri!” Madi shouted. Literally, kurri relates to smoking, but in this prison slang it meant: Pull. The sock disappeared out of sight. About thirty seconds later, a voice came back.

“Kurri!” Madi began pulling. The string returned. Then the sock. Inside was a telephone. I couldn't believe how small it was. An old Nokia-style phone that had somehow been made into a miniature version of itself, tiny enough to be passed between cells. Madi handed it to me. “Your wife.” Before I even put the telephone properly against my ear, I could hear Madina screaming. Not crying. Screaming. It was the kind of deep, dark scream you hear in a horror film when somebody's mind simply cannot process reality anymore.

“Madina... Madina...” Eventually words came through. “Where are you, hayatim? I need you!” Then another scream. A wretched, awful howl. The sound went straight through me. And suddenly all of my confusion and anger exploded. “WHY DID YOU DO IT?” I shouted. I had lost control. “WHY DID YOU LIE?” Silence. Complete silence. Then I heard her struggling to speak. “I... I... I'm scared, hayatim. I need you. Sophia is gone and you're in prison. I'm alone.” “Where are you?”

Even after all these years, I remember conversations like this almost word for word. Some memories fade. These don't. The emotional stress attached to those conversations burned them into my mind. A voice, a sentence, a pause—I can still hear them. “I'm going to get you a phone, hayatim,” she told me. “There's a guy called Mark next door. He's from Shelek. He will help.” Around me, everyone was desperate for their turn with the phone. I could see it in their faces.

Everyone inside those walls had somebody outside. A mother. A wife. Children. A brother. Someone they desperately needed to hear. I couldn't keep the telephone forever. I told Madina I had to go. I asked her to contact my sisters about getting the money for a phone. Because despite everything that was beginning to trouble me, despite the questions building inside my head, I was still supporting Madina completely. She was still my wife. And I was still very much in love with her.

That is important to understand. At this stage, I wasn't sitting in C18 thinking of Madina as my enemy. I wasn't constructing a case against her. I was desperately trying to understand something that made absolutely no sense. My daughter was dead. My wife was outside screaming that she needed me. And I was inside a detention centre trying to convince myself that somehow, somehow, our family could still survive what had happened. Before we finished, Madina said something that stayed with me:

"I can't live without you, hayatim. All my family is supporting you. We will get you home. But tell your sisters they have to listen to us." Then she repeated the point. "They are not listening to us." And finally: "They don't know Kazakhstan." The call ended. I handed the tiny phone back. Immediately, somebody else reached for it. The sock was prepared again. The string moved. The strange communication network between the cells continued as though nothing extraordinary had happened.

I lay back down. But one sentence kept repeating in my head. Tell your sisters they have to listen to us. At the time, I heard those words as desperation. Madina and her family were Kazakh. They understood this country. They understood the police. They understood the system. My sisters didn't. So when Madina said: "They don't know Kazakhstan," I believed she meant: Trust us. We know how to get you out. I had no idea how important those words would eventually become.

Because while I was sitting inside C18 believing that my wife and her family were fighting to bring me home, my sisters were outside being introduced to a completely different reality. A reality in which solving my problem apparently required money. And more money. And then more money. At that moment, however, I knew none of this. All I knew was that I had just heard my wife's voice. She still called me hayatim. My life. She said she couldn't live without me.

She said her family was supporting me. She promised they would get me home. And in the darkness of that cell, I desperately needed to believe her.

Chapter 64: Everything Has A Price

Everything Has a Price

After my first two weeks in detention, I was being dragged backwards and forwards through the system for one examination after another. Psychiatric examinations. Drug-dependency tests. Expert assessments. More interrogations. Every transfer began in roughly the same way. Large numbers of us would be brought downstairs into the basement and left there waiting until it was time to be loaded into what I came to think of as the meat wagon. By then the temperatures were already freezing.

And I still had practically nothing suitable to wear. Jeans. Light sports shoes. A jacket with a hood. I didn't even have a T-shirt underneath. For two weeks I had been sleeping directly on a metal bed frame without a mattress or pillow. I was freezing. I was exhausted. My mental state was a mess. I was beginning to

understand what prolonged detention could do to a person. I came to believe that places like this were designed to break you. Not necessarily through one spectacular act of brutality.

They could break you slowly. Cold. Exhaustion. Noise. Uncertainty. Humiliation. Sleep deprivation. The complete loss of control over the smallest aspects of your existence. There were windows in the cells, but behind the bars, on the outside, were metal sheets blocking the view. You couldn't see the sky. You couldn't see the street. You couldn't see anything outside. There were gaps to allow air through, and those gaps were what made the ingenious thread-and-sock communication system between cells possible.

But as windows onto the world, they were useless. You were inside. The outside world had disappeared. And there was no such thing as uninterrupted sleep. The regime—the guards—could burst into the cell at any hour of the day or night. The door would fly open and everyone was expected to get up immediately and stand with their hands behind their backs. Then they would turn the cell upside down. Blankets. Clothes. Possessions. Everything. They took whatever they wanted, particularly cigarettes, and classified things as contraband.

Then they left. You tried to sleep again. Eventually another door opened. Another inspection. Another disturbance. Sleep became something you caught in fragments. Downstairs, where we waited for transportation, people seemed to know who I was. Many of them hated me before they had ever spoken to me. The news had already created their image of the British pilot accused of killing his daughter. So whenever I was placed among large groups of detainees, I remained on full alert.

I was always expecting an attack. But most people were ultimately consumed by their own problems. Their own cases. Their own sentences. Their own families. Their own fear. And people in detention notice everything. Pretty soon, everybody began noticing Madina. Every time I was taken somewhere for an examination, somehow she seemed to know where I was going. And somehow she would be there. Waiting for me. Food in her hands. Desperation written across her face.

She would have 10,000-tenge notes ready. Money would be pushed into a guard's hand and suddenly she was allowed closer. She would hug me. Kiss me. Sit beside me. The food normally came in two packages. One was for me. The other was for the guards. Those who could speak some English occasionally translated the guards' questions. And their questions were revealing. “Is that your girlfriend?” “No.” “Second wife?” “No. I only have one wife.” They would look confused.

“You mean she's the mother of the baby who died?” “Yes. She's my daughter's mother.” Another question. “The child was biologically yours?” “Yes.” “And she is the biological mother?” “Yes.” Then came the question they really wanted answered: “Then why is she running around after you?” Sometimes they put it even more simply. “She's not angry?” And my answer was always obvious to me:

“Because I didn't kill my daughter.” What else was I supposed to say? But what fascinated me was how those conversations usually ended.

The guards would talk among themselves. Then someone would translate: “You'll go home soon. Don't worry.” I heard it again and again. “You'll go home soon.” Did they know something I didn't? At the time, I wanted desperately to believe they did. And slowly, my treatment inside the detention centre began to change. First, I finally received a mattress and pillow. They were filthy. The mattress was infested with bugs and God knows how many people had slept on it before me.

But after two weeks sleeping directly on freezing metal, it felt like an upgrade to a five-star hotel. Then, during one of the occasions when I saw Madina, she asked: “Did you receive the food I sent?” I looked at her. “What food?” She explained that she had been sending bags several times a week. “I only received one bag.” She became furious. She started shouting at the guards. That was when I understood that bags containing food and cigarettes she believed were being delivered to me had apparently not been reaching me.

My sisters had established an allowance so that supplies could be sent regularly. After that confrontation, things changed again. Food began arriving. Cigarettes began arriving. Bags of them. And then something almost absurd happened. The guards continued visiting our cell day and night. But increasingly they weren't coming simply to search us, turn the room upside down or occasionally hit somebody. Now some of them arrived with their hands out. Cigarettes.

Food. Sweets. Even toilet paper. It might sound funny when written on a page. It wasn't. What I saw was a serious lack of dignity among some of these men. They were government officers reduced to begging prisoners for basic everyday items. And I began noticing another distinction. The ones who appeared to live better were often those willing to take much bigger risks. The ones who, in my experience, could arrange things that officially weren't supposed to exist inside those walls.

Phones. Drugs. Special privileges. Better conditions. Everything appeared to have a price. Eventually I was taken to see the oper responsible for our corridor. I entered his office. He opened a drawer. And took out a smartphone. There it was. The very thing that supposedly wasn't allowed inside the detention centre, sitting in an officer's desk. He connected a video call. Madina appeared on the screen. For the first time since my arrest, I could actually see her properly while speaking to her.

The oper spoke to her directly. The other detainee translated for me. His question was remarkably straightforward. “Mohamed is under heavy control here. You are the victim in this case. Are you telling me that you want him to have a phone?” Madina didn't hesitate. “Yes. Yes.” She began pleading with him. Then she said something I would remember: “Mohamed is innocent. It's a mistake.

Please help him." Think about how strange that situation was. The authorities had classified this woman as the victim.

She had already given evidence against me that I still did not fully know about. Yet here she was, apparently telling one of the officers responsible for controlling me: Mohamed is innocent. It's a mistake. Please help him. The call ended. The oper put the smartphone down. Then, through our detainee-translator, he explained the arrangement. Three thousand dollars. For $3,000, I would be moved to better conditions. No searches. And there would be two smartphones in the room, shared between the prisoners living there.

I didn't negotiate. I didn't argue. I didn't ask whether any of this was legal. For two weeks I had been freezing, sleeping on metal, isolated from my family and desperately trying to understand what was happening to me. Now somebody was offering me a way to speak to the people I loved and escape some of the conditions I was living under. I agreed immediately. I was beginning to understand another rule of detention in Kazakhstan. Outside those walls, a prisoner's conditions were supposedly determined by law.

Inside them, I was discovering something very different. Comfort had a price. Communication had a price. Protection had a price. And if you had money, there always seemed to be someone willing to sell you something you were officially forbidden to have.

Chapter 65: The Currency Converter

The Currency Converter

Time passed. Extremely slowly. There is a particular kind of loneliness that comes from sitting inside a cell in a foreign country where you cannot speak the language and do not understand the culture. Everyone around you is talking. Everyone understands the rules. Everyone seems to know how things work. Except you. And I had far too much time to think. As the days passed, I began to feel that the situation was becoming more complicated. Something about Madina wasn't right.

I became increasingly convinced that she was hiding something. And another thought began troubling me. What if the investigation itself had already gone too far? What if too many decisions had already been made? Too many statements written. Too many accusations released publicly. Too many people committed to one version of events. Especially investigator Nurlan Bolatov. In my mind, this was no longer simply: We have a guilty foreigner. Let's see how much money we can squeeze out of him in return for a lesser sentence.

I was beginning to fear something much worse: If this foreigner walks free, people are going to have to explain what happened here. And around this time, I started hearing a strange expression increasingly often. "Your case is political." Political? What the hell did that mean? I was an airline pilot. I wasn't a politician. I wasn't an activist. I hadn't come to Kazakhstan to challenge anybody. Until my

arrest, I couldn't have told you anything meaningful about Kazakhstan's internal politics.

I hadn't even heard of Nazarbayev. Eventually I asked my supposed lawyer, Hizbullam: “Why is my case political?” His explanation surprised me. He told me that Britain had issued unexplained wealth orders connected with Nazarbayev and his family and their assets in the United Kingdom. I knew absolutely nothing about any of this. Nothing about unexplained wealth orders. Nothing about the Nazarbayev family's property interests in Britain. Nothing about the political relationships surrounding them.

Nothing about Tony Blair or people associated with him and their previous dealings with Kazakhstan. All of that came later. At that moment my response was very simple: “What has any of this got to do with me?” Hizbullam's answer disturbed me far more than the explanation itself. As I remember it, he said something along the lines of: “If they put you in prison, it's a great victory for Kazakhstan. You're British. Maybe your government will give the money back for you.”

I took what felt like the longest breath of my life. I stared at him. “You people are insane.” Did they genuinely imagine that governments operated like this? That Britain would somehow exchange disputed assets connected with the former president's family for an airline pilot sitting in a Kazakh prison? “You seriously believe the British government makes trades like that?” I couldn't understand the mentality. But what worried me wasn't simply that Hizbullam had said it.

People kept telling me that Hizbullam was well connected. That he knew people. That he could obtain information from circles much higher than the people I could see around me. Whether what he was telling me represented anything more than his own speculation, I had no way of knowing. But sitting inside a cell, unable to investigate anything for myself, hearing increasingly often that “your case is political,” it frightened me. Because if my case really had become something bigger than the death of my daughter, then what chance did evidence have?

By now, I was also beginning to learn more about what Madina had signed in her testimony. Not everything. Not yet. Just glimpses. Small pieces of information. Fragments of betrayal. I still hadn't transferred the $3,000 for the improved conditions, so my access to the outside world remained that tiny Nokia passed between cells. Every few days I might get a few precious minutes. And some of those conversations with Madina were becoming increasingly revealing.

During one of them, I confronted her. “Listen, Madina. Everyone can see you're lying. If I beat you, why didn't you have any marks on you?” I continued. “Why did you immediately throw away the clothes you were wearing?” And then something happened. For the first time, I heard something from Madina that sounded to me like a threat. She said: “Listen, Mohamed. If I didn't love you, I could just say I saw you killing Sophia and they would immediately throw you in prison for fifteen years.”

I went silent. There are sentences that change a relationship. That was one of them. It was the first time Madina activated what I would later come to think of as a currency converter inside me. Love has value. Especially when you love somebody completely. And I had loved Madina completely. But when somebody you love begins hurting you, something strange happens. The love doesn't necessarily disappear in one moment. It converts. Slowly. Painfully. One piece at a time.

Every lie converts a little. Every betrayal converts a little more. Every threat takes something that once felt warm and turns it cold. Love becomes confusion. Confusion becomes anger. Anger begins becoming hatred. The exchange rate changes with every new wound. And after hearing those words, I asked her: “Is this really you?” I couldn't reconcile the voice on that tiny telephone with the woman I thought I knew. “Is this Madina?” Then she told me something even more disturbing.

According to Madina, Hizbullam—my lawyer—had already prepared her for precisely this situation. She told me that he had said that if Mohamed started saying anything against her, they could simply write that she had witnessed me killing Sophia. And, according to her, Nurlan wanted exactly that. “The case will be complete.” I listened in disbelief. My lawyer? The man who was supposedly defending me? According to my wife, he had discussed with her how to provide the single allegation that could complete the case against me?

Then Madina changed her tone. She said: “But I told Hizbullam I love you and I need you.” There was something about the way she said it that disturbed me. Almost as though I was supposed to admire her for it. As though she were saying: Look what I could have done to you. Look what they offered me. But look what a good wife I am. I didn't do it. I sat there holding that miniature telephone, listening to the woman I still loved explain that she possessed the power to say a few words that could destroy the rest of my life.

And somewhere inside me, for the first time, something began to change. Not enough to stop loving her. Not yet. But the conversion had begun.

Chapter 66: The Barakats

The Barakats

The Barakat family is a close family. Because of the way we grew up in Britain—my parents and just the four of us children—the bond and love between us became one of the most powerful things I will ever experience in my lifetime. We grew up together in South London. A small family. Each new person who entered our lives became an extension of that original little family. And that was Sophia. Sophia wasn't just my daughter. She was our daughter. My parents had lost their granddaughter.

My sisters had lost their niece. And while each of them was trying to deal with the tremendous emotional pain of losing Sophia, they were simultaneously

watching their son and brother disappear into a legal system thousands of miles from home. The strength and courage my family displayed during that period is something I will never forget. They carried my emotions when I was no longer capable of carrying them myself. They travelled backwards and forwards to Almaty while increasingly fearing for their own safety.

Because these people frightened them. The Almaty police. My supposed lawyer, Hizbullam. Madina and members of her family. Make no mistake about it: my family came to regard some of the people surrounding this case as dangerous. And it didn't take long for them to understand what they were dealing with. When one of my sisters first flew into Almaty, she discovered that Madina had taken my passport from the hotel. Madina needed that passport because she intended to travel to Hong Kong, where our life savings were held.

At the same time, the police were looking for my passport. Madina handed it to my sister so that she could submit it to the authorities. My sister did exactly that. Investigator Nurlan Bolatov then began accusing my sister of stealing the passport and threatened to open a case against her. Think about that for a moment. My sister had arrived in Kazakhstan on an international flight that very morning. She had never been to the crime scene. She had been handed my passport and was voluntarily giving it to the police.

And now the investigator was threatening to accuse her of stealing it. My sister contacted the British Embassy in Astana. The Embassy intervened. The obvious question was raised: how could a woman who had only just arrived in Kazakhstan that morning have stolen a passport from a crime scene she had never entered? There is a documentary trail within the British Embassy's records concerning its intervention. This was the level of people we were having to deal with.

Meanwhile, something much more serious was happening with my money. Madina had access to my bank cards. Those cards had been in the possession of investigator Nurlan Bolatov and had been handed over to her. She was travelling from ATM to ATM withdrawing whatever money she could access. This isn't something I reconstructed years later from rumours inside a prison. There is a paper trail. Eventually, Madina's cousin's husband, Ilyas, had seen enough. He contacted my sisters confidentially through WhatsApp and told them what was happening.

When he recovered my bank cards, he photographed them and sent the photographs to my sisters. Those messages and photographs still exist. My sisters immediately started calling my banks. Cancel everything. Cards blocked. Access stopped. Whatever remained of my money had to be protected. And while all of this was happening outside, I knew almost nothing. I was completely isolated. My sisters weren't even being allowed to visit me. Eventually the lawyers suggested that they become my public defenders.

That finally gave them a legal route to see me. They travelled to the detention centre. They waited for hours trying to get inside. As I understood the law, I was entitled to two hours with my lawyers and public defenders. What did we actually

get? About five minutes. In a crowded corridor. Five minutes. After Sophia's death. After my arrest. After the beatings. After the isolation. After everything my family had discovered outside. We finally stood face to face, desperately trying to compress information that could determine the rest of my life into a few frantic minutes.

My sisters didn't waste time. “Don't trust anyone, Mohamed.” Then: “These people are out to get you.” And then came something I still wasn't emotionally ready to accept. “Madina isn't the person you thought you married.” They told me what they had witnessed. Madina was constantly around my lawyer and investigator. My sisters had seen it themselves. Later, translators would confirm what they had seen. Piece by piece, the information reaching me from outside was beginning to collide with what Madina herself was telling me during those secret telephone calls.

And some of those telephone conversations weren't simply memories either. Voice recordings survived. Including the conversation in which Madina told me that if she didn't love me, she could simply say she had seen me killing Sophia and I would be sent to prison. The woman officially presented as the victim was simultaneously telling her imprisoned husband what she could say to complete the case against him. And I had heard it from her own mouth. My sisters then explained the situation they were facing outside.

There appeared to be two choices. The first was money. “Mohamed, they're telling us we need to sell everything we have to pay to get you out.” My answer was immediate. “No.” There was nothing to discuss. “We're not giving them anything.” Sell everything? Our homes? Our savings? Everything my parents and sisters had spent their lives building? And hand it over to people surrounding the investigation into the death of my daughter? “They want blood money for Sophia's death. Is that what Sophia is to them?”

The thought made me physically sick. My daughter was dead. My beautiful little girl was lying in the ground. And now money was being discussed as though her death had created some kind of marketplace. No. Absolutely not. If that was the game, I refused to play it. My sisters explained the alternative. “Then there's only one other way.” Build the best defence we possibly could. That I understood. We're Barakats. We've been fighting our whole lives. We don't bend over for anyone.

If they wanted a legal fight, then we would fight them through the law. What I didn't understand at the time was how expensive that decision would become. I had no idea what serious lawyers cost. Especially international lawyers. Human-rights lawyers. Experts. Specialists. Legal opinions. Consultations. Reports. Reviews. Every new stage seemed to require another expert. Another lawyer. Another opinion. Another document. Another bill. And so something almost painfully ironic began to happen.

All those life savings that people surrounding my case allegedly wanted my family to hand over began disappearing anyway. But we didn't give the money to

them. We gave it to lawyers. And slowly, enormous amounts of our family's savings began being converted into something else. Little A4 pieces of paper. Legal opinions. Beautifully written. Carefully researched. Signed. Stamped. Filled with laws. International conventions. Case law. Forensic standards. Human-rights principles.

Each new piece of paper was supposed to carry enormous weight. Each one was going to help us at the next stage. This will help at appeal. This will help with the Prosecutor's Office. This will help at the Supreme Court. This international opinion is extremely important. And we believed it. Because what else were we supposed to do? We had been presented with what seemed to us like two completely different roads. One involved money disappearing into people's pockets.

The other involved lawyers, evidence and law. We chose the law. Years later, I would look back at the enormous amounts my family had spent and think about all those immaculate A4 pages. Pages explaining due process. Pages explaining my right to a fair trial. Pages explaining forensic standards. Pages explaining international human-rights obligations. Pages explaining what investigators should have done. Pages explaining what prosecutors should have done. Pages explaining what judges were legally required to consider.

They looked impressive. They sounded impressive. And in a functioning justice system, perhaps they would have carried enormous weight. But we were about to discover just how little a beautifully written legal opinion can weigh when it lands on the desk of someone who has already decided not to listen. My family refused to sell everything we had to buy my freedom. Instead, over the years that followed, we would spend a fortune trying to prove my innocence. There is an important difference between those two things.

One buys an outcome. The other places its faith in justice. We chose law over corruption. And at that point in my story, despite everything I had already seen, I still believed something that now seems almost painfully naïve. I believed that if we gathered enough evidence... if we found good enough lawyers... if we wrote strong enough legal arguments... if we could somehow get the truth in front of the right person... then eventually the system would have no choice but to listen.

We chose the law. I still believed that eventually the law would choose us back.

Chapter 67: The First To Talk Goes Home

The First to Talk Goes Home

Growing up in Britain, and watching far too many British and American crime programmes, gives you certain ideas about what you're supposed to do when you're arrested. I loved those programmes. Banged Up Abroad was one of my favourites. The lesson seemed obvious. Keep your mouth shut. Find out what you're actually being accused of. Get a lawyer. Then speak. When I was first

interrogated in Kazakhstan, for a brief period I was under the impression that Madina and I were both being treated as suspects.

And my immediate instinct was to protect my wife. Whatever had happened, she was Sophia's mother. She was my wife. She was the woman I loved. So my thinking was simple: Don't start blaming each other. Don't say things you don't understand. Wait until we know what's happening. Get proper legal representation. Then deal with this together. I was about to discover that the culture I encountered inside the Kazakh criminal-justice system operated very differently from anything I had imagined.

In detention, I gradually came to understand a simple rule: The first to talk goes home. At least, that was how prisoners explained it to me. People talked constantly. They sang like canaries. Information flowed towards the police day and night. Everybody seemed to know something about everybody else, and everybody appeared willing to trade that information when it suited them. Keeping your mouth shut wasn't regarded in the same way I had understood it growing up in Britain.

People informed. People negotiated. People tried to make themselves useful. And the information they provided wasn't necessarily some noble search for truth. From what I saw, it was frequently shaped around the interests of the person giving it. What happens to me if I tell you this? What can you do for me? What do I need to say to move the attention onto somebody else? I began to understand that information itself was a currency. And then there was Hizbullam.

I remember vividly the first moment I saw him. He walked in with my sisters. Have you ever met somebody and immediately felt that something was wrong? Before they have really spoken. Before you know anything about them. Just an instinct. I looked at my sister. “I don't want him.” She looked surprised. “Mohamed, nobody else wanted to take your case.” I looked at him again. “He's the devil.” I couldn't explain it. Something about him immediately disturbed me.

I would later learn that the story that nobody else was willing to take my case was something Madina and her family had been feeding my sisters. At that moment, however, my family was desperate. Their granddaughter and niece was dead. Their son and brother was imprisoned in a foreign country. They didn't speak the language. They didn't understand the system. And they were trying to find anyone who could help. If you want some idea of how Hizbullam eventually came across to me, think of the unscrupulous-lawyer world portrayed in Better Call Saul.

Except this wasn't television. This was my life. Hizbullam seemed incapable of deciding what his role actually was. Was he defending me? Was he helping Madina? Was he still behaving like a police officer involved in an investigation? At times it seemed as though he was trying to do all three simultaneously. And increasingly, I came to believe that his real usefulness within this system wasn't legal argument at all. It was knowing people. Knowing who needed to speak to whom.

Knowing who could arrange something. Knowing how money could move between the people who had been arrested and the people wearing uniforms pretending that everything around them represented justice. I was trying to understand all of this while grieving the death of my only daughter. Sophia was one year old. I was in a foreign country. I had been heavily beaten. I couldn't understand the language. I didn't understand the culture. I didn't know whom to trust.

And slowly I was discovering that I couldn't even understand the behaviour of my own wife. I was in profound shock. And I was becoming paranoid about everyone around me. When I regained consciousness after the beating, something was wrong with my left hand. I couldn't properly feel the fingers. It was particularly bad in my little finger and the finger beside it. They curled inwards. I couldn't properly straighten them. I would stare at my own hand and try to make the fingers move.

Nothing. My body didn't feel like mine anymore. My life didn't feel like mine anymore. Nobody around me seemed to be behaving normally. Not the police. Not my lawyer. Not even the mother of my daughter. And inside Kazakhstan's detention centres there are no mirrors. So for some time, I hadn't actually seen myself. Then eventually I did. I looked into a mirror. And I know people use this expression figuratively all the time: I didn't recognise myself. But I mean it literally.

For a moment, I couldn't understand who I was looking at. Before Sophia died, I had a few grey hairs. Now, when I looked at myself, my hair appeared almost completely grey. My face had changed colour. It had this strange yellowish, blackened dullness to it. I looked like an old black-and-white photograph of myself that had been left somewhere for decades and slowly turned yellow with age. I stared at the man in the mirror. That wasn't Captain Mohamed Barakat.

That wasn't the airline pilot. That wasn't the instructor. That wasn't the man who travelled the world and solved problems for everyone around him. The man staring back at me was broken. He needed help. He needed someone to put their arms around him. He needed his mother. He was a grieving father who had lost his little girl. And he was completely alone. The person he thought he should have been able to trust more than anyone else was slowly destroying whatever remained inside him.

The way I experienced Madina's actions, and the people she brought around this tragedy, felt completely without mercy. They reminded me of vultures. Circling. Waiting. Watching an injured animal becoming weaker. Then descending when it could no longer defend itself. There were moments when I simply didn't want to continue. Sophia was gone. Everything I understood about my life had disappeared with her. But then my family gave me three words. Three incredibly simple words.

“We need you.” My mother needed me. My father needed me. My sisters needed me. They had already lost Sophia. If I gave up, what would that do to

them? How much more pain could I possibly inflict upon the people who were travelling backwards and forwards across continents trying to save me while dealing with their own grief? So when I couldn't find a reason to continue living for myself, I continued for them. Not because I suddenly became fearless. Not because I suddenly became strong.

For one very simple reason. I didn't want my family to suffer another loss. And strangely, sitting inside that cell, my mind eventually travelled all the way back to my childhood. When I was growing up, I was the only boy among my siblings. I had my own bedroom. I slept alone. And as a child, I suffered from nightmares. Lots of them. Sometimes I would lie awake frightened to fall asleep because I knew that the monsters were waiting for me. Eventually, as a little boy, I invented my own solution.

Before going to sleep, I would close my eyes and deliberately imagine the monsters. But this time I controlled what happened. I imagined myself fighting them. I imagined myself defeating every one of them. Before the nightmare could begin, I had already won. It sounds like such a small thing. A child's trick. But it worked. Once I had defeated the monsters inside my imagination, the fear would ease. My body would relax. And eventually I could drift into sleep.

Decades later, inside a freezing cell in Kazakhstan, that little boy came back. Only the monsters were different now. And they had names. Years later, when I watched Game of Thrones, there was something about Arya Stark that immediately resonated with me. So many people had devastated that little girl's life. They had taken people she loved. They had taken her home. They had taken her childhood. And every night she repeated the names of the people she held responsible.

A list. She couldn't reach them yet. She couldn't defeat them yet. But she could remember them. Sitting in that cell, I became my own version of little Arya Stark. I started remembering names. Not because I could do anything to them from inside that cell. I couldn't. I had no power. No freedom. No telephone of my own. I could barely communicate. But there was one thing nobody could take away from me. My memory. So I remembered. Who said what. Who threatened me.

Who lied. Who was present. Who took money. Who wrote something. Who signed something. Who looked away. Who helped. Who refused to help. I remembered names. I remembered faces. I remembered conversations. And for many years afterwards, I continued doing exactly that. It became my adult version of defeating the monsters before I went to sleep. Except now I wasn't imagining myself hurting anyone. I was imagining surviving long enough to tell the story. Long enough to put every name beside every action.

Long enough to gather the evidence. Long enough for somebody outside those walls finally to listen. As a child, I defeated imaginary monsters so that I could sleep. In Kazakhstan, I began doing something similar so that I could survive. And whenever I felt myself slipping back towards that place where I no longer cared

whether I lived or died, I returned to those three words: We need you. So I stayed. I remembered. And I survived.

Chapter 68: Action Threat Action

Action. Threat. Action.

After years inside Kazakhstan's criminal-justice and prison system, I have reached a conclusion: I have never met what I would describe as a clean cop. Not one. I have never encountered one who, in one form or another, didn't eventually have his hand out. The difference was in how they did it. Some asked politely. If you refused, they accepted it and didn't necessarily become vindictive. Others created situations deliberately designed to force you to negotiate.

And then there were those who appeared completely out of control. They beat people. They humiliated them. They demanded things. They pursued particular prisoners relentlessly and, from what I witnessed, caused enormous psychological damage. Basic human needs became instruments of control. A shower. Clean clothes. Soap. Toothpaste. Exercise. Food. Things that most people never even think about could become privileges to grant, remove, steal or trade. One day my sister arrived in Almaty determined to do something incredibly simple.

She wanted me to feel human again. She knew what condition I was living in inside C18. So she went shopping. She spent hundreds of dollars buying things she knew I liked. Food. Deodorant. Shampoo. Shower gel. Toiletries. Small roll-on perfumes that were permitted inside, the type we called musk. Cigarettes from duty free. Nothing extraordinary. Just familiar things from normal life. Things that smelled like the person I used to be. She wanted her brother to open that package inside this filthy detention centre and, even if only for a few minutes, feel like Mohamed again.

The package never arrived. A few days later, a small woman in an administration uniform appeared outside our cell. She was carrying the saddest-looking replacement package imaginable. Three oranges. Two bananas. Five packets of cheap cigarettes called Stateline. She apologised. Through what little I could understand, she explained that women working in the women's section had stolen my package. Most of what my sister had carefully bought for me was simply gone.

Normally I might have become furious. But at that particular moment I was in such a dark psychological state that I could barely process what she was telling me. Only the previous day something else had happened. Guards entered the cell. They restrained me. A nurse came in. I was pinned down while she forcibly injected me with a substance I did not know. Nobody explained to me what it was. Shortly afterwards, I was taken for an internal psychiatric assessment.

I walked into that assessment drowsy. My speech was slurred. And strangely, I was extremely talkative. What had they injected me with? A sedative? Something else? At the time, in my increasingly paranoid state, I even wondered: Truth

serum? I still don't know. What I do know is that I was physically restrained, injected against my will with something I couldn't identify, and then presented for a psychiatric assessment while visibly affected by it. Against that background, a stolen food package almost seemed insignificant.

That week I had a video call with the British Embassy. I complained that the package my sister had delivered hadn't reached me. The Embassy would often ask me a question along the lines of: “Mohamed, do you want us to raise this formally with the authorities, or would you prefer us just to have a quiet word with them?” That distinction mattered enormously to me. Because by then I had learned the rhythm. Action. Then the threat. Complain and things will get worse.

Then another action. I had already been beaten. I had been intimidated. I felt that guards were constantly creating situations around me. And hanging over everything was the same message: If you complain, things can become much worse. So I told the Embassy: “Could you please just speak to them? Just ask them to stop stealing everything.” I thought I was choosing the safer option. A quiet word. No confrontation. No major complaint. Just tell them to leave my things alone.

It was a big mistake. Outside our cell was the electrical switch for the cell lighting. Two guards in particular had taken an intense dislike to us. They also seemed to derive enormous amusement from frightening and hurting prisoners. They discovered something about the wiring outside our cell. There was a loose electrical wire. If they touched it against the metal door frame and then called me over, the frame became live. They thought this was hilarious. They would call:

“Mohamed!” And naturally I would rush towards the door. Every time I heard my name being called, I thought perhaps my lawyer had arrived. Or my sisters. Maybe somebody had come to see me. So I would run to the cell door and lean against the frame. Electricity. The first time, I managed to pull myself away. Then it happened again. Again, I managed to let go. They laughed. To them, apparently, watching the foreign prisoner jump from an electric shock was entertainment.

Then came the third time. They called my name. I went to the door. I touched the frame. And this time I couldn't let go. My body locked. For those seconds, I couldn't pull myself away from the metal. Eventually they removed the wire. I collapsed onto the floor. I remember holding my chest. Holding the area around my heart. This time nobody was laughing. The two guards panicked. And then they disappeared. To this day, I sometimes feel discomfort in exactly that place in my chest.

I don't know what physical damage, if any, that electrical shock caused. I only know what it feels like to me. As though there is a scar somewhere around my heart. But something else was damaged that day too. My willingness to complain. Because inside my mind, the connection was now complete. Something happens to you. You complain. Somebody outside asks questions. Then something worse happens to you. Whether every act was formally connected or not almost became irrelevant.

Because psychologically, the lesson had already been learned. Keep your mouth shut. The same British instincts that had told me after my arrest to stay quiet until I understood what was happening now took on an entirely different meaning. This wasn't about protecting my legal rights anymore. It was about protecting myself physically. The British Embassy was one of the very few connections I had to the outside world. They were people I desperately wanted to trust.

But they weren't inside the cell with me after the call ended. I was. They weren't standing at that metal door when my name was called. I was. They weren't going to be there at two in the morning when the guards decided to enter. I was. And so, for a very, very long time afterwards, I became extremely careful about what I reported to the Embassy. Not because there was nothing to report. Quite the opposite. There was too much to report. I was frightened of what might happen after I reported it.

And that fear worked. For a long time, it kept me quiet. Until one day, much later, I had no choice but to speak.

Chapter 69: The Angel With No Legs

The Angel With No Legs

Days and nights inside the cell were endless. Time didn't pass. It simply stood still. There was absolutely nothing to do except sit and worry about what was happening in the outside world. That, I came to believe, was part of how C18 broke people down. You were locked inside overcrowded cells almost permanently. No stimulation. No privacy. No control over your own life. Nothing to occupy your mind except your case, your family and whatever nightmare might be waiting for you next.

Supposedly, we were entitled to a walk once a day. I recorded periods of as long as seven weeks when I wasn't taken out for a walk at all. And perhaps I should explain what the word walk actually meant inside C18. The door opened. Ten men lined up. We were taken upstairs towards the fourth floor, at roof level. Another metal door opened. And we entered another cell. Approximately four metres by four metres. Empty. That was our walk. We walked around this little concrete box in circles for perhaps ten minutes.

Round and round. Like fish swimming around a tank. There was no view. No open sky. Nothing. Just walls. On one of them somebody had written a phrase. The man beside me translated it. Apparently it was a well-known saying: “Want to go to prison? Visit Almaty.” Round and round we went. Then back downstairs. Back into the cell. Because of the almost complete absence of exercise and the enormous amount of time I spent simply sitting on my bed—there wasn't enough space to do much else—my knees eventually became severely swollen.

The swelling became extraordinary. Twice I had to be taken from detention to Almaty City Hospital No. 1, where doctors drained the accumulated fluid from my

knees. It was there that I was diagnosed with post- traumatic arthritis following the injuries I had sustained. There is a medical record documenting the treatment and diagnosis. My body was beginning to record what was happening to me even when nobody else seemed interested in doing so. But one of the most degrading things they could take away wasn't exercise.

It was a shower. At one stage I recorded approximately five weeks without being allowed to shower. This happened during the period of my internal psychiatric assessment. People outside prison might think withholding a shower is a relatively minor punishment. It isn't. Do it to somebody for long enough and you begin stripping away their sense of being human. Your clothes stink. Your hair stinks. Your skin stinks. You become unable to tolerate your own smell.

Then the people around you can't tolerate it either. Gradually everyone begins treating you differently. You begin feeling less like a human being and more like an animal. And I came to believe there was a reason the pressure around me increased during the psychiatric examinations. The first assessment hadn't gone the way Nurlan Bolatov expected. I had been transported to an assessment centre in Almaty. It looked Soviet. Everything seemed old. Cold. Institutional.

Once again I was chained and dragged around as though I were some dangerous animal. I remember standing in a corridor outside one of the examination rooms. The corridor itself reminded me of the psychiatric hospitals you see in old films about the Second World War. Perhaps thirty metres away I could see the entrance. It looked as though my sisters had arrived, but they weren't being allowed inside. Then a woman entered. Tall. Long black overcoat. Black trousers.

Black boots. Long dark hair falling around her face. As she walked down the corridor, she attracted everyone's attention. Then she saw me. Our eyes locked. She kept walking towards me. It felt like the longest slow-motion moment imaginable. She came closer. And closer. Her eyes never left mine. Then, less than a metre away, all that determination suddenly disappeared. She hesitated. Just for a moment. But I saw it. I looked at her. “Madina?” “Yes, hayatim.”

And she threw herself into my arms. That tiny hesitation before she did it told me everything. She had been wondering whether something inside me had changed. Whether I had begun to resent her for what she had done. The psychologists were watching. Other detainees waiting for assessments were watching. And the guards chained to me were watching. I physically manoeuvred the guards around us because I wanted to put my arms around my wife. Their mouths were practically hanging open.

They were confused. And they had every reason to be. The media narrative had been relentless. According to the story being presented publicly, I was the monster. Madina was the terrified, grieving victim. But what everybody in that corridor was witnessing didn't look anything like that story. The supposed victim had just walked directly towards the supposed monster and thrown herself into his arms. Then I was taken inside. Three women sat behind a desk opposite me.

Two Kazakh women sat on either side of a larger Russian woman with black hair and glasses. The questions started immediately. One after another. I answered. And very quickly I could see that something wasn't going the way they expected. I wasn't hiding anything. I wasn't withdrawn. I was angry. Angry about Sophia. Angry about what had happened to me. Angry about the way I was being treated. At one point I was leaning forward across their desk, tapping my finger against it while the translator struggled to keep up.

"Sophia was the love of my life." Tap. "No matter what you say." Tap. "No matter what you do." Tap. "Nobody can take that away from us." Tap. "Nobody is going to tell me I killed her." Tap. "Nobody." The Russian woman in the centre stared at me. Then something changed. "What's this?" She spoke English. Suddenly the entire dynamic of the assessment changed. We started talking directly. No translator standing between every thought. No waiting while somebody converted my emotions into another language.

For the first time, I could explain myself at full speed. And we talked. And talked. I told her what had happened. What I remembered. What I had been experiencing. The two Kazakh women couldn't speak English, so she periodically translated parts of our conversation for them. Every now and then they interrupted with another question, sometimes one that seemed completely disconnected from what we were discussing. But the conversation between the Russian psychologist and me became intense.

Her face was changing. I could see concern. Then she suddenly asked: "Where is your wife?" She pointed towards the corridor. "Was that the woman you were hugging outside?" "Yes." She looked astonished. "I saw that." Then she asked the question that had been running through my own mind. "Why isn't she being investigated?" I looked at her. "Exactly." Eventually she seemed to have heard enough. I stood up. She shifted forward and suddenly began raising her voice.

"I know what I'm going to do!" I froze. "I know what I'm going to do!" The anticipation terrified me. What was she going to do? Then, at the top of her voice, she announced: "I'm going to send you to the doctor!" The relief that came over me was almost ridiculous. I nearly cried. "Yes." Finally. "I need help." As I was leaving the room, I turned around and looked back at her. And I said: "The whole world is going to know what you did to me in Kazakhstan." Then I was back in the corridor waiting for the next part of the assessment.

By now my sisters had somehow been allowed closer. Madina was there too. From what I understood, money had once again changed hands with the guards to allow them nearer to me. They immediately asked: "How did it go?" I told them: "The big Russian woman in the middle believes me." I was certain of it. I could see it in her eyes. She was concerned about me. Then came the second stage. At the time, I didn't understand what they were doing. Only later did I come to understand the prolonged testing as a method of bringing a person towards mental fatigue before returning to the most emotionally difficult questions.

A younger Russian woman sat opposite me. A small elderly Kazakh woman sat behind me. The younger woman began with simple tests. Colours. “Choose your favourite.” Then arrange them from favourite to least favourite. Pictures. “Which one doesn't belong?” More pictures. More questions. More exercises. Again. Again. Again. It continued until I was visibly tired. And then the questions changed. Sophia. The day she died. What happened? What do you remember? Again.

Again. Again. The woman seemed increasingly frustrated. Whatever she was searching for, she wasn't finding it. Eventually she placed a piece of paper in front of me. “Draw a mythical animal.” I looked at her. “I can't draw.” She insisted. “Draw anything.” “I'm not artistic.” “Anything.” So I picked up the pencil. And I drew. It looked like something a child might draw. A round body. A round face attached to it. The face was smiling. I gave it wings. No legs.

And above its head, I drew a halo. I looked up. The woman was staring at the drawing. Something had changed in her face. Her eyes were red. Mine were already filling with tears. She looked at me. Then at the drawing. Then back at me. “Who is this?” I couldn't answer immediately. She asked again. “Who is this?” Something came from deep inside my stomach and travelled all the way into my throat. And then I broke. “Sophia.” I was crying uncontrollably. She looked at the picture again.

“Why doesn't she have legs?” I could barely speak. “Because she doesn't need them in heaven.” I pointed at the wings. “She's an angel.” Then at the smile. “And she was always smiling.” I was sobbing now. “She was a happy baby.” The woman reached across towards me. And she hugged me. For a moment, inside this cold Soviet-looking psychiatric institution, somebody simply treated me like a grieving father. She told me: “I'm going to help you.” Then she became angry.

She started shouting at the guards. She shouted towards the older Kazakh woman. People began moving around. They gave me time to calm myself before I was taken outside. And then something extraordinary happened. The guards started talking to Madina. The message travelled. From one person to another. From guards to prisoners. From corridor to corridor. He's going home. The psychologists had seen him. He's going home. Something must be wrong with the case. He's going home.

For the first time since those metal doors had closed behind me, the people inside the system were saying the words I had been desperately waiting to hear. Mohamed is going home. And for a brief moment, I believed them.

Chapter 70: Worry About Yourself Mohamed

“Worry About Yourself, Mohamed”

For all the time Hizbullam spent supposedly acting as my lawyer, there was one piece of genuinely useful information that I remember him bringing me. He arrived at the detention centre. Like most of the people I was encountering within

Kazakhstan's legal system, he didn't speak English, so once again everything had to pass through a translator. He looked at me through the bars. “Mohamed, it's a bilateral compression.” He was talking about Sophia's head injury.

Then he explained what he had apparently been told by the specialist who had examined Sophia. According to Hizbullam, the specialist's view was that even if somebody had placed a pillow over the child and beaten her through it, there should have been more visible injuries. The expert, he said, strongly suspected that Sophia's injuries had resulted from a fall. I stood there absorbing what he was telling me. A fall. This should have been enormous. If the injuries were consistent with a fall, then surely every possible explanation for that fall had to be investigated.

Surely everyone who had been present had to be examined properly. Surely investigators should have been asking what happened to Sophia rather than deciding who they wanted to blame and then building everything around that conclusion. But by this stage, something else had already begun seriously troubling me. Hizbullam had repeatedly been seen privately with Madina. They talked in his car. They disappeared behind walls to speak where other people couldn't hear them.

Their relationship appeared extraordinarily comfortable for a lawyer who was supposedly representing me. When they greeted one another, they did so with large, affectionate hugs. And now he was standing in front of my cell telling me that an expert believed my daughter's injuries could have resulted from a fall. Perhaps he expected me to celebrate. I didn't. I looked at his emotionless face and asked the question that had been consuming me: “How come Madina isn't being investigated?”

His reaction was immediate. Agitation. His expression changed. “Worry about yourself, Mohamed. Nobody is interested in Madina.” Nobody is interested in Madina? She was Sophia's mother. She had been there. She was central to everything that had happened that morning. And now, according to my own lawyer, a specialist was raising the possibility of a fall. Yet nobody was interested in investigating her? Then Hizbullam did something so ridiculous that even in my condition I could see exactly what he was trying to do.

He moved very close to the bars. Really close. He turned his head so that instead of looking at me, he presented his ear towards me. It looked like something from an old KGB interrogation film. Then he asked: “Do you remember how you fell with Sophia?” I stared at him. I couldn't decide whether I found it more insulting or more absurd. The suggestion was so obvious. Do you remember how you fell with Sophia? It felt as though he was trying to feed me the beginning of an explanation and waiting to see whether I would complete it for him.

Perhaps this was some technique he remembered from his years in the police. But there was another absurdity to it. The man didn't even speak English. He stood there with his ear pushed towards the bars as though some miraculous confession was going to travel directly into it. I just stared. Eventually he seemed to realise

how ridiculous he looked and straightened himself up. So I asked again. “Why isn't anybody investigating Madina?” This time his answer was even more disturbing.

“Madina already has a paper confirming she's innocent.” A paper. Confirming she was innocent. I looked at him. His demeanour told me there was far more happening than anyone was explaining to me. I reached through the bars, grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him towards me until his face was right against the cell. His eyes were directly in front of mine. For a second he looked shocked. Then shock became anger. He became aggressive. What I hadn't even noticed was that the cell door was open.

He came inside as though he wanted to fight. His hand swung upwards over his head. I stepped backwards. My fist closed. And that was the end of Hizbullam as far as I was concerned. Whatever illusion remained that this man was my legal defence disappeared in that moment. But Hizbullam himself didn't disappear. Quite the opposite. From then onwards, whenever I saw him, he seemed to be standing beside Investigator Nurlan Bolatov. The man who had supposedly been brought into my life to defend me was, in my eyes, now firmly on the other side.

Meanwhile, something else was developing inside the detention centre. The guards had discovered a honey pot. Me. They realised there was money to be made from the foreign prisoner desperately trying to communicate with his family and wife. The system was simple. Other inmates would sell me miniature Nokia phones. Approximately $200 each. I would finally have a telephone. For perhaps an hour. Sometimes enough time to make the calls I desperately needed to make.

Then, remarkably, shortly after buying it, the guards would suddenly know exactly where the forbidden telephone was. The cell door would burst open. They would search. The phone would be confiscated. And eventually another miniature Nokia would become available for me to buy. Another $200. Another hour. Another confiscation. Then another phone. Whether every person involved was formally coordinating with every other person, I couldn't know from inside that cell.

But from where I was sitting, the result was wonderfully efficient. Sell Mohamed the phone. Let Mohamed use the phone. Take the phone from Mohamed. Sell Mohamed another phone. Again. And again. For them, perhaps, it was money. For me, those little phones became something completely different. They became one of the most important sources of information I had. Because every time I managed to speak with Madina, something happened. She talked. And the longer we talked, the more she revealed.

Sometimes it was one sentence. Sometimes a contradiction. Sometimes something she apparently hadn't intended to say. I was still emotionally attached to her. I was still desperately trying to understand how the woman I loved fitted into this nightmare. But conversation by conversation, pieces were beginning to fall out. And several times Madina made me a promise that I could never get out of my head. “After we get you out, I promise I'll tell you what happened to Sophia.”

After we get you out. Then I'll tell you. I would sit in that cell after the telephone disappeared and repeat those words in my mind. After we get you out, I'll tell you what happened to Sophia. Why afterwards? Why couldn't she tell me now? What did she know that I didn't? What was there left to tell? The guards thought they were selling me telephones. What they were actually selling me, one hour at a time, was access to the truth. And Madina was slowly beginning to talk.

Chapter 71: The Safest Place I Had Ever Known

The Safest Place I Had Ever Known

Something in that filthy mattress bit the back of my head. I reached around instinctively and touched the spot. And suddenly I wasn't in C18 anymore. I was with Sophia. I could feel her tiny hand playing with the short hair on the back of my head. She used to stroke it with her fingers, then give it little taps while making those meaningless little sounds that only a baby understands. Baby language. The memory came over me like warmth. In that freezing, miserable place, it soothed me.

It brought me comfort. And then another memory came back. One day Sophia had wrapped both of her tiny hands around my face. I remember looking at her and having this strange thought: Between those two tiny hands is the safest place I will ever be. Think about that. A fully grown man. An airline captain. A father who was supposed to be the protector. And somehow this tiny one-year-old baby could make me feel safe. There was something about having her little fingers wrapped around my face that made the rest of the world disappear.

It was warm. Safe. Pure. The most loving place I had ever known. Now I was lying on a filthy mattress in a detention centre in Kazakhstan, touching the place on the back-left side of my head where I remembered her fingers. So I rubbed it. And for a moment, I could almost feel her again. Then I started doing it more often. I would sit on the bed frame and rub that same patch of hair. The back-left side of my head. Again. And again. Day and night. Sometimes consciously.

Increasingly without even realising I was doing it. My hand would simply rise to my head. Rub. Stroke. Tap. As though somewhere inside my mind I was trying to recreate the feeling of Sophia's little hand touching me. It became a habit. Then something more than a habit. A complex. I would catch myself doing it and think: Mohamed, you're losing your mind. Perhaps I was. In truth, considering everything happening around me, I probably was beginning to lose parts of it.

And even today, all these years later, I still sometimes find my hand travelling towards that same place. I still rub the hair there. Only now the spells are shorter. But somehow that movement survived everything. Maybe because Sophia was the one thing inside my mind that they couldn't reach. They could control the cell. They could control when I slept. When I walked. When I showered. When I ate. They could beat me. Humiliate me. Drag me through corridors in chains.

They could put whatever version of me they wanted into the newspapers. But they couldn't change what Sophia had been to me. And they couldn't stop me remembering the touch of her hand. There was also something else keeping me alive. Determination. A sheer, stubborn determination that I wasn't going to allow these people to get away with what they were doing to me, to my family and to Sophia's memory. By then, everything had accumulated. Sophia was dead. Madina's behaviour and how it increasingly became obvious as her betrayal.

Hizbullam and his sleazy manoeuvring. Nurlan Bolatov and his increasingly desperate recklessness. The beatings. The humiliation. The torture. Being dragged around and displayed like some circus freak. The paranoia I had developed—and from where I was sitting, I had plenty of reasons to be paranoid. The British Embassy knew I had been injured and knew I was complaining about my treatment, yet at that stage I felt desperately alone and unprotected. Whatever they were doing behind the scenes, from inside that cell it certainly didn't feel as though anyone was stopping what was happening to me.

Then there was the media. My trial had effectively begun there within hours of Sophia's death. Before a court had heard evidence. Before experts had finished their work. Before I could even understand the Russian documents being put in front of me. To the public, the story had already been written. The British father who killed his daughter. And finally there were the people immediately around me. The other detainees. Every one of them had his own catastrophe.

His own criminal case. His own family. His own fears. His own desperation. Yet somehow nobody ever seemed capable of leaving me alone. By this stage my family had established a fund simply to keep me fed and supplied inside detention. Three times a week, enormous blue plastic bags would arrive. Food. Fruit. Drinks. Cigarettes. Basic necessities. My family had originally wanted someone else to arrange the packages, but Madina insisted on doing it herself. She wanted everyone—including me—to see that she was still the devoted wife.

Later I came to believe that she was keeping part of the money my family provided, but at the time all I saw were those enormous blue bags arriving with messages written across them in black marker. I love you, hayatim. Be strong. I'm with you. The messages of a loving wife. Then the bag would enter the cell. And chaos would begin. The other detainees would rush towards it. Whatever problems they had been discussing five minutes earlier disappeared. Food came out.

Cigarettes came out. Things were immediately divided. Some of the food was eaten inside our cell. Some was sent through the communication lines to friends in other cells. Cigarettes disappeared almost instantly. Then the guards would start arriving. They wanted cigarettes. Food. Something from the package. Something else. Then someone else wanted something. By that point it sometimes felt as though my family was feeding half the detention centre. But no matter how much arrived, everybody always wanted more.

More food. More cigarettes. More money. More favours. More. More. More. Have you ever had somebody in your life who is constantly on your back?

Someone who never gives you a moment's peace? Always thinking about you, but not because they care about you. Thinking about what else they can get from you. How much further they can push. Always talking. Always asking. Always shouting. Always in your face. Now imagine being locked in a room with that feeling twenty-four hours a day.

There is nowhere to go. No door you can close. No walk you can take. No phone you can switch off. No moment when you can simply say: Leave me alone. Another blue bag arrived. Everyone rushed towards the door. They began pulling things out. Food. Cigarettes. Fruit. Then someone found photographs. “Mohamed.” They passed them across to me. Sophia. I took the photographs and returned to my bed frame. Behind me the cell came alive. Packages were being opened. People were talking.

Food was being arranged across the table. Cigarettes were already being passed around. Someone called me. “Come and eat.” I shook my head. I sat there staring at Sophia. My hand rose unconsciously towards the back-left side of my head. I began rubbing that same patch of hair. The cell around me was eating the food my family had sent. For once, nobody was asking me questions. Nobody was demanding anything. Nobody was shouting in my face. They were too busy eating.

And I realised something. While they were feeding, it was the only moment of peace I was going to get. So I didn't eat. I sat on my bed. I held the photograph of my daughter. I touched the place where I remembered her little hand. And for those few precious minutes, I went somewhere else. Back between those tiny fingers. Back to the safest place I had ever known.

Chapter 72: A Year and Eight Months

A Year and Eight Months

I spent one year and eight months inside the detention centre. Occasional glimpses of the sky. Read that number again. One year. Eight months. Most readers will pass straight over it without really thinking about what it means. Some might even think: That's not so bad. And perhaps some of those same people would struggle to get through a single day without their phone. Without social media. Without choosing what they eat. Without walking outside. Without closing a door and being alone.

Without looking up at the sky. It is easy to remain detached from another person's suffering when you believe it could never happen to you. That's somebody else's problem. Somebody else's country. Somebody else's prison. Somebody else's injustice. It will never happen to me. The uncomfortable truth is that many people only start asking for justice when injustice arrives at their own door. And I can't pretend I was completely different. Before all of this happened, I wasn't some crusader travelling around the world fighting everybody else's battles.

That's not to say I was completely detached from other people's suffering, but I navigated my life around other people's misfortunes.

They belonged to other people. I had my career. My family. My plans. My life. Then suddenly I became one of those other people. When someone experiences one major traumatic event—or several major traumatic events in succession—they can develop post-traumatic stress disorder. PTSD. That terminology started appearing in what prison doctors and nurses were writing about me. And there was plenty for my mind to process. My daughter was dead. I was imprisoned in a foreign country.

I had been beaten. I couldn't understand the language. My marriage was disintegrating in front of me. I didn't trust my lawyer. I didn't trust the investigator. I didn't trust the guards. I didn't know what was happening outside. And I had no idea when any of it would end. But time has an extraordinary quality. It keeps moving even when your own life seems to have stopped. Days become weeks. Weeks become months. Months become years. And eventually something inside you begins to change.

Much later, I read about another psychological concept: Post-traumatic growth. It describes the positive psychological changes that some people experience through their struggle with trauma. But when I read about it, I interpreted what had happened to me slightly differently. I wouldn't call it healing. For me, there is a difference between healing and growing thicker skin. Imagine your skin has been ripped away. Healing would mean growing that same skin back.

The nerves return. The sensitivity returns. Eventually, perhaps, touching that place feels something like it did before. What happened to me felt different. I grew thicker skin. The nerves were still underneath. They hadn't disappeared. But they were buried deeper. It took more to reach them. More to frighten me. More to hurt me. More to make me react. It took more effort to cut through the skin and reach the sensitive parts underneath. That isn't necessarily healing.

It is adaptation. Protection. Survival. And unfortunately for the people trying to intimidate me, they eventually encountered the same problem. Their methods were losing their effect. Remember the pattern: Action. Threat. Action. In the beginning, a beating frightened me. Being dragged into the basement frightened me. A slap frightened me. Being surrounded by guards frightened me. Being ordered to perform squat after squat after squat until my legs gave way frightened me.

But eventually something changed. They could see it. The punches weren't producing the same reaction anymore. The slaps weren't producing the same reaction. The basement wasn't producing the same fear. They could make us squat until our legs physically collapsed underneath us, but mentally I was becoming harder to intimidate. The skin was getting thicker. And when one level of pressure stops working, the people applying it have a choice. Stop. Or escalate.

In C18, they escalated. One method was to introduce another detainee into the cell. Not just anybody. A gangster. Usually somebody who already knew he was almost certainly going to receive a prison sentence. In a strange way, what happened inside detention was also training for what awaited him when we eventually went to lager—camp, prison. Because there, as I explained earlier, another selection process awaited us. Quarantine. The sorting. The hierarchy. The groups.

The Kozyols—the "goats"—working with the administration. The Blatnois—the criminal hierarchy. Different names. Different identities. Different supposed loyalties. And very often the same introduction: Violence. You arrive. You're assessed. You're tested. And then somebody beats the living daylights out of you. It might be the Kozyols. It might be the Blatnois. Whoever happened to control that particular prison at that particular time. Over the years I came to understand something about all these supposedly separate groups.

They might fight one another. They might hate one another. They might claim completely different identities and loyalties. But in the prison system I lived inside, their fundamental purpose repeatedly came back to the same thing. Beat and extort prisoners. And above that internal prison economy stood the people with official power. The administration. The police. And, as I came to understand the wider system, prosecutors and other officials. This isn't something I watched happening to other people from the safety of my bed.

I lived inside it. I suffered through it with everyone else. We paid. We bought the food. We supplied the cigarettes. We bought the phones. We repaired the prisons we were being held inside with our own money. Think about the absurdity of that. You are imprisoned by the state and then expected to spend your own money repairing the prison in which the state has imprisoned you. We bought materials. We paid for things the state should have provided. We supplied enormous quantities of food.

We supplied cigarettes. Clothing. Phones. Money. Whatever was demanded. And those of us perceived as wealthy were expected to provide more. Much more. I wasn't watching prisoners being exploited. I was being exploited alongside them. My family was paying. I was paying. The people around me were paying. People sold land. Families gathered money. Relatives sent whatever they could. And inside prison the demands continued. People like me—the businessmen, former officials, ministers and anyone whose family was believed to have money—weren't simply prisoners.

We were revenue streams. The more they believed you had, the more they expected from you. Food. Cigarettes. Phones. Repairs. Designer clothes. Money. Favours. Whatever arrangements had been made. Even holidays. Dubai seemed to come up so frequently in conversations about what somebody wanted paid for that sometimes you could forget we were supposedly talking about poorly paid government employees. And the demands never stopped. More. More. More. There was always somebody else to satisfy.

Somebody above somebody else. Somebody who wanted his share. And when you had already paid once, that didn't mean the problem was solved. Quite the opposite. It meant they knew you could pay. So they came back. Prison, as I came to understand it, wasn't simply a place where the state locked people away. There was an economy inside it. A business. And if somebody believed you had money, your value wasn't simply measured in years of imprisonment. Your value was measured by how much could be extracted from you while you were there.

Even ministers and senior officials who had been convicted in cases involving tens of millions of dollars couldn't keep up with the demands. And believe me, over the years we have had so many former ministers and senior officials sitting in these prisons with us that I'm surprised they didn't set up the Oval Office here. The joke hides something much darker. Outside those walls, some of these men had occupied some of the most powerful positions in Kazakhstan.

Inside, we were all feeding the same machine. Status outside didn't necessarily protect you inside. Having money could actually create another problem. It changed the way people looked at you. And by this stage they had been looking at me for a long time. The British pilot. The foreigner. The man whose family could send money. The man receiving enormous food packages. The man buying telephones. The man whose relatives kept flying into Kazakhstan. They had already discovered that I could be exploited.

They had already discovered that my family could be pressured. But now they were discovering something else. I was becoming harder to frighten. The punches weren't enough anymore. The slaps weren't enough. The threats weren't enough. The basement wasn't enough. My legs could collapse. My body could hurt. But the fear wasn't working in the same way anymore. The skin had become thicker. So if they wanted to reach the nerves underneath, they were going to have to cut deeper.

And soon they would start bringing the pressure directly into my cell.

Chapter 73: The System Never Died

The System Never Died

Kazakhstan became independent in 1991. The Soviet Union disappeared. The flag changed. The national anthem changed. Departments acquired new names. New uniforms appeared. A new constitution was written. Kazakhstan joined the United Nations and signed international human-rights treaties. But institutions have memories. Buildings remember how they were used. Bureaucracies inherit habits. Police inherit methods. Prosecutors inherit assumptions about their authority.

Prisons inherit cultures. And when I began trying to understand the system that had swallowed me, I eventually found myself travelling backwards through its history. Sooner or later, you arrive at four letters: NKVD. The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs was not simply a police force. At different times it concentrated ordinary policing, state security, intelligence, border security and

prison authority inside one enormous coercive structure. It oversaw prisons and forced-labour camps, and its subordinate structures included the Gulag administration. Under Stalin, particularly during the Great Purge, the NKVD carried out mass arrests, imprisonment, torture and executions.

I need to make something clear before somebody deliberately misunderstands what I am saying. Modern Kazakhstan is not Stalin's Soviet Union. I am not claiming that people in Kazakhstan today are being executed by the hundreds of thousands. Kazakhstan has courts. It has lawyers. It has appeals. It has prosecutors. It has an Ombudsman. It has a constitution. It has international obligations. My question is different. How much of the institutional mentality survived?

Because changing the sign above a building is easy. Changing the mentality inside it can take generations. The historical NKVD became infamous not merely because innocent people suffered, but because the system could reverse the natural direction of justice. Instead of beginning with: What happened? the machinery could begin with: Who is the enemy? Once the enemy had been identified, the investigation could become an exercise in constructing the case around him.

That distinction matters enormously to me. Because from the first days of my own case, that is exactly what I felt was happening. Sophia was dead. I was the foreign husband. I was British. I was Arab. I couldn't speak Russian. I couldn't read the statements being placed in front of me. I had been beaten. The media had already announced me to the country as the man who killed his daughter. And almost immediately I found myself asking a question that would follow me for years:

Is anybody actually investigating what happened to Sophia? Or are they investigating how to convict Mohamed? The Old Machine The NKVD's historical record is horrifying. It combined functions that democratic systems deliberately try to separate. It operated as an interior ministry and secret police while exercising intelligence, law-enforcement and prison functions. During the Great Purge, it conducted mass arrests, imprisonment, torture and executions, while millions were eventually sent into the Gulag forced- labour system.

Why separate these powers in a modern justice system? Because power needs friction. The investigator shouldn't be the judge. The prosecutor shouldn't simply validate the investigator. The judge shouldn't be negotiating the desired outcome with the prosecutor. The prison shouldn't be allowed to conceal what happens to the prisoner. The institution accused of abusing somebody shouldn't simply investigate itself and announce: Nothing happened. There are supposed to be walls between these institutions.

Checks. Balances. Independent eyes. Different interests. Because once everyone starts protecting everyone else, justice becomes theatre. There may still be a courtroom. There may still be a prosecutor. There may still be a defence lawyer. There may still be a judge. Everyone wears the correct costume. Everyone sits in the correct place. Everyone signs the correct papers. But the existence of the

performance doesn't necessarily tell you whether anyone is genuinely searching for the truth.

And Kazakhstan's prison system has itself been described in language that deliberately echoes this Soviet inheritance. Years before I ever entered a Kazakh prison, the BBC ran reporting under the title: “Kazakhstan's Living Gulags.” Think about that title. Not Kazakhstan's difficult prisons. Not Kazakhstan's overcrowded prisons. Living Gulags. The BBC was reporting on allegations of torture, humiliation and brutal treatment inside Kazakhstan's penitentiary system. Other contemporary reporting documented prisoners cutting open their own bodies, slashing their arms and sewing their mouths shut in desperate attempts to draw attention to what was happening behind the walls.

So when I later entered C18 and eventually the prison camps, I wasn't walking into a problem that had suddenly appeared with my case. International journalists and human-rights organisations had been warning about this system years before I arrived. And yet when you're the person actually standing behind those doors, the historical comparison stops sounding dramatic. It starts feeling disturbingly familiar. I spent years trying to understand whether what I was experiencing was simply a collection of exceptionally bad individuals.

One corrupt guard. One bad investigator. One useless lawyer. One compromised official. Another corrupt prison employee. Eventually the numbers became too large for me to continue thinking that way. And you don't have to believe me. Because something remarkable has happened during the years I have been imprisoned. Kazakhstan has prosecuted its own officials. Police. Prison officers. Prosecutors. Judges. Senior officials. People inside the very institutions I am describing.

So before dismissing what prisoners say happens behind these walls, look at what Kazakhstan's own courts have established about some of the people running them. Prison No. 57 Let's start somewhere particularly close to me. Prison No. 57. My prison. Former Institution No. 57 chief Petr Pisarev was sentenced to nine years' imprisonment in a corruption case involving money from prisoners and the provision of protection and prohibited items. Another official, Erlan Bolekbay, was also convicted.

The former deputy chief of No. 57, Nurlan Bidaibekov, was also prosecuted in connection with allegations involving bribes from prisoners, and reporting later described a former deputy head of the institution receiving a prison sentence. Why does that matter? Because throughout this book I keep telling you about the prison economy. Money. Protection. Phones. Privileges. Contraband. Payments. I have told you how prisoners perceived as wealthy become sources of income.

I have told you that we paid. I have told you that we supplied. I have told you that prison could become a business. So understand the significance of this: The chief of the very prison in which I lived was himself eventually sent to prison in a corruption case involving money from prisoners and prohibited items. I'm not

asking you to take everything on faith. The system eventually prosecuted one of its own chiefs for conduct remarkably familiar to the world I have been describing.

And Prison No. 57 was not some isolated island. Investigations into prisons in the Almaty region exposed an extraordinary underground economy involving prisoner-controlled accounts and billions of tenge in transactions. Phones. Alcohol. Drugs. Money. Connections between prisoners and employees. An entire economy operating inside institutions supposedly under total state control. Think about that contradiction. The prisoner officially owns almost nothing. His movements are controlled.

His possessions are controlled. His visitors are controlled. His telephone access is controlled. His food is controlled. His clothing is controlled. The doors are controlled. The perimeter is controlled. Cameras supposedly watch everything. Yet enormous illegal economies somehow flourish inside. How? A prison isn't a public marketplace. Nobody accidentally drives through the gate with a boot full of telephones, alcohol and drugs and sets up a stall. Someone has to allow things through.

Someone has to look away. Someone gets paid. The VIP Cells Now we arrive at something almost surreal for me to read years after I first entered detention. Because I have already told you what happened to me. Pay for better conditions. Pay for telephones. Pay to avoid constant searches. Pay for privileges. At the time, sitting inside C18, it seemed like some secret world nobody outside would ever understand. Years later, criminal cases exposed what were described as commercial or VIP cells in an Almaty detention centre.

According to prosecution material reported by Orda, detainees could pay for favourable cells, telephone access, better food and reduced interference from searches. Officials and trusted prisoners were implicated in collecting money. One former senior operative, Bekzhan Makenov, was convicted in connection with such commercial-cell arrangements and sentenced to seven and a half years. Another case involved KNB officer Miras Sovetov, who received a five-year sentence after admitting abuse of authority connected with such arrangements.

Read that again. Paid cells. Mobile phones. Food. Reduced searches. Money. Officials. Does any of that sound familiar yet? Earlier in this book I told you about being offered improved conditions. $3,000. Better conditions. No searches. Smartphones in the room. I cannot tell you that the particular people who dealt with me were necessarily participants in the later prosecuted schemes unless evidence establishes that connection. But I can tell you this: The business model existed.

And Kazakhstan's own criminal justice system eventually prosecuted officials over it. The Judges Then there are the judges. The people sitting above everyone else. The people whose independence is supposed to represent the final barrier between state power and the accused. Former Supreme Court judge Meiram Zhanguttinov was sentenced to five years in 2021 in a case involving attempted fraud; another former judge involved in the matter also received five years.

A former chairman of Aktau City Court, Bauyrzhan Shaidullin, was sentenced to nine years in a case involving fraud and incitement to bribery connected with promises concerning a favourable judicial outcome. Former Shymkent judge Zhanat Musirali received seven and a half years in a scheme involving an enormous payment sought from the wife of a defendant in connection with helping him avoid imprisonment. Former Uralsk City Court chairman Ruslan Zhumagulov was sentenced to imprisonment for large-scale fraud.

These aren't prisoners gossiping through holes in a cell wall. These aren't Mohamed Barakat's theories. These are criminal cases involving judges. And that matters when I tell you what prisoners and their families talk about every single day. How much does the judge want? Who knows the prosecutor? Who can settle the case? Who can change the sentence? Who has the connection? I have heard versions of these conversations for years. When you've spent long enough inside Kazakhstan's prison system, justice sometimes starts sounding less like a principle and more like a marketplace.

The Prosecutors Then come the prosecutors. Former prosecutor Marat Abuov was convicted in a corruption-related case. A prosecutor in Taraz was sentenced to five years after convictions including incitement to bribery and attempted fraud. Former prosecutor Gamal Tazabekov received five years for abuse of authority in a case in which prosecutors said a prisoner had been exploited as his personal cook. A former prosecutor in the Ulytau region was sentenced to three and a half years for fraud and incitement to bribery and banned for life from public service.

Another case involving a transport prosecutor in Aktau concerned 2.5 million tenge allegedly sought in connection with helping a defendant obtain a more favourable punishment and avoid imprisonment. Again: Money. Connections. Promises. Sentences. Freedom. The very subjects prisoners talk about endlessly. This doesn't mean every prosecutor in Kazakhstan is corrupt. It doesn't mean every judge accepts money. It doesn't mean every criminal case is purchased. But it destroys another argument entirely:

that such things simply don't happen. They do. Kazakhstan's own courts say they do. The Police Then we come to torture. This is where the subject stops being abstract for me. Because I know what a police baton feels like. I know what old handcuffs cutting into bleeding wrists feel like. I know what electricity feels like. I know what it feels like when the person wearing the uniform is the person you're frightened of. And once again, you don't have to rely entirely on me.

Police officers in Kazakhstan have been convicted of torture. In Atyrau, five police officers were convicted in a case involving the beating and torture of a suspect in an attempt to obtain a confession. Three Almaty police officers were sentenced to prison for torturing detainees connected with the January 2022 events. Other former officers were convicted in further January-related torture cases, including cases involving detainees abused inside police facilities.

In another case, former police officers were convicted of torturing dozens of people during the Bloody January period. This wasn't simply a historical problem

that Kazakhstan could blame on Stalin. It was happening in the twenty-first century. And eventually the state itself was forced to respond. Forty-Seven Here is perhaps one of the most important numbers in this chapter. 47. Not 47 complaints. Not 47 allegations. According to Kazakhstan's Human Rights Ombudsman, 47 law-enforcement personnel were convicted of torture in 2023 alone.

The figures for earlier years were also significant. And from January 2023, Kazakhstan changed the system so that pretrial investigations into torture came under the exclusive jurisdiction of prosecutors. That institutional change matters. The authorities also began addressing surveillance failures inside law-enforcement facilities. Thousands of camera blind spots were reportedly identified and eliminated. Ask yourself why those reforms were necessary. Why does a country need to remove thousands of blind spots from law-enforcement buildings?

Why does responsibility for investigating torture need to be moved? Why do prosecutors need special methodologies referencing the principles of the Istanbul Protocol? Because torture isn't something Kazakhstan can simply dismiss as foreign propaganda. Kazakhstan itself acknowledges the problem. A Police Chief and a Rape There is another case that shows just how far abuse of official power can descend. I originally remembered hearing that a judge had raped his secretary.

When I later checked the case carefully, the details were different—and the real story was arguably even more disturbing. The man convicted was Marat Kushtybayev, then head of the Taldykorgan police department. He was sentenced to eleven years for raping a 27-year-old woman in his police office. Then another corruption scandal developed around the case. A court secretary became implicated in a separate case concerning 40 million tenge allegedly connected to an attempt to persuade the victim to change her testimony and thereby help obtain a more favourable outcome for Kushtybayev.

Think about the institutions orbiting a single case. A senior police officer. A rape inside a police building. A victim. A criminal prosecution. Money. An attempt to change testimony. A court employee. Another prosecution. This is what institutional corruption does. It spreads. One compromised person requires another compromised person. Then another. Then another. Eventually nobody knows where the original crime ends and the machinery protecting people from consequences begins.

Who Investigates the Investigators? For years I kept returning to the same question. Who investigates the investigators? I complained about torture. I complained about mistreatment. I complained about evidence. I complained about procedure. My family complained. My lawyers complained. The British Embassy became aware of my allegations. Human-rights organisations became involved. Letters travelled between institutions. Responses came back. And again and again I encountered variations of the same conclusion:

No evidence. Not established. No grounds. Closed. Next complaint. Next letter. Next rejection. But here's what makes those responses so difficult for me to accept. If Kazakhstan itself eventually decided that torture investigations should

be removed from ordinary investigative structures and placed exclusively with prosecutors, then the state itself recognised the importance of institutional independence in investigating abuse. And if Kazakhstan's own prosecution authorities developed procedures referencing the Istanbul Protocol, then asking for an investigation that meets those standards isn't some exotic demand invented by a British prisoner.

I'm asking Kazakhstan to apply principles its own authorities now say matter. Not Allegations Through a Prison Wall This is the distinction I want the reader to remember. When I tell you that we paid for phones— officials have been prosecuted over commercial prison arrangements involving phones. When I tell you prisoners paid for better conditions— officials have been prosecuted over paid privileged cells. When I tell you prisoners paid for protection— a chief of Prison No. 57 was convicted in a case involving money from prisoners and protection.

When I tell you corruption can reach the judiciary— judges, including a former Supreme Court judge, have themselves been imprisoned. When I tell you prosecutors can become part of corruption— prosecutors have themselves been convicted. When I tell you police torture people— police officers have been convicted of torture. When I tell you that torture isn't properly prevented— Kazakhstan's own authorities have introduced reforms specifically designed to combat it.

These aren't merely allegations whispered to me through holes in prison walls. These are problems documented by Kazakhstan's own prosecutions, courts and state institutions. So What Survived? And that brings me back to the NKVD. I am not saying that the modern Kazakh police officer is an NKVD executioner. That would be historically ridiculous. I'm asking something more uncomfortable. What happens when a country changes its political system faster than it changes its institutional culture?

What happens when the Soviet Union disappears but the people who train the next generation were themselves trained inside Soviet institutions? And what happens when the habits survive? Confession before investigation. Institution before individual. Hierarchy before truth. Loyalty upwards. Pressure downwards. Informants everywhere. Prisoners policing prisoners. Violence hidden from public view. An obsession with statistics and solved cases. The presumption, in practice, that if the state has accused you, there must be a reason.

And above everything else: Protect the system. That is the inheritance I am talking about. Not identical institutions. Not identical crimes. Not identical historical circumstances. Institutional DNA. Kazakhstan has changed enormously since the Soviet period. It would be dishonest to pretend otherwise. The country has introduced anti-torture reforms. It has prosecuted police officers, prison officials, prosecutors and judges. The fact that officials are sometimes prosecuted is itself evidence that there are people inside Kazakhstan attempting to change the system.

But there is another way to read those convictions. Every time another police officer is convicted of torture— every time another prison official is imprisoned for corruption— every time another prosecutor is caught selling influence— every time another judge is convicted— the state is also documenting the existence of the very disease it says it is trying to cure. And I have been living inside that disease for years. I didn't discover it in a history book.

I discovered it when my wrists were bleeding. I discovered it when money was demanded. I discovered it when phones were sold to me and then confiscated. I discovered it when we paid for things the state should provide. I discovered it when we repaired the prisons holding us. I discovered it when people who were supposed to protect prisoners frightened them instead. I discovered it when complaints about abuse disappeared into the same institutional machinery being complained about.

Only much later did I start reading the history. And that was when something became clear to me. I didn't begin by reading about the Gulag and then looking for similarities. I lived the system first. Years later, I discovered that the BBC had already described Kazakhstan's prisons as “Living Gulags.” By then, I understood exactly why somebody had chosen those words. Perhaps the most dangerous thing about an old system isn't that it survives unchanged. That would make it easy to recognise.

The uniforms change. The names change. The laws change. New institutions appear. New slogans are printed. New international agreements are signed. And slowly everyone convinces themselves that the old world has disappeared. But sometimes the machinery doesn't need to survive intact. Sometimes all it needs to do is teach the next generation how things are done. The Soviet Union died. The question Kazakhstan still has to answer is how much of the system died with it.

Chapter 74: This is Kazakhstan

This Is Kazakhstan

Within the first couple of months, the results of the forensic examinations began arriving. And something started going wrong for the investigation. Not for me. For them. Because examination after examination, the evidence was beginning to tell a story very different from the one Investigator Nurlan Bolatov and the prosecution needed in order to convict me. First came the autopsy. Sophia's head injury was described as a bilateral compression injury. A crushing mechanism.

In simple terms, her head had suffered compression between two surfaces — one hard, such as a floor, and another comparatively softer surface, potentially a human body. This was important. The injury raised an entirely different mechanism from the narrative being constructed around me. It raised the possibility of a fall — someone falling while holding Sophia, someone falling onto

her, or another compression event capable of producing the injuries described by the experts.

Whatever the precise sequence of events, the forensic findings demanded investigation. Then came the psychiatric assessment. The conclusion described me as having been in what was referred to as a twilight state around the relevant period — an altered state of consciousness that had to be considered when trying to reconstruct what had happened that morning. Then came the narcotics evidence. The drug-dependency assessment concluded that I had no drug dependency.

More importantly, my blood and urine both tested negative for narcotics. That mattered because almost immediately after my arrest, drugs had somehow entered the story. At one of my first hearings, I had already watched a police officer standing in the corridor whispering to the judge. The translator sitting beside me leaned over and told me: “The police officer told the judge you were on drugs.” But now there was scientific evidence. No narcotics in my blood.

No narcotics in my urine. No drug dependency. Another part of the story being constructed around me had collided with the evidence. Then came the DNA. My DNA was excluded from Sophia's blanket. Then the fingerprints. Fingerprints recovered during the investigation did not match mine. One result after another. Autopsy. Psychiatry. Narcotics. Blood. Urine. DNA. Fingerprints. And suddenly the evidence wasn't behaving the way the investigation needed it to behave.

It wasn't pointing obediently towards Mohamed Barakat. At the very least, it was screaming for the investigation to widen. Who else was present? What exactly happened that morning? How did Sophia sustain a bilateral compression injury? Whose fingerprints had been recovered? Why didn't they match mine? Whose DNA was present? Whose DNA wasn't? What did Madina do? Where had she been? What physical evidence supported her account? Why hadn't her fingerprints been taken and compared?

Why hadn't her DNA been compared against the relevant evidence? And if the allegation was that I had brutally attacked Madina — throwing her onto a bed, climbing on top of her, beating her repeatedly, catching her again at the door and strangling and punching her — where were the corresponding injuries on her body? These weren't insignificant details. These were fundamental forensic questions. And this should have been the moment when the investigation stopped.

Not stopped permanently. Stopped and reassessed. Go back to the beginning. Put every assumption aside. Look at every person who had been inside that room. Look at the physical evidence. Look at the forensic evidence. Look at the inconsistencies. And ask the question an investigation into the death of a one-year-old child should have been asking from the very beginning: What actually happened to Sophia? That is what an investigation is supposed to do. Follow the evidence.

But that isn't what happened. They started retesting the evidence. This wasn't some feeling I developed sitting inside a prison cell. The examinations were repeated and revisited. The original forensic findings existed. Instead of those

findings causing the investigation to widen towards other possible explanations for Sophia's death, the forensic process continued until new conclusions could be produced. The most extraordinary example concerned Sophia herself.

A subsequent forensic examination was conducted without Sophia's body. She was not exhumed. The experts did not have her corpse in front of them. Yet a new opinion concerning the injuries and mechanism of her death was produced. That process would eventually become one of the central forensic disputes in my case, including whether such a re-examination without the body complied with Kazakhstan's own forensic regulations. Think about what was happening. The original evidence was producing questions.

Instead of answering those questions, they were trying to produce different evidence. New examination. New opinion. New attempt. Meanwhile the questions that should have been getting louder were disappearing into the background. Whose fingerprints were they? Why didn't they match mine? Why was my DNA excluded? Why wasn't Madina tested? What caused the bilateral compression? Where were Madina's injuries? Why did the physical evidence not correspond with the story being told?

The investigation had already chosen its destination. Now the evidence had to be made to take it there. And as this continued, experts themselves came under pressure. The forensic process was no longer simply a neutral scientific exercise occurring independently from the investigation. Examinations were being revisited, conclusions challenged and the evidence pushed again and again. By then too much had already happened. I had been arrested. I had been beaten.

I had been publicly portrayed as my daughter's killer. Statements had been written. Madina had been designated the victim. The media had been fed a narrative. My family had been pressured. Money had been discussed. People had committed themselves to one version of events. The machine was already moving. Now imagine what happens if somebody pulls the emergency brake and says: Stop. The evidence doesn't support what we've been saying. What happens if, after everything that had already been done to me, the evidence says:

You arrested the wrong person? Now it isn't simply an embarrassing mistake. Questions have to be answered. Why was he beaten? Why was he prevented from saying goodbye to his daughter? Why was he publicly presented as her killer? Why wasn't the other person in the room properly investigated? Why weren't her fingerprints taken? Why wasn't her DNA compared? Why were forensic examinations repeated? Why were the original findings not followed? Who authorised what?

Who knew what? And when? At some point, correcting the mistake becomes more dangerous to the people who made it than continuing with it. And I believe that was the point my case had reached. My innocence was no longer merely inconvenient. It had become dangerous. One day Nurlan Bolatov came to see me in detention. By then I had a new lawyer. Her name was Aigul. I'll tell you much more about her later. During this particular visit, Aigul briefly left the room.

For the first time in a while, Nurlan and I were alone. He immediately started telling me that he needed to speak with me privately. Later. Without my lawyer. I stared at him. Why? Then he said something I have never forgotten. “We know you didn't kill Sophia.” I looked at him. After everything that had happened, I wasn't sure I had heard him correctly. Then he continued. “But you don't understand our legal system.” Something inside me exploded. For months I had been carrying anger, grief and helplessness that had nowhere to go.

This man was standing in front of me after everything that had happened. After my daughter had died. After I had been arrested. After I had been beaten. After he had promised me that if I signed the Russian statement I would be allowed to see Sophia. After I had begged to see her. After they buried her without me. After I had been denied the chance to hold my daughter one final time. After the media had turned me into a monster. After the forensic evidence itself had started contradicting the case they were constructing.

And now the investigator responsible for my case was standing face to face with me saying: “We know you didn't kill Sophia.” My voice started rising. “You didn't let me say goodbye to my daughter, Nurlan!” He stood there. I got louder. “You didn't let me bury my daughter, Nurlan!” Everything was coming out now. Months of rage. Months of grief. Months of being unable to understand how the people supposedly investigating my daughter's death could behave this way.

I was shouting. “Everyone can see that she did it, Nurlan!” My voice was now at full volume. Then I said the words I had probably been carrying inside me from the moment they put me behind those doors. “I'm going to destroy you, Nurlan!” By now Nurlan Bolatov was sweating profusely. He sat down on a small stool. For several seconds he said nothing. He gathered himself. Then he looked up at me. And something about his expression changed. For perhaps the first time, I didn't see Captain Nurlan Bolatov, the investigator.

I saw the man underneath. He looked exhausted. And there was something in his tone that I interpreted almost as disgust — not with me, but with the system and with what the investigation had become. He looked directly at me. Then he said: “This is Kazakhstan, Mohamed.” That was it. Not: The evidence proves you're guilty. Not: You're mistaken. Not: The experts proved you killed Sophia. Not: Trust the investigation. Not: The court will establish the truth. Just:

“This is Kazakhstan, Mohamed.” At the time, I couldn't possibly have understood how important those four words would become. I would spend years learning Kazakhstan's Criminal Procedure Code. Years reading forensic reports. Years challenging expert conclusions. Years watching examinations being revisited. Years sending complaints to prosecutors. Years appealing to courts. Years writing to the General Prosecutor's Office. Years trying to get the Supreme Court to look at what had happened.

Years trying to make somebody go back to the beginning. There would be thousands of pages. Expert reports. Court judgments. Prosecutorial decisions. Applications. Appeals. Refusals. Official letters. Legal opinions. International

lawyers. Human-rights organisations. British Embassy correspondence. Thousands upon thousands of words attempting to explain something Nurlan Bolatov had explained to me in four. Because the evidence had already begun asking the right question.

The system simply refused to follow it. And sitting on that stool in front of me, sweating after telling me they knew I hadn't killed my daughter, the investigator responsible for my case gave me the shortest explanation of Kazakhstan's justice system I would ever receive. I can still see him looking up at me. I can still hear his voice. “This is Kazakhstan, Mohamed.”

Chapter 75: Cell 197

Cell 197

I had been scammed. I paid the first $1,500 to Shokar, the oper responsible for the corridor, and finally I was moved to cell 55. For a moment, it seemed like the money had worked. There were only four other prisoners in the cell. Two of them spoke English. They were obviously wealthy men, and compared with where I had been living, the conditions were completely different. There was a smartphone. There were two miniature Nokia phones. I could finally speak properly with the outside world.

For the first time in weeks, I felt as though I had bought myself a tiny piece of humanity. It lasted less than forty-eight hours. Then they sent me straight back to cell 57. The explanation was that I was a foreigner under strict control. But something else was happening. Nurlan Bolatov had arrived. The first psychiatric results had not gone the way the investigation wanted, and now he was trying to interfere with what came next. He called me downstairs to the holding cells.

There, Nurlan said something to me that almost broke what was left of my mind. “Mohamed, we will simply exhume your daughter's corpse and break all the bones in her body if you don't confess.” For a second, I couldn't process the words. Exhume Sophia? Dig my baby out of the ground? Break her bones? There are threats you can make against a man himself. Beat him. Starve him. Freeze him. Lock him away. Humiliate him. After enough of it, you begin developing ways of surviving.

But Sophia was different. Sophia was the one place inside my mind they weren't allowed to touch. She was already dead. They had already taken away my chance to say goodbye to her. They had already buried her while I sat inside a cell. Now he was threatening her body. I returned upstairs to cell 57 with those words going around and around inside my head. Before I could even begin processing them, guards were waiting in the corridor. “Get your belongings. You're being moved.”

Again? Where? Nobody explained anything. I collected the few things I had and followed them. Eventually we stopped outside another cell. 197. The door opened. The moment I stepped inside, I knew something was wrong. This wasn't

an ordinary cell. I was in the psychiatric ward. I looked around. There were the most hideous depictions on the walls. The men inside looked seriously disturbed. Some sat in corners rocking backwards and forwards. Others simply stared at the walls.

Nobody needed to explain where I was. My mind was already overheating. Everything that had happened over the previous weeks was colliding inside my head at once. Sophia. Madina. The beatings. The interrogations. The psychiatric examinations. The threats. And now Nurlan's words. We will exhume your daughter's corpse. We will break all the bones in her body. My head was pounding. My eyes hurt deep behind their sockets. My body started shaking uncontrollably.

I couldn't stop it. I lay down on the metal bunk. The room started disappearing around me. And I passed out. When I woke up, for a few seconds I didn't know where I was. Then I looked towards the cell door. There was an eye staring through the peephole. A tiny, beady eye. Watching me. A few moments later it disappeared. Then it came back. Every fifteen minutes or so: the eye. Disappear. The eye. Disappear. Ya Allah, where on earth am I? What are these people?

What have they put me in here with? It felt like I had woken up inside a Stephen King film. Men rocking in corners. Strange drawings covering the walls. Faces staring into nothing. And every fifteen minutes that strange little eye appearing in the door. Watching. Checking. Waiting. I needed a phone. Immediately. I needed to speak to my family. I needed somebody outside these walls to know where they had put me and what Nurlan had just said to me. There was a hole in the wall connecting our cell with the next one.

I looked around at the men in the room. One of them made eye contact with me. I put my thumb against my ear and my little finger towards my mouth. The universal prison sign. Phone. He looked at me and nodded towards the hole in the wall. I walked over. “Assalamu alaykum.” A voice answered from the other side. “Wa alaykum assalam.” “English? English?” I asked. There was movement on the other side. Then a Russian man called Dima appeared at the hole. “Ey, man. I know who you are. I'm reading your news every day.”

Then came the question I had already become accustomed to hearing. “Why you kill daughter?” “I didn't kill anyone,” I said. “I need a phone. Fast.” Dima immediately understood. “Oh, oh. Very expensive here,” he said. “Very, very expensive.” “How much?” I could hear them discussing it on the other side of the wall. Then Dima came back. “Eighty thousand.” 80,000 tenge. At the time, just over two hundred dollars. “Okay. No problem.” Dima started laughing in that heavy Russian accent of his.

“No problem!” The others started laughing too. To them it was funny. Some Englishman had appeared in the psychiatric ward willing to pay 80,000 tenge for a miniature Nokia without even negotiating. I didn't care. “Okay. Evening.” “Okay,” I said. “Okay.” I moved away from the wall. My eyes were still aching behind their sockets. My body was still shaking. I couldn't control my hands. I couldn't

stop imagining men digging into the ground. Reaching Sophia. Opening whatever surrounded her.

Touching her. Breaking her tiny bones. My poor Sophia. She was one year old. She was already gone. Wasn't that enough? I sat there surrounded by men rocking backwards and forwards, staring into empty walls, while an eye appeared every fifteen minutes through the door to check whether I was still there. And for perhaps the first time I understood that there were places inside this system where the walls themselves could be used against your mind. Beat me. Threaten me.

Lock me away. Do whatever you want to me. But don't touch my daughter. Don't touch Sophia. I remember exactly what was going through my mind. It wasn't rational. I wasn't thinking rationally anymore. I was grieving, terrified, exhausted and psychologically collapsing. There was only one thought repeating itself inside my head: My poor Sophia. If they touch her, I'll kill myself. I swear I'll kill myself.

Chapter 76: The Men Who Have Nothing

The Men Who Have Nothing

There are many things I cannot discuss in this book. Not yet. Especially when it comes to torture and mistreatment. The reason is very simple: I am still living inside this system. The people who inflicted some of that suffering are still here too. When this book is eventually released, I have absolutely no doubt there will be questions asked, conversations had and situations I will have to deal with because of what I have written. So there are things I know that must remain unwritten for now.

There are names I cannot put on these pages. There are incidents I cannot describe. There are details I cannot give you while I am still sleeping behind these walls. But to those who were sent into my cell, and to those who sent them there to inflict pain: You know who you are. And you know what you did. There are other things, however, that I can describe. Things that happen openly. Things you can see simply by living here. And perhaps the people who suffer most inside this system are not the wealthy prisoners, the gangsters or the high-profile inmates.

They are the men who have nothing. No money. No influential friends. No family sending parcels. Nobody topping up an account. Nobody bringing medicine. Nobody arriving at the gates with food, cigarettes, toiletries or clean clothes. For these men, the system doesn't merely imprison them. It consumes them. When a prisoner arrives, he is issued clothing of such low quality that it is difficult to describe without sounding as though I am exaggerating. The material feels almost like plastic.

You can practically pull some of it apart between two fingers. Plastic shoes. Two pairs of polyester trousers. A polyester jacket. Two T-shirts that almost immediately become discoloured with sweat. A polyester cap. And that's more or less your new wardrobe. There are supposed to be other provisions. Underwear.

Soap. Toothpaste. A razor. Basic hygiene products. We do receive bedsheets and sometimes a rough blanket or cover. Usually most of this is dealt with during the quarantine stage.

After that, reality takes over. And for a man without money, reality means charity. Hand-me-downs. An old shirt from another prisoner. Someone else's shoes. Half a tube of toothpaste. A little soap. A few cigarettes. Some food pushed across a table. Whatever somebody else no longer needs. There is always a difference between what a prison is supposed to provide on paper and what actually reaches the prisoner. And poverty inside prison creates its own class system.

The men without money don't have the same access to the things wealthy prisoners and gangsters use every day. A washing machine may physically exist somewhere nearby. A proper shower may exist. Exercise equipment may exist. Medicine may exist. Better food certainly exists. But existing and being accessible are two completely different things. The poor survive by making themselves useful. They clean. They sweep. They cut the grass. In winter they clear snow.

They repair things. They carry things from one end of the prison to another. Then sometimes they carry the same things back again. They become lookouts. Information becomes a form of currency. Who is coming? Which officer is on duty? Is there going to be a search? Which building are they checking? Who has entered the prison? Where are the internal police? And so these men learn to retrieve information quickly and bring it back even faster to whoever controls the environment around them.

Sometimes the entire place becomes a ridiculous game of cat and mouse. Things that aren't permitted have to disappear whenever the internal authorities approach. Boxing gloves. Punching bags. Training equipment. Lounges. Large suitcases. Sofas. Things are carried from one place to another, hidden, moved again, returned and hidden again. The poorest prisoners become the legs of the prison. They carry everything. They clean everything. They hear everything. They watch everything.

And because they have almost nothing of their own, their usefulness becomes one of the few things they possess. But the part that affects me most is watching what happens to their bodies. If you don't have money, proper medical treatment becomes extremely difficult to obtain. Dental treatment is another problem entirely. You watch men's teeth deteriorate. One goes. Then another. Then another. I've already lost three myself. The diet doesn't help. Neither does the oral hygiene.

And then there is the food itself. If you have no family, no money and nobody sending food into the prison, eventually you have to survive on what the prison gives you. And sooner or later, you become a walking skeleton. Most of us who have another option rarely eat a complete prison meal. There is a reason. Breakfast is usually some form of porridge. Barley. Sometimes corn. Kazakhstan is rich in

grain, so grain is always available. But somehow they manage to turn it into something that tastes like cardboard.

Occasionally they add sugar. Usually it is just tasteless slop, carrying the smell of whatever else has been cooked in the same enormous pans. Food should be one of the few things a prisoner looks forward to. Here, it can become one of the most depressing moments of the day. There have been periods when we were forced to attend the mess hall and eat. Everything becomes a procedure. We assemble by unit. Rows of five. Uniforms inspected. Hair checked to make sure it has been cut short.

Faces checked to make sure everyone is clean-shaven. Break one of these rules and they film you. A violation is issued. Collect enough violations and you can find yourself heading towards isolation. Then we march. Eventually we reach what everyone calls the mesh. Up the stairs. Inside. And before you even see the food, you smell it. The entire place stinks of what you're about to eat. We line up side by side next to the chairs. Nobody sits. An order comes.

Hats off. Then another order. Sit. And the food arrives. A metal bowl containing a broth of barely washed potatoes and carrots with pieces of meat floating inside it. Nobody really knows what kind of meat it is. Sometimes packaging appears with expiry dates so old you find yourself staring at them in disbelief. Ten years. Fifteen years. The meat can stink of congealed blood and freezer burn. Then there is the bread. A slice of prison loaf. We learned our own rule about that too.

Eat the crust. Be careful with the soft inside. Eat too much of it and people complain of becoming sick. So there we sit. Rows of prisoners in identical cheap uniforms, eating from metal bowls under orders. I look up. On the wall is an old, sad painting made by a prisoner. A bowl of fruit. I stare at it. And instead of looking at the food in front of me, I start imagining the taste of the fruit in the painting. Watermelon. Strawberries. Things that sound completely ordinary until you haven't tasted them for years.

We're lucky if once in a while we get an apple. It's strange what prison does to your imagination. Outside, you can walk through a supermarket and barely notice mountains of fruit. Inside, you can stare at a badly painted watermelon on a wall and almost taste it. I look back down at my metal bowl. There is a cockroach floating in the soup. I don't say anything. I don't dare. Because if I point it out and everyone else loses their appetite, suddenly I'm the problem.

Then the comments start from across the table. Mohamed thinks he's too good to eat this. The Englishman won't eat. So I say nothing. I slowly bite the crust of my bread. I'm frightened of eating there. I've been diagnosed with intestinal worms twice while in prison. Both times my sisters had to arrange medication from outside. Medicine is expensive. Getting it into prison is difficult. And even after my family manages to obtain it and send it, I'm lucky if all of it actually reaches me through the prison clinic.

So I sit there looking at the cockroach. And I chew my bread. Around me, other men eat because they have to. Not because they like the food. Not because they don't see what I see. Because there is nothing else coming. That's the difference. I can refuse a bowl because somewhere outside these walls I have family. Someone is thinking about me. Someone will arrange food. Someone will try to find medicine. For the man sitting opposite me who has nobody, that disgusting bowl isn't an option.

It's dinner. When the meal is finished, something happens that seemed bizarre to me when I first saw it. The zeks lick their spoons. Then they put them into their pockets. Apparently, according to prison logic, once you've licked your spoon, it's clean. And off we march again. Back through the prison. Back to the unit. Back to the cell. Tomorrow, do it again. And the next day. And the next. The diet also helps explain something else you see everywhere in prison.

Sugar. Sweets—konfety, конфеты—are everywhere. They sound insignificant until you've lived here. A sweet gives you a little burst of energy. Something pleasurable. Something different. Something for your brain to look forward to. Tea and sweets become little events during days in which almost nothing happens. Eventually you realise how psychologically important they have become. Sugar addiction is real in here. Take away someone's sweets and you can actually see the change in his mood.

People become miserable. Irritable. Depressed. They start asking: “Konfety est?” Any sweets? It's such a small question. But prison reduces life to small things. A cigarette. A sweet. A cup of tea. Ten minutes outside. A phone call. A clean pair of socks. An apple. Things you wouldn't even think about outside become events inside. Then there is chifir — чифирь. This isn't tea in the sense most British people would understand the word. It is an extraordinarily concentrated tea with deep roots in Soviet and post-Soviet prison culture.

The first time you see it being prepared, you think somebody has misunderstood the concept of tea. An absurd amount of tea leaves goes into a relatively small quantity of water. A third of a box. Sometimes what looks like half a box. The result is almost black. Bitter. Heavy. To me it tastes absolutely disgusting. But prisoners drink it strong. Very strong. For men living monotonous lives with little stimulation, tea, cigarettes and sugar become ways of pushing the body through another day.

And there is something almost historically unsettling about watching it. The Soviet Union disappeared. The flag changed. The country changed. The uniforms changed. Yet here is this same dark prison drink, chifir, carried from one generation of prisoners into another. Then there is the smell. You cannot write truthfully about prison without writing about smell. For many of these men, access to a shower is limited. Imagine working. Sweating. Sleeping in crowded conditions.

Wearing cheap polyester. Smoking. Eating badly. Then waiting for the next opportunity to properly wash yourself. The basic soap we use is what they call

khozyaystvennoye mylo — хозяйственное мыло. Household soap. Laundry soap. Old-fashioned, basic, virtually perfume-free Soviet-style soap. You wash yourself with what you have. You wash your clothes with what you have. You survive with what you have. And slowly something happens to a man. Not just physically.

Psychologically. The outside world begins disappearing from him. His clothes change. His smell changes. His teeth change. His language changes. His posture changes. His expectations change. Eventually even his name changes. He becomes a zek. Зэк. Another prisoner. Another uniform. Another man drinking chifir. Another man waiting for shower day. Another man asking for sweets. Another man whose tooth hurts but who cannot afford proper treatment. Another man clearing snow.

Another man carrying someone's sofa because the internal cops are coming. Another man watching the corridor because information is one of the few currencies available to him. Another human being slowly being converted into a function of the institution. And this is where money changes everything. Throughout this book I have described corruption, payments and the underground prison economy. But there is another side to that story. If you have money, the system exploits you.

If you have nothing, the system uses you. My family has supported me. They have sent food. They have sent clothes. They have paid for things I needed. That doesn't protect a person from prison, violence or humiliation. But after years inside, I understand what an enormous difference having somebody outside can make. Because I have lived beside the men who have nobody. I've eaten with them. I've slept beside them. I've worked beside them. I've watched them beg for cigarettes.

I've watched them share the last sweets in a packet. I've watched their clothes deteriorate. I've watched their teeth disappear. I've watched their bodies become thinner. And I've watched the prison gradually become their entire universe. I'll discuss later what the prison is officially supposed to provide in terms of nutrition, clothing, hygiene and medical care and compare it with what actually reaches us. For now, I want you to understand something much simpler.

Imagine living like this not for a week. Not for a month. Not even for a year. Imagine doing it for fifteen years. Twenty years. Look at the men who have survived at the bottom of this system for long enough and you can see it in their faces. Their cheeks disappear. Their teeth disappear. Their clothes hang from them. Their shoulders collapse. Some shuffle rather than walk. Something seems to have been drained from their eyes. Walking zombies. There are moments when I look at some of the poorest and most emaciated prisoners and an image enters my mind that I wish didn't.

The photographs I have seen throughout my life of emaciated prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. I am not saying this prison is a Nazi concentration camp. The history, circumstances and crimes are profoundly different. I'm telling you what the physical appearance of some of these men evokes in my mind.

Hollow cheeks. Thin bodies. Clothes hanging loosely from them. Eyes that look as though life itself has slowly been pulled out. And then I remind myself: These aren't historical photographs.

These men are standing in front of me. They are alive. They are serving sentences. And some of them will live this way for fifteen or twenty years. Then you begin to understand what poverty really means inside prison. Outside these walls, money determines comfort. Inside these walls, money can determine whether you eat something you can stomach. Whether you replace a rotten tooth. Whether you obtain medicine when parasites are living inside your body. Whether you wash properly.

Whether you have decent shoes. Whether you have toothpaste. Whether you can refuse the metal bowl with the cockroach floating in it. People outside imagine deprivation as having nothing. Prison teaches you that there are degrees of nothing. There is having almost nothing but knowing your mother will arrive next week. There is having almost nothing but knowing your wife will send a parcel. There is having almost nothing but knowing somebody somewhere is thinking about you.

And then there is having nobody. No parcel coming. No money coming. No medicine coming. No food coming. No new shoes. No toothpaste. No lawyer fighting. No family calling. No one waiting. Those are the men the system can swallow whole. Tomorrow the doors will open again. They'll line up in rows of five. Their uniforms will be inspected. Their hair will be checked. They'll march to the mess hall. They'll stand beside their chairs. Hats off. Sit. Another metal bowl will be placed in front of them.

And they will eat. Because nobody outside is coming to feed them. The court may give two men exactly the same number of years. But the man with money and a family serves one sentence. The man with nothing serves another.

Chapter 77: The Second Trial

The Second Trial

Suicide is everywhere in detention. Attempts. Threats. Scars running across arms and necks. Men who have cut themselves. Men who have sewn their mouths shut. Men who have reached a point where death appears preferable to another day inside a system they believe refuses to hear them. People outside often misunderstand why this happens. They imagine a man has committed some terrible crime, suddenly realises he is going to prison and cannot handle the consequences.

I have lived among these men. I have listened to them. I have read case documents. I have watched them argue their cases amongst themselves for months. And again and again I have encountered something different. Men who say it is not prison itself that is destroying them. It is the belief that they have been wrongly convicted and that nothing they produce will make anyone listen. One

morning in cell 57, I woke to a strange grunting noise. For a few seconds I couldn't understand what I was hearing.

Then I looked up. Sayad was hanging from the ceiling. He had fashioned a noose from the bedsheets. The cell exploded into movement. People shouted. We rushed towards him. We got him down. We saved his life. That afternoon, Sayad received a seventeen-year prison sentence. He maintained that he had never committed the crime. He had been accused of sexual intercourse with a minor. And this is the part that must not be brushed aside. According to the case material I learned about, the medical examination found that the girl was still a virgin.

His DNA was excluded from her clothing. And the girl herself stood in court and said: He never touched me. The accusation, Sayad said, was being maintained by her father. Medical evidence. Forensic evidence. And the words of the alleged victim herself. What more was this man supposed to produce? That afternoon the court gave him seventeen years. Later, on appeal, his sentence was reduced to six. Eventually he was transferred from detention to lager—to prison camp.

There, Sayad attempted suicide again. This time nobody reached him in time. He died. Rest in peace, Sayad. For years I carried his story with me. But what disturbed me even more was discovering that cases containing these kinds of contradictions were not something that existed only in the stories prisoners told one another. I began finding them outside these walls too. “Nobody raped me” Consider another Kazakhstan case. Three teenagers in West Kazakhstan were convicted in a case involving the alleged group rape of a thirteen-year-old girl.

According to published reporting about the appeal, the medical examination found the girl to be a virgin. And then there were her own words. In recorded testimony, according to the report, the girl said: “Nobody raped me. I didn't sleep with anyone.” The report says she explained that she had been frightened to return home after staying out overnight and described previous threats that she could be sent to a juvenile adaptation centre. Relatives of the convicted teenagers maintained that police had pressured the boys to confess.

You might imagine that such evidence would at the very least cause the system to stop. Medical evidence. The alleged victim saying she wasn't raped. Questions concerning how the original allegation arose. Instead, according to the report, when the case reached appeal, the court added another month to the sentences of all three teenagers. Read that again. The girl said nobody raped her. The reported medical examination found her to be a virgin. And their sentences went up.

That story immediately reminded me of Sayad. Different people. Different case. Different circumstances. But the same question: At what point is evidence allowed to defeat an accusation? There was another extraordinary case in Almaty in 2019. Three young men had been sentenced to eight years in a rape case. Then the schoolgirl at the centre of the case publicly asked for them to be acquitted. She said nobody had raped her and claimed her incriminating evidence had been given under pressure.

That doesn't automatically tell us everything that happened. A recantation itself must also be investigated. People can be pressured into making accusations. They can also be pressured into withdrawing them. That's precisely the point. Investigate. Don't simply choose whichever statement produces the result you want. Test it against the objective evidence. Kazakhstan knows false accusations exist And nobody can seriously argue that knowingly false allegations simply don't happen in Kazakhstan, because Kazakhstan's own courts and prosecutors have prosecuted them.

In 2016, an Almaty woman was convicted after authorities concluded she had fabricated a rape allegation to conceal injuries she had actually received during a drunken fight with another woman. Witnesses to the fight contradicted her story and she eventually admitted what she had done. She received one year of restriction of liberty. In another Kazakhstan case reported in 2018, a woman accused a married lover of rape after discovering he had concealed his marriage. The rape investigation was terminated when the allegation wasn't substantiated; she admitted making the accusation in anger and was convicted for the false report.

In East Kazakhstan in 2020, another woman maintained during an investigation that a man had raped her beside a road. According to the reported judgment, forensic examinations eventually exposed serious problems with her account. She admitted fabricating the allegation and was convicted of knowingly making a false report. And in another East Kazakhstan case, special prosecutors established that a woman had voluntarily had sexual relations with an acquaintance and then reported him for rape the following day. She was subsequently convicted for knowingly making a false accusation. This isn't my prison gossip. The East Kazakhstan prosecutor's office itself published the case.

Orda has reported another revealing example of the complexity surrounding accusations. In 2026, police investigated public allegations by a blogger that her father had sexually abused her in childhood; according to Orda's report, police said their checks did not confirm the allegations. None of these cases proves that another complainant is lying. They establish something much simpler: Human beings sometimes make false accusations. Women can lie. Men can lie.

Parents can lie. Children can be pressured. Witnesses can lie. Police officers can lie. Defendants can certainly lie. And alleged victims can tell the truth. That is why we invented evidence. Don't believe the man. Don't believe the woman. Believe the evidence. There is another side of this that must be said clearly. Kazakhstan also has genuine victims of rape and sexual violence whose allegations have not been treated properly. Orda has documented cases where alleged victims and their families complained about failures in investigations. It has also reported the extraordinary procedural history of a rape case in which a blogger was convicted, subsequently acquitted on appeal, and then had that acquittal overturned by Kazakhstan's Supreme Court.

That matters. Because I'm not arguing that Kazakhstan should stop believing women. I'm not arguing that every man sitting beside me claiming innocence is innocent. That would be ridiculous. I'm arguing for something far more fundamental. Don't believe the man because he is a man. Don't believe the woman because she is a woman. Believe the evidence. If a woman says she was raped, investigate it seriously. Protect her. Collect the forensic evidence. Preserve the clothing.

Take DNA. Conduct the medical examination properly. Interview witnesses. Test the suspect's account. Test her account. And prosecute the perpetrator if the evidence establishes the offence. But if the medical evidence contradicts the accusation, examine that contradiction. If DNA excludes the accused where his DNA would reasonably be expected, examine that. If the alleged victim herself says the accused never touched her, don't pretend those words don't exist.

And if somebody deliberately fabricated an allegation, investigate that too. That isn't anti-woman. That's justice. The trial after the trial Inside prison, something extraordinary happens to criminal cases. There is a second trial. It isn't official. There is no judge. There is no prosecutor. There are no robes. But there is something prisoners possess in almost unlimited quantities: Time. When someone arrives with a serious conviction, particularly for certain offences, the other prisoners want to know exactly why he is there.

And saying: “I'm innocent.” means absolutely nothing. Everyone says that. So they start digging. Intelligent prisoners read judgments. They read expert reports. They compare witness statements. They look at dates. They find contradictions. They ask what the alleged victim originally said. They ask what changed. They ask what the medical examination showed. They ask about DNA. They ask about fingerprints. They ask who benefited. They ask about money. And they interrogate you.

Again. And again. And again. Because nobody wants to discover later that the man sleeping beside him has been lying about what he did. Influential inmates make enquiries. People with contacts check outside. Gangsters find people who know the families. Stories travel between prisons, neighbourhoods and cities. And eventually the unofficial court reaches its verdict. Sometimes the answer is: You're lying. You did it. Prison is full of guilty men who deny their crimes.

I've met them too. But sometimes people read the documents. They make their enquiries. They challenge the prisoner. They look at the evidence. And eventually the conclusion travelling around the prison is different: This man has been framed. I have seen enough of these cases that I intend to tell you about them throughout this book. Not rumours. Where possible, I want the documents. The medical examinations. The forensic reports. The judgments. The alleged victim's own words.

Videos. Appeals. Anything capable of being independently checked. Because after what happened to me, someone's word alone isn't enough for me either. Show me the evidence. The honey pot And then we arrive at the subject nobody inside

this system can avoid for long. Money. An accusation can create an economy around the accused. How much money does he have? What does his family own? Can they sell the house? Can they borrow? Who knows the investigator? Who knows the prosecutor?

Who knows the judge? Who can make a telephone call? Who can “solve” the problem? Who can reduce the sentence? Who can make the case disappear? Some of the people offering these services are undoubtedly scammers. Others claim connections. But when a family believes their son, husband, brother or father could lose fifteen or twenty years of his life, desperation makes them vulnerable. That desperation becomes a honey pot. And allegations involving women and children generate enormous fear because the social condemnation can begin before the evidence has even been examined.

Then someone appears and says: Pay. We'll solve it. That's where justice begins becoming a marketplace. I know this world because I've lived inside it. One of the questions I repeatedly heard after my arrest wasn't: “What evidence do they have against you?” It was: “Have you paid?” At first I couldn't understand why everyone kept asking me that. Years later, I understand perfectly. When frightened families begin believing that evidence won't necessarily save the accused, anybody claiming to control the outcome suddenly possesses something enormously valuable.

Freedom has a price. A reduced sentence supposedly has a price. A favourable decision supposedly has a price. Access has a price. Protection has a price. And around that fear grow brokers, intermediaries, gangsters, scammers and corrupt officials, each looking for their share. That is the honey pot. And if allegations themselves become opportunities for extortion or corruption, then the institutions responsible for investigating them have an even greater obligation to rely on independently verifiable evidence.

Because the state possesses a power no ordinary citizen possesses. It can take twenty years of your life. My own prison archive I don't expect you, the reader, simply to believe every story I tell you. After everything I've experienced, that would make me a hypocrite. So as this book continues, when I introduce prisoners whose cases I have personally examined, I want to distinguish between different levels of evidence. There will be cases where I heard only the prisoner's account.

I'll tell you that. There will be cases where I personally examined his documents. I'll tell you that. There will be cases supported by medical evidence. I'll show you. There will be DNA results. Court judgments. Videos. Statements from alleged victims. Public reporting. Where those materials can legally and safely be published, eventually the reader should be able to examine them too. Then you can decide. The man working near me today has his own story. He says the supposed victim never accused him at all.

He says the accusation originated with her mother after a conflict with his mother. And most extraordinarily, he tells me that the alleged victim herself has publicly appeared on YouTube saying that he is innocent and that the charges

against him were falsified. I'm not asking you to accept his account simply because I've written it here. I want to find that video. I want to examine his judgment. I want to read the evidence. Because that's the standard I wish had been applied to all of us.

And perhaps that is the greatest irony of this place. A convicted man sometimes arrives in prison and finally encounters people willing to spend months reading his case. Not because they're human-rights lawyers. Not because they're investigators. Because they're prisoners with nothing but time. I've watched men scrutinise cases more intensely inside these walls than some officials appeared to scrutinise them before sending people here. And that is why I say something that sounds absurd until you've lived it:

Sometimes it feels as though there is more justice inside a Kazakhstan prison than in Kazakhstan's justice system itself. Sayad never got another chance. We saved him the first time. We weren't there the second. And whenever I think about him, I come back to the same question. What happens inside the mind of a man who believes he can show the authorities a medical examination, forensic evidence and the words of the alleged victim herself—and still cannot make them hear him?

Eventually a prison sentence stops looking like a number. Seventeen years. Six years. Fifteen years. Twenty years. It becomes tomorrow. And tomorrow. And tomorrow. Until one night a man looks at a bedsheet and decides he cannot face another tomorrow. I know where that road ends. I woke up one morning to the sound of Sayad choking at the end of a bedsheet. That morning, we reached him. Later, in lager, he tried again. This time nobody did. Rest in peace, Sayad.

And for every case I tell you about from this point forward, remember one rule: Don't believe the accused simply because he says he is innocent. Don't believe an accusation simply because somebody signed it. Believe the evidence.

Chapter 78: Another day, Another Suicide

Another Day, Another Suicide

13 August 2026. Another day. Another suicide. Yesterday, a prisoner everyone here knew as Lokha, from the sewing section on the third floor, walked into an abandoned part of the prison we call the cold section. It's an old building now used mainly for collecting waste. Somehow he had a knife. He went inside alone. And stabbed himself in the heart. They found him during the second check, at around five o'clock in the afternoon. He had only arrived here about two months earlier.

Twenty-one-year sentence. I never met him. I don't know his family. I don't know what was happening inside his head. I don't know what finally made him walk into that abandoned building carrying a knife. And because I don't know, I'm not going to invent a story for him. All I know is that yesterday he was alive. And now he isn't. The strange thing is how quickly prison moves on. For a short while, people talked. Information travelled through the prison as it always does.

Who? Where? How? When did they find him? Then gradually everyone returned to whatever they had been doing. The prison swallowed another death and carried on functioning. Meals still came. Doors still opened and closed. Names were still called. People still smoked. People still argued. People still laughed. People still asked for coffee, cigarettes and sweets. By evening, life had already begun closing over the space where another human being had disappeared.

He seemed to have had little impact on most of the people around me. Perhaps tomorrow somebody else will be the subject everyone is talking about. Perhaps his death will appear somewhere in an official record. Perhaps it will be reported. Perhaps it won't. Perhaps somewhere he will simply become another number. Another statistic. And something about my own reaction disturbed me too. I didn't spend the evening consumed by what had happened. I've been surrounded by death, suffering, self-harm and desperation for so long that another suicide no longer produces the reaction in me that it once would have.

I lay on my bed writing. And eventually one thought entered my mind: We're all going to die one day anyway. Might as well give it our best shot while we're here. That might sound strange immediately after writing about a man who has just taken his own life. But I mean the exact opposite of giving up. I mean that even here, there are things worth fighting for. Even inside prison. Even after years have been taken from you. Even when almost everything you once considered normal has disappeared.

You can still affect something. Maybe not inside the room you're sitting in. Maybe not inside the building. Maybe not even inside the country. But somewhere much, much further away. A letter can travel further than you can. An idea can cross a border that you cannot. A story can enter a room that you will never be permitted to enter. And perhaps something changes because of it. Maybe one day the UK government develops a clearer and more transparent policy for dealing with British citizens imprisoned abroad who present credible allegations of serious mistreatment, procedural violations or wrongful conviction.

Maybe another British family doesn't have to spend years trying to understand what their government can and cannot do. Maybe something changes here in Kazakhstan. A procedure. A prison condition. An investigation. A safeguard. The way somebody's evidence is examined. The way somebody's complaint is treated. The way another prisoner is treated when everyone around him can see that psychologically he is collapsing. These are enormous systems. Changing them is difficult.

Sometimes unbelievably difficult. But difficult and impossible are not the same thing. Prison teaches you something strange about power. You can have almost none of it and still have some. They can decide when the door opens. They can decide when you eat. When you walk. When you sleep. When you see your family. They can surround you with concrete, steel and razor wire. But as long as you are still thinking, speaking and writing, there remains a small territory they don't completely control.

What you decide to do with the life you still have. Yesterday, a man I never knew walked into the cold section. By five o'clock, he was dead. Today the prison continues. And so do I. Not because I have forgotten what has happened to me. Not because I've accepted it. And certainly not because I believe nothing can change. Quite the opposite. There is still work to do. There are still people I love. There are still things worth exposing. There are still things worth changing.

There are still battles worth fighting. Maybe some of them will fail. Maybe some will succeed long after I'm gone. But we're all going to die one day anyway. So while I'm still here— I might as well give it my best shot.

Chapter 79: The Lawyer Who Was Going to Save Me

The Lawyer Who Was Going to Save Me

By now we had changed lawyers. Hizbullam was gone, at least as my defence lawyer, and in his place came Aigul. I was relieved. At that stage, almost anybody seemed better than Hizbullam. But I was beginning to discover another recurring feature of the Kazakhstan legal system: lawyers who promote themselves as though they possess extraordinary influence over a system in which, when it really matters, the defence lawyer can be almost completely powerless. Aigul knew how to sell hope.

She told us that she knew Nurlan Bolatov well. They had studied together. She had defeated him in previous cases. He was afraid of her. That's what we were told. When your daughter is dead, you're sitting in detention in a foreign country and your family is desperately searching for anybody capable of helping you, statements like that sound enormously important. Maybe finally we had found somebody who knew how this system worked. Maybe somebody could control Nurlan.

Maybe somebody could get me out. Aigul repeatedly raised the possibility that I could be transferred to house arrest while the investigation continued. Hope became something lawyers could sell us. And my family paid enormous amounts of money for it. This is something I would come to understand much better over the following years. Legal fees in Kazakhstan could be extraordinary considering how little power the lawyer sometimes appeared able—or willing—to exercise against investigators and prosecutors.

What exactly was the lawyer's role? I was still trying to understand that myself. Around the seventh or eighth month of my detention, Aigul arrived with documents and asked me to sign the case-file materials. That was when another problem began revealing itself. Apparently, as expert reports had been completed, I was supposed to have been properly familiarised with them. But I had barely seen any of them. And those I had seen might as well have been written in hieroglyphics.

Everything was in Russian. The English interpretation available to me was so poor that complicated forensic terminology became gibberish. I was supposedly

participating in my own defence while barely understanding the scientific evidence in the case against me. Eventually, one of the people who started helping me understand my own criminal case wasn't my lawyer. It was Dima, the Russian prisoner in the neighbouring cell. We communicated through a hole in the wall.

I would pass information through. He would read. Then his voice would come back. “Ey, man.” I moved closer to the hole. “Your expertise results very good.” “What does it say?” “Say your DNA not on your daughter's clothes.” He continued reading. “Say baby died from fall.” Then another result. “Experts clear you.” I stood there listening through a hole in a prison wall while another prisoner explained forensic evidence concerning the death of my own daughter.

Think about the absurdity of that. My family was paying lawyers enormous sums of money. There were investigators. Prosecutors. Translators. Experts. An entire criminal-justice system supposedly operating around me. Yet one of the clearest explanations I received of the evidence came from a Russian prisoner called Dima speaking to me through a hole somebody had made in a concrete wall. Then Dima asked the obvious question. “Ey, man. Why you didn't write against your wife if you think she's lying?”

I explained what the lawyers kept telling me. “My lawyer says we need Madina. Apparently there's some law here where she can forgive me in court.” There was a pause. “Forgive you for what?” Another pause. “Seems obvious she did it.” I didn't know what to say. “Yeah, but that's what the lawyers keep saying.” This idea followed me everywhere. We need Madina. Madina needs to forgive you. The lawyers seemed obsessed with reconciliation with the person who, on paper, was being treated as the victim.

I gradually understood why. In Kazakhstan, reconciliation with a victim can have important legal consequences for certain categories of offences. In countless cases, money changes hands, the victim forgives the accused, and lawyers attempt to use that reconciliation to terminate or mitigate the criminal proceedings. But there was one enormous problem with applying that mentality to my case. Forgive me for what? I was saying I hadn't killed Sophia. I was increasingly questioning Madina's own actions.

The forensic evidence I was finally beginning to understand was raising questions completely different from the narrative being constructed against me. Yet instead of saying: Then let's investigate Madina. the strategy seemed to remain: Keep Madina happy. We need Madina. Maybe Madina will forgive you. Dima understood the absurdity immediately. “Yeah, Kazakhstan, buddy,” he said. “They don't care. They never want admit they wrong. And money. Your case, they looking big money.”

Even Dima started thinking internationally. He told me that with everything I was describing, surely I could eventually go to the European Court of Human Rights. I thought so too. I was British. Surely being a British citizen meant that somehow European human-rights protections followed me wherever I went. I didn't understand international jurisdiction. Much later I learned the simple reality:

Kazakhstan is not a party to the European Convention on Human Rights, and the European Court of Human Rights does not have jurisdiction over Kazakhstan merely because the prisoner happens to be British.

At the time, I didn't know that. What surprised me later was how many lawyers I encountered who appeared equally confused about the international mechanisms actually available to me. Aigul was in way over her head. I wouldn't fully understand that until much later. At that moment, I was simply grateful Hizbullam was gone. But there is one thing Aigul did for which I remain genuinely grateful. She stopped them exhuming Sophia. Nurlan hadn't merely threatened me when he told me they would dig up my daughter's body.

He actually applied for her exhumation. My one-year-old daughter had already been subjected to an autopsy. She had already been buried without me. I hadn't been permitted to hold her one final time. I hadn't been permitted to say goodbye. I hadn't been permitted to attend her funeral. And now they wanted to dig her back out of the ground. Aigul fought it. And she won. Sophia remained where she was. Whatever mistakes Aigul made later, I will always be grateful to her for that.

Meanwhile, something else was happening to me. After months of being assessed almost entirely in Russian in what we called the SPEC room—the psychiatric ward—I was eventually moved. To this day, I struggle to understand how much of that psychiatric examination could genuinely have been an examination of me. Most of the people examining me couldn't communicate with me. I couldn't understand their questions. They couldn't understand my answers. My proper translator appeared only twice.

Yet somehow conclusions were still being produced about my mind. About my behaviour. About what I supposedly thought. About what I supposedly said. At the time I was confused. Later, when I finally saw the results, the confusion became something else. I found descriptions and statements attributed to me that I did not recognise. Things I had never told them. Things I had never said. And some of what appeared in those materials reflected information and narratives I associated not with anything I had told the psychiatric examiners, but with what Nurlan Bolatov himself had been writing about me.

Then the whole experience began making a different kind of sense. How do you psychiatrically examine a man you cannot speak to? How do you record detailed statements from him when there is no competent interpreter in the room? How do you decide what is happening inside his mind when he cannot even understand the questions? For months I had assumed the problem was simply language. I thought perhaps I wasn't explaining myself properly. Perhaps the translators weren't translating properly.

Perhaps the experts misunderstood me. I was still searching for innocent explanations. But slowly I was learning the lesson that would follow me through almost every stage of my case: Sometimes it didn't matter what I said. Sometimes it didn't matter what the first expert concluded. Sometimes it didn't matter what the DNA said. Sometimes it didn't matter what the fingerprints said. Sometimes it

didn't even matter what the medical evidence said. Because whenever an answer didn't fit the case being constructed against me, somehow another answer could be sought.

And another examination could begin. I didn't understand yet how far they were prepared to take that process. I was about to find out.

Chapter 80: No Silence, No Sleep

No Silence, No Sleep

Lokha's death has affected me more than I initially thought it would. Not emotionally. I didn't know him. It has affected me through sleep. Or, more accurately, the lack of it. It turns out Lokha wasn't legally authorised to work in the work zone where he had been working. That has created a problem for the administration, and when something goes wrong inside a Kazakhstan prison, I have learned exactly what comes next. Overkill. And collective punishment. Now the guards are waking us approximately every hour and a half throughout the night to check that we're still here.

During the day, they've introduced two additional checks. Hundreds of prisoners. One man dies. Everyone's life changes. It is a strategy I've become extremely familiar with during my years inside the Kazakhstan system. Something happens. The administration needs to demonstrate that something is being done. So instead of identifying precisely what failed and fixing it, everybody gets punished. More checks. More restrictions. More doors opening. More shouting.

Less sleep. And sleep deprivation carries memories of its own. The moment those doors start crashing open throughout the night, I'm not only here anymore. I'm back in C18. Back in the psychiatric assessment. Back in the trial. Back in those periods when sleeping for more than an hour at a time became almost impossible. During the psychiatric assessment, the guards and medical staff would wake me constantly. Every hour. Their explanation was that they were worried I might commit suicide.

Then, during the trial, the same treatment returned. Again and again. Wake up. Door. Shouting. Check. Sleep. Wake up. Door. Shouting. Check. It drives a person insane. I suffered plenty of sleep deprivation during my years as a pilot. Pilots understand fatigue. Early starts. Late finishes. Night flights. Changing time zones. Long duty periods. Your body telling you that you should be asleep while your responsibilities tell you otherwise. But this is something completely different.

There is an enormous difference between being tired and being prevented from sleeping. Imagine finally drifting off under extreme psychological stress. Then—BANG. The door crashes open. You're ripped from your pillow. Somebody is shouting at you in a language you don't understand. Your heart accelerates before your brain has even worked out where you are. You sit up. You respond. The door closes. Silence. Now try sleeping again. Your body is still full of adrenaline.

Your mind starts running. Sophia. The case. Madina. Nurlan. The experts. What are they going to do tomorrow? What are they doing to the evidence? Are they really going to touch Sophia's body? What was in that injection? Why am I here? What happens at court? Eventually your breathing slows. Your eyes become heavy. You begin slipping away. And just as your body finally gives in— BANG. The door opens again. Get up. Another check. Another voice. Another shock.

Another hour gone. Then start again. After several nights, time begins losing its shape. After enough interrupted sleep, your emotions change. Your concentration disappears. Your patience disappears. Small things become enormous. Your memory starts behaving strangely. You become irritable, confused and constantly alert. And all of this was happening while I was already under extraordinary pressure. I had been forcibly injected. I was undergoing psychiatric examinations I could barely understand.

I was terrified about what they might do to my dead daughter's body. I was surrounded by men who could themselves be dangerous, desperate and psychologically close to the edge. Later, when I came under threat inside prison after Madina and her mother had, as I understood it, sought to have someone stab me, sleep became dangerous for another reason. How deeply do you sleep when you believe somebody might attack you? Part of your brain refuses to switch off.

Every movement matters. Every whisper matters. Every person walking towards your bed matters. Sleep becomes vulnerability. And then there was the trial. I was supposed to defend my life while exhausted. I was sitting in a courtroom that I had increasingly come to believe had already decided my fate before the first session even began. Around me were lawyers making endless promises. We'll solve this. The next motion will help. The next stage will be different.

Keep going. And always, somewhere behind the hope: Keep paying the bill. Then something started happening that should have been enormously important. Bags of case files began arriving in my room. Finally. Documents. Expert reports. Statements. Forensic materials. Page after page after page. And this time, some of them were finally being translated into English at a level I could actually understand. For months I had been fighting against something I couldn't properly see.

Now pieces of the case were finally appearing in front of me. I wanted to read everything. I needed to read everything. Every sentence. Every date. Every expert conclusion. Every contradiction. I needed somewhere quiet. Somewhere I could sit for hours and reconstruct what had happened to my daughter and what had been done to my case. But there was one problem. There is no silence here. And there was no sleep. People talking. People shouting through holes in the walls to other cells.

Metal doors crashing open and shut. Guards. Checks. Arguments. Footsteps and movement in the corridors. Occasionally the distant sound of a radio somewhere, but even that was rare. Night becomes day. Day becomes night. And

somewhere amongst all of that noise, I sat with bags full of paper trying to understand how the state intended to put me in prison for twenty years. Now, years later, Lokha's death has brought those nights back. Every hour and a half: Doors.

Checks. Voices. Lights. Wake up. And strangely, because of all this, I've started thinking about Lokha himself more than I did immediately after he died. I've now heard something I didn't know when I first wrote about him. Apparently, his case also involved the death of a minor. He had a twenty-one-year sentence. He arrived here approximately two months before his death. Then he walked into the cold section with a knife and never came back out alive. And now I find myself wondering.

What was his case? Did he do what they convicted him of doing? Or was his case another one containing contradictions nobody wanted to hear? I don't know. And after everything I've written, I'm certainly not going to declare him innocent merely because he killed himself. Suicide proves neither guilt nor innocence. So I'll do what I wish people had done with my case. I'll ask questions. I'll ask people who knew him. I'll find out his full name if I can. I'll ask what court convicted him.

I'll ask what the allegation actually was. And if there are documents available, I'll try to read them. Maybe the evidence will show that he committed a terrible crime. If it does, that's what I'll write. Maybe it won't. That's worth finding out too. Don't believe the prisoner. Don't automatically believe the accusation. Find the evidence. For now, however, Lokha has left me something without ever knowing me. Every ninety minutes his death opens my door. And every time that door crashes open, for a fraction of a second I'm back where all of this began.

C18. Sophia. The psychiatric ward. The trial. The files. The injections. The fear. Trying desperately to keep my eyes open long enough to understand the evidence that might save my life. No silence. No sleep. And another night begins.

Chapter 81: The Second Scam

The Second Scam

Once I was finally moved out of SPEC 197—the psychiatric ward—I was sent to cell 23. Apparently Madina had paid a guard $500 to arrange it. The cell itself wasn't particularly better. What made it better for me was one of the people living there. He was an older Turkish man, a convicted con artist who had been found guilty of cheating people out of money. More importantly for me, he spoke perfect English. After months of struggling to understand the language around me, suddenly there was someone I could actually communicate with.

He could translate. He could explain what people were saying. He could help me navigate the strange world I had been dropped into. The Turkish man had also established a relationship with the oper responsible for our corridor. His name was Ali. Ali had his own particular management style. Every so often he was fond of

taking the entire room down to the basement and punching us in the ribs. One of his main obsessions was mobile phones. His position was simple:

All phones go through Ali. He had informants in practically every room. If somebody had a phone that hadn't been supplied through him, sooner or later Ali would know. During COVID this became particularly important. The detention centre went into complete lockdown. Visitation stopped. People were getting sick. Men dressed from head to toe in white protective suits walked through the corridors, making the place look like some low-budget science-fiction film.

Nothing was coming in. Food supplies were disappearing. Cigarettes were disappearing. People were becoming increasingly agitated. When you lock a room full of already stressed prisoners together, cut them off from their families, reduce their supplies and leave them wondering whether the virus spreading through the building is going to reach them next, tempers don't improve. They explode. At this particularly difficult time, Ali had supplied the Turkish man with a phone.

And eventually Ali made his move. The message came through the Turk: “Tell Barakat to give me $1,500 a month. I'll move both of you into a special room. Just the two of you. Smartphone. No searches.” Here we go again. Another VIP package. Another person selling conditions inside a state detention facility. Ali was also offering a similar arrangement to two wealthy Russian prisoners in the neighbouring room. One of them had been a director connected with Yandex Taxi, the Russian equivalent of Uber.

So one day the doors opened. Out we came. Four prisoners carrying mattresses, pillows, kettles and whatever personal belongings we had accumulated. We were marched into another block. Eventually all four of us ended up in cell 224. This was the section where convicted prisoners were temporarily held while being processed before transfer to lager. And then I saw something that stopped me. The window. There was a partial view of a field. That's all. A field.

For most people outside, it would have meant absolutely nothing. They might have looked through that window for half a second and turned away. I couldn't. I was mesmerised. After so long surrounded by walls, bars, metal sheets and concrete, I could see part of the outside world. Distance. Open space. Something that wasn't another wall. I stood there looking at it. A field. You don't understand what a field can mean until somebody takes the world away from you.

Then the phone arrived. One smartphone for the four of us to share. There was just one problem. No SIM card. We had to arrange that ourselves. Opposite us was Bacha, a relative of a prosecutor. Bacha had received special treatment from the first day he arrived. For free. Funny how the system works when you know the right people. Within about thirty minutes, a SIM card appeared. Now everyone wanted the phone. But one man immediately began monopolising it. Alex.

Alex had run a pyramid scheme involving tens of millions of dollars. He and the Turkish man disliked each other almost immediately. It was actually quite entertaining. Two con men trapped in the same cell. Both trying to make money by convincing the rest of us that they could somehow “fix our cases.” Both

completely confident that they themselves would never receive serious prison sentences. Both eventually went on to do hard time. But at that moment, each seemed convinced that he understood the system better than everybody else.

Arguments started almost immediately. Who gets the phone? How long? Who paid what? Who knows whom? Who can fix whose case? Eventually the situation became impossible and Ali was forced to keep at least part of his promise. The two Russians were moved into a separate room. And then, for more than a week: Bliss. A room with space. A view from the window. And practically unlimited access to a smartphone. For most people, unlimited access to a phone means entertainment.

For me, it meant something completely different. I could finally work on my case. Bags of translated materials had started arriving. Expert reports. Statements. Motions. Legal provisions. Investigative documents. For the first time, I could sit down and begin properly reconstructing what had been done. I read. And read. And read. And very quickly something became apparent. This case was a mess. The more I read, the less frightened I became of the evidence itself.

I started becoming almost confident. This is what they've got? Seriously? Then I started reading the witness statements properly. And something jumped off the pages. The wording was identical. Not vaguely similar. Not occasionally repetitive. Throughout the witness statements, the same wording appeared again and again—even when different people had supposedly given their statements independently and on completely different dates. Different witnesses. Different dates.

The same language. These were supposed to be individual human beings describing what they personally remembered. Different people have different vocabularies. They remember different details. They construct sentences differently. They describe events in their own way. Yet on paper, these supposedly independent witnesses seemed to speak with one voice. At that moment I didn't yet possess everything that would come later. Later, we would give these statements to an expert for analysis.

The conclusion was devastating. These did not read as independently and freely worded statements originating from different people. The analysis indicated a single authorship behind them. That author was identified as Nurlan Bolatov. But what happened in court was even worse. The witnesses themselves began admitting what had happened. They had not freely dictated everything appearing in those statements. They said they had simply signed statements provided to them by Nurlan Bolatov.

Why? To help the police. Think about that. These documents were being presented as witness evidence in a murder investigation. Yet the witnesses themselves would later acknowledge in court that they had signed statements prepared for them. And this wasn't some insignificant detail hidden in an irrelevant corner of the file. Witness testimony formed part of the case being constructed to

send me to prison. Sitting there in cell 224, I didn't yet know how far this would eventually unravel.

But I could already see the pattern with my own eyes. Different witnesses. Different dates. Identical wording. Something was terribly wrong. Then I moved on to the expert evidence. Again, the problems were sitting there on paper. Experts were recording difficulties with conducting further examinations without Sophia's body. I had copies of Kazakhstan's own laws beside me. I had the motions my lawyers had submitted. I had the forensic results. DNA. Fingerprints.

The autopsy. The psychiatric findings. The witness statements. I spread everything around me and started comparing it. Document against document. Statement against statement. Expert conclusion against the law. Date against date. For the first time, I could see the architecture of the case rather than merely being told about it. And I remember thinking: My lawyers are right. The violations weren't hidden. They were everywhere. For the first time in months, I felt something dangerously close to optimism.

I genuinely couldn't understand how Nurlan Bolatov expected to obtain a conviction from this. This is a joke. He can't possibly convict me with this rubbish. I still had one enormous misunderstanding about the system I was trapped inside. I believed that if the evidence became bad enough, eventually somebody above Nurlan would stop him. A prosecutor. A judge. Somebody. I believed somebody would eventually sit down, read the same documents I was reading and say:

Enough. These witnesses didn't independently say these things. The forensic evidence doesn't support what you're alleging. The procedures aren't being followed. This case cannot continue like this. I didn't yet understand that proving something was wrong with an investigation and finding somebody inside the system willing to do something about it were two entirely different battles. But for that brief period in cell 224, I had something I hadn't possessed for months.

Time. Documents. A telephone. And a little piece of the outside world visible through the window. Then, in the middle of the night— BANG! The door exploded open. Regime officers rushed into the room. They knew exactly where to look. The phones were pulled straight from their hiding places. No searching around. No uncertainty. They went directly to them. The Turkish man protested. The head regime officer looked at him. “Ali cannot protect you from us.” The Turk lowered his voice.

“But Ali already paid you.” The regimenik laughed. “Did he tell you that?” Then came the sentence that explained everything. “Ali will be gone tomorrow.” And immediately afterwards: “Pack your things.” “Take your mattress.” “You're moving.” Again. I was livid. Desperate. But what could I do? I packed my belongings. Picked up my mattress. And followed them. When I entered the next room, I understood the game immediately. Pressure. Take away the conditions. Take away the phone.

Take away the view. Take away whatever tiny amount of comfort you've managed to obtain. Make life unbearable again. Then wait. Eventually the

prisoner—or his family—will ask: How much? And the cycle begins again. I had already paid once. Then again. Now somebody wanted the machine restarted. This time I refused to play. I stopped eating again. They watched. There were always people watching. Informants. Prisoners reporting to guards. Guards waiting to see whether the pressure was working.

One day. Two days. Five. A week. I continued. Eleven days. Eventually they gave in. Not completely. There would be no phone. But I could return to the cell with the view. For me, that was enough. I carried my mattress back. I looked through that window again. The field was still there. And so were the bags of documents. By now I understood something important. Every time they moved me, threatened me, deprived me of sleep, took something away or demanded more money, my attention was being dragged away from the one thing that mattered most.

The evidence. So let them keep the phone. I had the files. I had finally reached the point where I could understand them. And I had years of questions waiting to be answered. I sat down. Opened the first bundle. And started again from the beginning. It was time to study the case properly.

Chapter 82: They Needed a Different Answer

They Needed a Different Answer

I continued reading. The deeper I went into the case files, the stranger the investigation became. Meanwhile, my case was going nowhere. Weeks became months. Months became more months. I remained in detention while Nurlan Bolatov tried to obtain something he desperately needed: A different answer from the forensic experts. The first autopsy had already produced a result that created a problem for the prosecution case. It described Sophia's injuries as a compression injury—a mechanism consistent with her head being compressed between two surfaces.

But that wasn't the conclusion the investigation wanted to carry forward. So they sought another examination. There was an immediate problem. Sophia was buried. Nurlan Bolatov applied to have her body exhumed. The court refused. He challenged that refusal. Those attempts failed. And without Sophia's body, the experts themselves began telling him that they could not properly do what he was asking them to do. This wasn't some technical objection invented years later by my lawyers.

It is in the documents. Kazakhstan's own forensic rules were clear. Paragraph 400 stated that establishing the cause of death solely from medical documents, without examination of the corpse, was not permitted. The director of the Almaty Institute of Forensic Expertise, Bekzhanov, wrote directly to Nurlan Bolatov stating that exhumation was necessary and warning that the medical materials could be returned without execution if the corpse was not provided. That should have been the end of it.

No body. No proper repeat examination. No pretending photographs could replace a corpse. But the investigation didn't stop. Instead, the pressure moved towards the experts. The original expert had already produced findings that didn't fit the prosecution theory. Proceedings were then opened against that expert. And the other experts could see exactly what was happening. An expert gives an answer the investigation doesn't like. Then that expert himself becomes the subject of a case.

Now imagine being the next expert asked to reconsider the same death. How independent do you feel? How confident are you that saying “I cannot give you the answer you want” will be accepted as a professional conclusion? The documentary trail would become even more extraordinary. The experts repeatedly recorded that they could not properly establish the mechanism of Sophia's injuries without examining her body. They specifically complained about the limitations of photographs.

Photographs cannot reliably reproduce dimensions. They do not preserve the three-dimensional characteristics of fractures. They do not show microscopic detail. They cannot substitute for physically examining the bones. And the experts themselves said so. In report No. 28, the commission expressly wrote that it was not possible to establish the detailed mechanism of the open cranial injury, including because the photographs did not convey the microscopic characteristics of the skull damage and because the request to re-examine the body had not been granted.

The same commission also recorded that it was not possible from photographs, without re-examining the corpse, to differentiate which type of trauma had produced particular areas of the skull fractures. Read that carefully. The experts themselves were effectively saying: We cannot properly determine this from the photographs. Yet the examination continued. And later, when our lawyers directly asked the Ministry of Justice's Centre for Forensic Expertise whether a child's cause of death could be established during a repeat forensic examination without examining the corpse, the answer was unequivocal.

The Centre referred directly back to paragraph 400: Establishing cause of death solely from medical documents without examination of the corpse is not permitted. So this isn't Mohamed Barakat sitting in prison years later inventing a complaint. This is Kazakhstan's own forensic institution confirming Kazakhstan's own rule. And still the report existed. A report produced without re-examining Sophia's body. A report that itself acknowledged the limitations of the photographs.

A report that did not establish a clear, scientifically reliable mechanism of death. A report whose conclusions differed fundamentally from the first autopsy. The first examination described a compression injury. The later commission moved towards an impression-inertial mechanism, effectively changing the forensic theory of how the skull injuries occurred. That contradiction is expressly

identified in the later Supreme Court filing. And all the while, I was sitting in detention.

Waiting. Months. Just waiting for them to finish producing the opinion they needed. By then I had almost the entire case file. And there are things inside those files that I still struggle to look at. One day I reached the autopsy photographs. And there was Sophia. My baby. Photographs of the examination of her body. Her tiny body cut open. Parts of her placed into jars. I am not going to try to describe what that did to me. There are no words. And I refuse to cheapen it by searching for some dramatic sentence that could never be enough.

She was my daughter. That is enough. I closed the photographs. And later, because I had no choice, I opened the files again. Because if I didn't read them, who would? --- Aigul was still my lawyer when we reached the first preliminary hearing. By then I had read enough of the case myself to know what I expected her to attack. The witness statements. The forensic contradictions. The repeat examination. The fact that the experts themselves had said they couldn't properly determine the mechanism without Sophia's body.

The translations. The procedural violations. The evidence that didn't match the prosecution story. Finally, I thought, somebody in authority would have to confront all of this. COVID had changed the whole process. The hearings were conducted remotely through Zoom. I sat inside the detention centre in front of one of the most basic computers imaginable, relying on an equally basic internet connection. On the screen appeared the judge who would eventually sentence me:

Bakhytzhan Bakirbayev. He had previously been a prosecutor. From the beginning, his attitude towards the defence was aggressive. I was waiting for Aigul. This was her moment. My family had spent enormous sums on lawyers. I had spent months reading the case. I could see how many problems were buried inside those files. Then Aigul started speaking. She had arrived dressed as though she had stepped out of an episode of Dallas from the 1980s. Big presentation.

Big confidence. And then came her argument. The case had been conducted in Russian. She argued that proceedings in Kazakhstan should first have been conducted in the Kazakh language. That was it. I stared at the screen. Then I looked at my translator. “Is that it?” He looked at me. “Is that all she's complaining about?” I felt sick. Not because the language issue was necessarily meaningless. That wasn't the point. A baby was dead. I was facing a murder charge.

The case files contained identical witness statements. The forensic evidence contained major contradictions. The repeat autopsy process had proceeded despite the absence of Sophia's body and despite the experts recording that they could not properly establish the mechanism from photographs. And this was the opening argument from my defence? They used the wrong official language. Even I, a pilot with no legal education in Kazakhstan, knew what was going to happen.

No judge was going to throw out a case involving the death of a one-year-old child simply because my lawyer stood there dramatically arguing about the official language. Aigul raised her voice. Bakirbayev immediately cut her down. “Don't

you dare raise your voice in my courtroom." Motion dismissed. Second preliminary hearing scheduled. I don't even remember the date anymore. I remember the feeling. I'm doomed. That is what stayed with me. All those files. All those contradictions.

All those months. And this was my defence. I returned to the cell and shouted across the corridor. "Bekka!" Bekka was still there. The man with all the prosecutor contacts. "Man, I'm desperate for a phone." He understood immediately. He called a guard. His cell door opened. Bekka walked across the corridor. Then my door opened too. That alone was a display of power. Detainees were not supposed to simply walk from one another's cells. Bekka walked straight over.

We shook hands. And during that handshake he pressed a miniature Nokia into my palm. No string through a wall. No secret delivery. No elaborate trick. He had simply called the guard, walked out of his own cell, entered mine and handed me a forbidden phone. Power inside prison does not always belong to the person wearing the uniform. I called my sisters. The moment they answered, everything came out. "I'm doomed." I was almost screaming. "I'm fucking doomed."

"Mohamed, calm down." "You didn't see what happened. She didn't say anything. Nothing! With everything in the case, that's what she argued?" Then my sisters said something I wasn't expecting. "Don't worry, Mohamed. We were prepared for this." I stopped. "What do you mean?" "We're already talking to three of the best lawyers in Almaty." Another lawyer. More money. "They're expensive," my sisters said, "but it's our best shot." And once again, my sisters saved my sanity.

I don't think they will ever completely understand how many times they did that. A few words through a tiny illegal Nokia inside a detention centre could pull me back from the edge. We've got this. We're working on it. Don't give up. There's another option. I would never have made it far enough to sit here today writing this book without them. The following day, I was introduced to the new team. Tair. Head of the Bar Association and owner of the firm. A former police officer who had gone on to study law.

Dirhan. A former special investigator. And Abzal. Young. Immaculately groomed. Ambitious. Abzal spoke perfect English. He had studied law in the UK before qualifying in Kazakhstan. Immediately, the difference was visible. These men looked sharp. Organised. Prepared. They looked like they meant business. And then they started saying exactly what I desperately needed to hear. "We've heard about your case." "At first, we didn't want to touch it." That caught my attention.

"But after understanding what has been happening, Mohamed, we decided to become involved." Then came the sentence that meant everything to my family and me: "A long time ago, we took a position that we would fight corruption in Kazakhstan." Finally. That was what I thought. Finally somebody understood. Finally somebody wasn't afraid. Finally I had lawyers who weren't going to sit

quietly while Nurlan Bolatov did whatever he wanted. “We're here to help you now.”

Those words gave me hope. Looking back now, after everything I have learned during the years since, I hear that conversation differently. These men had taken the time to understand the assignment. They understood us. A British family thousands of miles from home. A dead one-year-old child. A son sitting in detention. Sisters desperately spending whatever they could find to save their brother. And a family still believing that if only we could find lawyers intelligent enough, connected enough and brave enough, the system would eventually work.

They told us exactly what we needed to hear. I find it difficult now to believe that Tair, after spending virtually his entire professional life inside Kazakhstan's law-enforcement and legal system, genuinely believed that he was about to march into a courtroom and defeat systemic corruption. He knew the system infinitely better than we did. For us, this was our lives. For a law firm, we were also clients. And desperate clients with hope are valuable clients.

But I want to be fair about something. Their legal work was good. Very good. Whatever I came to think later about the promises and the money, these men were not incompetent. Their work was clean. Professional. Detailed. They went through the case and produced one of the most impressive lists of violations I had seen. They found some of the strongest experts available in Kazakhstan. Those experts attacked the prosecution case from every direction. They challenged the forensic methodology.

They challenged the conclusions. They exposed contradictions. They dismantled Nurlan's work piece by piece. That distinction matters. Because this wasn't another situation where I could simply say: My lawyers were useless. These lawyers weren't useless. Quite the opposite. They demonstrated how little excellent legal work can matter when the person deciding the case has no intention of allowing that work to change the outcome. They also did something else that would become important later.

They began connecting the case internationally. Through them, we were introduced to international human-rights lawyer Anna Bradshaw. International human-rights lawyers, we were about to discover, operated in an entirely different financial universe. She was extraordinarily expensive. We would learn that the hard way. More money. More invoices. More legal opinions. But without those connections, I also have to acknowledge something important: we would have had far less chance of attracting the attention of Kazakhstan's human-rights community to what was happening in my courtroom.

So the picture isn't black and white. Tair, Dirhan and Abzal did serious work. They found serious experts. They identified serious violations. They helped bring serious outside attention to the case. And still— I went to prison. That was the lesson I hadn't understood yet. I had spent months believing that my problem was Nurlan Bolatov. Expose his mistakes and I win. Expose the identical witness statements. Win. Expose the forensic problems. Win. Show that the experts

themselves said the repeat examination couldn't properly establish the mechanism without Sophia's body.

Win. Show paragraph 400. Win. Bring better experts. Win. Show the procedural violations. Win. Find better lawyers. Win. Bring international human-rights lawyers. Win. I still believed this was an argument. I believed that if we accumulated enough evidence on one side of the scales, eventually the scales had to move. And Tair, Dirhan and Abzal gave me exactly what I had been asking for: A proper defence. The experts they found attacked Nurlan's work. The lawyers documented the violations.

The case was being pulled apart piece by piece. But none of us controlled the person sitting above it all. Judge Bakhytzhan Bakirbayev. And if the judge doesn't care about the violations— if he doesn't care what the experts say— if he doesn't care that Kazakhstan's own forensic rules prohibit establishing cause of death from medical documentation alone without examining the corpse— if he doesn't care that the experts themselves recorded that photographs were insufficient to determine the mechanism—

if he doesn't care how the evidence was produced— if he doesn't care whether the investigation complied with the law— then you can hire the finest lawyers you can find. You can hire the finest experts. You can produce hundreds of pages of motions. You can spend your family's life savings. You can prove one contradiction after another. You can be completely right on paper. And it can all become almost worthless. Because ultimately somebody still has to enforce the law.

Back then, however, I didn't understand that. I looked at these three sharp new lawyers. I listened to Abzal speaking perfect English. I listened to Tair talking about fighting corruption. I heard about the experts they were going to bring. And for the first time since that disastrous preliminary hearing, I felt the panic beginning to leave my body. My sisters had done it again. They had given me another reason to believe. Another reason to wake up the next morning.

Another reason to open those bags of case files and keep reading. Another reason to fight. Maybe these were finally the lawyers who could save me. I had no idea how much finding out the answer to that question was going to cost us.

Chapter 83: When Loyalty Ends

When Loyalty Ends

Once the rain stops, the umbrella becomes a burden. When a blind man sees for the first time, the walking stick that guided him through life is the first thing he no longer needs. When the sun returns, the candle that carried someone through the darkness is extinguished. That is how loyalty sometimes ends when the benefit disappears. Some people remember you only for the comfort you provided. The problems you solved. The protection you gave. The money you found.

The doors you opened. The weight you carried when they were too weak to carry it themselves. They hold onto you tightly while the storm is above them. Then the sky clears. And suddenly the umbrella is inconvenient. They don't necessarily miss you. They miss how useful you were to them. You never walk into a restaurant and order a plate of salt. Nobody celebrates the salt. Nobody photographs it. Nobody thinks much about it at all. But remove it from everything and suddenly the whole meal tastes wrong.

Some people become like that in other people's lives. Always there. Always solving something. Always adding something that everybody around them eventually takes for granted. You become the person everyone calls. The person who arranges things. Pays for things. Fixes things. Protects people. Carries everyone through the difficult period. And eventually people stop seeing what you do as kindness. They start seeing it as what you are supposed to do. Then one day you can no longer provide what they want.

Or they no longer need what you provide. And that is when you discover whether they loved the person— or the service. For years, whenever I thought about Madina's betrayal, I would sometimes feel stupid. How did I not see it? How could I have trusted her? How could I have continued protecting her? Why was I still worried about her when I was the one sitting behind bars? Why did I still tell my sisters to support her? Why did I still believe her messages? Why did I continue loving somebody who was slowly destroying everything around me?

The more I learned about the lies, the manipulation and the things happening behind my back, the easier it became to turn that anger against myself. How could you have been so stupid, Mohamed? But over time I learned to answer that question differently. I wasn't stupid because I loved my wife. I wasn't stupid because I protected the mother of my daughter. I wasn't stupid because when everything collapsed, my first instinct was still to look after the people I considered my family.

That says something about me. What somebody chooses to do with that loyalty says something about them. And I refuse to allow another person's betrayal to rewrite the meaning of my own kindness. Never regret being somebody's umbrella. Never regret being the light somebody followed through a dark period. Never regret the times you were loyal when disloyalty would have been easier. Your kindness wasn't wasted simply because somebody eventually abused it. It revealed your character.

Not theirs. Madina's actions forced me to learn that lesson in the hardest possible way. There were moments when I loved her while she was hurting me. Moments when I defended her while she was damaging me. Moments when I worried about her safety while I was sitting in a detention centre wondering what was going to happen to my own life. I cannot go backwards and turn myself into a colder man just so the past hurts less. Nor would I want to. Because whenever I start feeling ashamed that I trusted her, I remind myself of something much more important:

I know who I was. I know why I acted the way I did. And despite everything that has happened to me, I know who I still want to be. The storm may teach me to recognise people more carefully. The betrayal may teach me where to place my trust. Prison may make me harder. Life may make me more cautious. But none of those things gets to decide my character for me. Madina's betrayal belongs to Madina. My loyalty belongs to me. And I will not be ashamed of it.

Chapter 84: A Product of the System

A Product of the System

By now I knew Madina’s statements almost by heart. I knew where the drugs suddenly appeared. I knew where the description of the alleged assault changed. I knew where one version contradicted another. I knew where facts moved around as though the story itself was being adjusted to whatever was required at that particular moment. I had spent countless hours asking myself how somebody could change her story so many times and still remain comfortably on one side of an investigation while the person she accused remained locked behind bars.

But eventually I realised I was asking the wrong question. The contradictions were already there. I could read them a thousand times and they would still be contradictions. What I needed to understand was something else. Why had Madina reacted this way in the first place? For a long time, the simplest answer was fear. She had effectively told me that herself. During one of the final interrogations, when I demanded that she read what she had said about me and then look me in the eyes, she couldn't do it.

“I don't know how I said those things about you,” she told me. “I was scared.” Then came the words that stayed with me: “You don't know Kazakhstan, Mohamed. Look what they're doing to you. I don't want to go to prison.” For years I concentrated on I was scared. Eventually I realised the more important words were: You don't know Kazakhstan. She did. That was the difference. To say Madina was frightened doesn't explain anything unless you understand what she was frightened of.

She knew the system that had suddenly entered our lives. She had grown up around it. She knew what people said about the police. She knew what investigators could do. She knew what prosecutors could do. She understood the importance of money, connections and knowing the right people. She knew what it could mean when the machinery of the criminal justice system turned towards you. She knew the danger contained in one word: Suspect. And that wasn't some imaginary fear I later attributed to her. Nurlan Bolatov eventually used that exact threat against her when her statements kept changing:

“If you continue changing your statement, I will make you a suspect.” Think about the power contained in that sentence. Tell the wrong story and the machinery might turn around. Change your version one more time and you might move from one side of the table to the other. From victim to suspect. From

somebody the police are supposedly protecting to somebody the police are investigating. That was the system Madina understood. And after spending years living inside it myself, I eventually began to understand her response to it.

Madina was a product of the system. I don't mean that the system absolves her of responsibility. It doesn't. Her words were hers. Her decisions were hers. Her lies were hers. Her betrayal was hers. But people don't develop their survival instincts in a vacuum. They develop them from the world around them. They watch. They listen. They learn what happens to other people. They learn what works and what doesn't. And if people grow up believing that truth and innocence will always protect them, they behave one way when trouble arrives.

If they grow up believing that truth may not protect them at all, they learn different survival mechanisms. Connections. Money. Influence. Relationships. Knowing somebody in the police. Knowing somebody in the prosecutor's office. Finding somebody who knows somebody who knows somebody. And perhaps most importantly: Making sure the problem belongs to somebody else. After years in Kazakhstan, I came to believe that this is one of the deepest forms of damage a corrupt legal system can inflict upon a society.

Corruption isn't limited to an envelope being passed underneath a table. It doesn't remain inside police stations. It doesn't stop at the prosecutor's office. It doesn't disappear when a judge leaves the courtroom. It changes the behaviour of everybody forced to live around it. People adapt to systems. They have to. If the official rules don't protect you, you learn the unofficial rules. If evidence doesn't guarantee safety, you search for something that does.

If connections work, people cultivate connections. If money solves problems, people search for money. If being useful to authority protects you, people learn to become useful. If the first person to point the finger gains an advantage, eventually people learn to point quickly. And when enough people live like that for long enough, something changes. These things stop feeling like strategies. They become instincts. That was what I had failed to understand about Madina.

I had been looking at her behaviour as though something sinister had suddenly appeared inside her on the morning Sophia died. But nothing appears from nowhere. Sophia's death didn't create Madina's personality. It created the crisis that revealed it. Suddenly the police were there. Investigators were asking questions. A child was dead. Somebody might be blamed. Somebody might become a suspect. Somebody might go to prison. And Madina knew far better than I did what being swallowed by that machinery could mean.

Her response was immediate self-preservation. Don't let it be me. Once I understood that, I began looking differently at the changing statements. I no longer needed to spend another twenty pages repeating every contradiction. The reader already knows them. What mattered to me now was the direction in which every changing version travelled. Away from Madina. The details could move. The story could change. New elements could appear. Old elements could disappear.

But the direction remained remarkably consistent. Keep the investigation moving away from her. And once Nurlan Bolatov warned that he could make her a suspect, the fear underlying that behaviour was exposed completely. She knew what side of the table she wanted to remain on. And she knew what could happen if she crossed to the other. There is another side to this that took me much longer to understand. People who live inside dysfunctional systems learn not only how to protect themselves from authority. They also learn how quickly relationships can change when somebody becomes dangerous to be associated with.

Loyalty is easy when loyalty costs nothing. Its real value appears when loyalty becomes expensive. When somebody is successful, useful, connected or capable of solving problems, people gather around them. But when that same person becomes a liability, suddenly the calculation changes. The person hasn't necessarily changed. The circumstances have. That was what happened when the criminal justice system entered our lives. Everything was rearranged. Relationships.

Interests. Loyalties. Fear. Survival. People began deciding where they needed to stand. And Madina made her decision very quickly. The tragedy is that once somebody chooses self-preservation through accusation, returning to the truth becomes increasingly difficult. One statement requires another. One contradiction needs an explanation. The explanation creates another contradiction. And eventually the person isn't merely telling a lie. They are protecting the position that the original lie created for them.

That is why Bolatov's warning to Madina matters so much to me. “If you continue changing your statement, I will make you a suspect.” By that point, telling the truth potentially carried consequences of its own. The system had created an incentive for the story to continue. And this is where my understanding of Madina eventually became part of something much larger. Over the years I began meeting people from every level of Kazakhstan's prison system. Poor men.

Wealthy businessmen. Former officials. Police officers. People with connections. People without anybody. Men who had committed terrible crimes. Men who claimed they had committed nothing. And slowly I started recognising the same survival language everywhere. Who do you know? Who can you call? Who can solve it? How much do they want? Who needs to be paid? Who has connections to the prosecutor? Who knows the judge? Who can make the problem disappear? Who can make it somebody else's problem?

Those questions tell you something profound about a society's relationship with justice. When people trust institutions, they ask: What does the law say? When they stop trusting institutions, they ask: Who do you know? And once that mentality becomes embedded deeply enough, corruption no longer needs to announce itself. Everybody already understands how the game is played. That is why I eventually stopped viewing Madina simply as one dishonest person who betrayed me.

That description was too easy. It explained her actions without explaining where those instincts came from. I began seeing her as something far more disturbing. Evidence of what a system can produce. A person conditioned to fear becoming the target. A person who understood that connections could matter more than procedure. A person whose instinct in a crisis was to move suspicion away from herself before the machinery could turn towards her. And once the machinery had chosen somebody else, staying on the safe side of it became increasingly important.

That doesn't make what she did acceptable. Understanding something isn't the same as forgiving it. Explaining behaviour doesn't remove responsibility for it. Madina still made her choices. But after years inside the system she had known all her life, I finally understood something about those choices that I couldn't possibly have understood when I first arrived. Corruption doesn't merely steal money. It steals trust. It changes relationships between citizens and authority.

It teaches people that rules aren't necessarily what protect them. It teaches them to search for influence instead of justice. It teaches them to calculate where power lies and position themselves accordingly. And eventually it reaches somewhere far more dangerous than a policeman's pocket or a judge's desk. It reaches the human instinct. Give that process enough years and people no longer consciously decide how to respond when the system comes knocking. The response has already been learned.

The strategy is already there. And that, after all those years of asking myself why, was the conclusion I finally reached about Madina. Her sinister ways didn't suddenly appear on the morning Sophia died. They had been shaped long before I ever met her. Sophia's death simply created the crisis that exposed them. Madina knew Kazakhstan. She knew what becoming a suspect could mean. She knew what she feared. And when the machinery arrived at our door, the system she had spent her life living under had already taught her how she believed she needed to survive it.

Madina was a product of the system.

Chapter 85: The Court

The Court

By the time the trial began, I had already spent months watching the investigation twist itself around evidence that refused to give Nurlan Bolatov and the prosecution the story they needed. But I still had one final belief left. The court. Surely this was where it would stop. An investigator could manipulate an investigation. Prosecutors could ignore motions. Experts could be pressured. Evidence could be retested. But eventually everyone would have to stand before a judge. Witnesses would have to answer questions. Experts would have to defend their conclusions. Lawyers would be allowed to challenge the evidence.

Surely this was the place where facts finally mattered. I was wrong. Fortunately, much of what happened in that courtroom was recorded, and we preserved the recordings in the cloud. Seven years later, I don't have to rely solely upon memory to remember what happened. The court was a sham from the get-go. And almost immediately, the witnesses began falling apart. On paper their statements looked convincing. In court many of them could recite those statements beautifully, sometimes almost word for word.

Until somebody started asking questions. Then everything changed. Take them away from the prepared story and suddenly memories became less certain. Details moved. Events changed. Contradictions appeared. Eventually came admissions that should have caused enormous problems for the prosecution. Witnesses admitted signing statements they hadn't even properly read. They admitted the words weren't their own. They described how the hotel's head of security, a former agent, had told them to cooperate and do what the police needed.

This was particularly important because throughout the witness statements the same strange problem appeared: different people, supposedly giving independent accounts on different dates, somehow repeatedly used remarkably similar wording. Later we would have those statements examined by an expert. But sitting in court, I was already watching the explanation unfold in front of me. They weren't their words. Some had simply signed what had been put in front of them.

And yet there was something almost absurd about watching what happened next. When witnesses followed the script, everything ran smoothly. When questions took them away from it, they fell apart. And whenever things became particularly uncomfortable for the prosecution, Judge Bakhytzhan Bakirbayev seemed unable to resist intervening. Again. And again. And again. The more the prosecution's story struggled, the more desperate the effort to hold the courtroom together became.

So did Bakirbayev's temper. We argued constantly. The translation was poor. At times I was trying to follow a trial that would determine whether I spent decades in prison through translations that simply weren't adequate. When we objected, argued or pushed too hard, Bakirbayev's irritation was impossible to miss. His temper wasn't something he made much effort to conceal. Neither was his authority. This was his courtroom. At least, that was how he behaved.

But there was one thing the witnesses remained remarkably consistent about. Madina showed no visible signs of having been in the violent struggle she had described. Witness after witness had seen her. Nobody described the battered woman her allegations should have produced. No obvious injuries. No signs of this extraordinary physical confrontation. Nothing. And by then her own versions were changing. It didn't matter. That became the defining feature of the trial.

It didn't matter. A witness could fall apart. It didn't matter. A witness could admit signing words he hadn't read. It didn't matter. Madina could change her story. It didn't matter. We could expose another contradiction. It didn't matter.

Evidence could point in another direction. It didn't matter. The trial simply continued moving towards the same destination. And gradually I stopped believing I was sitting in a courtroom trying to determine whether I had killed my daughter.

I was watching a performance whose ending had already been written. The media situation only deepened that feeling. Journalists reporting proceedings in ways we considered fair encountered restrictions, while journalists accepted by the court were permitted access. We repeatedly tried to have Bakirbayev removed. Rejected. We complained. Rejected. We complained higher. Rejected. We challenged what was happening at every level we could reach. Nothing changed.

We were asking the system to protect us from itself. The system protected itself. But what stayed with me most wasn't even the rulings. It was the behaviour. The threats. The manipulation. The way witnesses were treated when their evidence began moving in the wrong direction. The way the judge intervened. The way the prosecution behaved. And so much of it was on video. The prosecutors changed several times during my trial. One prosecutor in particular would pull faces, strike poses and laugh while asking questions about a case involving the death of my one-year-old daughter.

For them, apparently, parts of it were funny. For me, this was my daughter. My freedom. My family. My entire life. I was watching my life being destroyed by people who appeared completely detached from the consequences of what they were doing. And that is something I came to understand about unchecked power. Leave somebody with enough authority for long enough, surround him with a system that continually protects him, dismiss the complaints made against him, allow him to control the room and decide who speaks and when, and eventually something happens to the person exercising that power.

He becomes numb. He begins confusing obedience with respect. He begins confusing his position with himself. And eventually he can become so disconnected from the suffering in front of him that another human being's desperation barely registers. That was the Bakirbayev I watched from the other side of the courtroom. Our lawyers later told us that information they had received behind the scenes indicated that Bakirbayev had been specifically selected for my case. They described him as the judge brought in for exactly these kinds of difficult cases—the man who could carry a prosecution through when the case itself was a mess.

By then, I hardly needed anybody behind the scenes to explain what I was seeing. I was watching it myself. I watched witnesses fall apart. I watched the judge intervene. I watched contradictions pile up. I watched the prosecution struggle. I watched Madina's story change. And I watched every problem that should have mattered somehow become irrelevant. I became furious. Not disappointed. Not merely frustrated. Furious. There are moments in life when anger is all you have left.

They had taken my daughter. They had taken my freedom. They had dragged my name through the media. They had put my family through hell. And now I was sitting in a courtroom watching the one institution that was supposed to examine what had happened simply carry me towards a predetermined sentence. So yes, I hated them. And I won't pretend seven years later that I look back at all of this with some enlightened emotional detachment. I don't. There are things I still want to say to those people.

Especially Bakirbayev. So Bakirbayev, if this book ever reaches you, read this part carefully. You're all going down. I believed it when I sat in your courtroom, and something inside me still believes it today. Maybe it will happen because of my case. Maybe it won't. Maybe something much bigger eventually exposes all of you. Maybe this book becomes successful enough that somebody turns it into a documentary or a film. Who knows? And maybe one day the footage from that courtroom appears on a screen large enough for millions of people to watch.

I hope it does. I hope they don't simply listen to me describing you. I hope they watch you themselves. Watch the witnesses. Watch the contradictions. Watch the interventions. Watch the prosecutors. Watch the threats. Watch the expressions. Watch the judge. Then let them decide what they are looking at. Maybe that will be enough of a wake-up call. Maybe the exposure eventually becomes so great that those responsible for abusing the power entrusted to them finally face the same system they used against everybody else.

Maybe one day some of you end up in the prisons where you sent so many others. I don't know. Maybe ultimately it has nothing to do with Mohamed Barakat at all. But something inside me has always believed that one way or another, you're all going down. Because power doesn't last forever. And there is something I learned about people like Bakirbayev: Fear and respect are worlds apart. People stand when you enter a courtroom. They call you Your Honour. They become silent when you demand silence.

Lawyers lower their voices when you threaten them. Defendants obey because you possess the power to destroy years of their lives. But don't confuse any of that with respect. When people look at you, what do you imagine they see? A great judge? A respected guardian of justice? Or a man they obey because they're frightened of what he can do to them? You can demand obedience. You cannot order another human being to respect you. And eventually the robe comes off.

The courtroom empties. The title disappears. Then all that remains is the record of what you did while you had the power. I remember looking Bakirbayev directly in the face during the trial. I told him: “The law is the final authority in this courtroom. Not you.” And I told him something else. “You can never decide whether I'm innocent or guilty. You can only decide whether you want to imprison me or not.” At the time those words probably meant nothing to him.

He had the power. I was the man sitting in detention. He was the judge. I was the accused. But here we are seven years later. Madina eventually confessed. We obtained the recordings. Her voice was forensically examined and identified as

hers. The woman whose allegations had helped propel this entire nightmare forward would eventually say things that demanded the case be looked at again. So yes, Bakirbayev, I think about you. I think about that courtroom. I think about your ego.

I think about the certainty with which you behaved. And sometimes I wonder what a clown you must feel now. I hope your ego has shrunk closer to your physical size. Yes, that's insulting. I mean it to be. I'm not writing this book to pretend I emerged from seven years of this without anger. I didn't. I was ripped apart. My family was ripped apart. My daughter's name was dragged through a process that I believe had stopped caring about discovering the truth long before I ever entered that courtroom.

There are scars from that which no amount of elegant writing is going to make disappear. And then came the day of the verdict. Bakirbayev stood up. I watched him. He began reading. And as he reached the decision that was going to take twenty years of my life, I saw what I interpreted as that sinister smile he couldn't quite conceal. Twenty years. Twenty years of hard time. For murdering my own one-year-old daughter. I stared directly at him. Blank face. No emotion.

No collapse. No tears. Nothing. Because something else had already begun inside my head. Keep Madina talking. I knew I had to keep talking to her. I knew I had to keep her close enough that eventually the truth would come out. I knew that one day she would make the mistake that mattered. One day she would say what really happened. One day she would confess. And until that day, I had to survive. Survive. Keep talking. Keep fighting. Don't let them finish the story here.

Bakirbayev believed he had just finished my case. Twenty years. Bang. Done. Next case. But I knew something as I stared at him. I wasn't finished. I didn't know then how many years the fight would take. I didn't know how many prisons I would pass through. How many times I would be beaten. How many complaints we would write. How many officials would ignore us. How many doors would close. How much money my family would lose. How many nights I would lie awake wondering whether any of this would ever end.

I didn't know how much of myself I would lose along the way. I only knew that I wasn't going to stop. Somewhere underneath the anger, grief and disbelief was a determination that had become stronger than anything they could do to me. They could sentence me. They could imprison me. They could humiliate me. They could beat me. They could try to break me. But they couldn't make me accept what they had done. Bakirbayev could give me twenty years. He couldn't make me stop fighting.

And as he finished reading the verdict, I understood something that he couldn't possibly have understood from where he was standing. For him, the trial was over. For me, the longest and hardest fight of my life had only just begun.

Chapter 86: Madina: Everyone else is to Blame

Madina: Everyone Else Is to Blame

Before I leave the courtroom behind and take you into what came next, I need to stop for a moment and explain something about Madina. Because it would be unfair—and historically inaccurate—to leave the reader believing that Madina gave her original statements, watched me receive twenty years and then quietly disappeared into her life. She didn't. By the time of the trial, Madina was fighting. She wrote motion after motion. Statement after statement. She made repeated applications to the courts and prosecution. She continued appealing upwards, eventually even to the Supreme Court. She appeared on television telling Kazakhstan that I was innocent and that her original statements were wrong.

She argued constantly with Bakirbayev. She tried several times to have him removed as the presiding judge. At one point, during one of their confrontations, Bakirbayev lost his temper and asked her: “Whose side are you on anyway? Ours or his?” Read that question again. Ours or his? Why did a judge have an ours? A court isn't supposed to belong to either side. A judge isn't supposed to be part of the prosecution. There should be the prosecution, the defence, the evidence and the law.

Madina objected to what he had said and, through her lawyer, responded: “I am on the side of justice.” Whatever I would later learn about Madina, I won't rewrite history to remove that part. She fought. She was telling people I was innocent. She was trying to undo what she had done. And one of the few news channels that reported what she was actually saying would later be prevented from entering the courtroom proceedings, despite the trial supposedly being open.

At this stage, however, there was something Madina still couldn't do. Accept full responsibility for how it had begun. There was always somebody else to blame. --- Her Own Words I don't want to merely tell you that Madina retracted her statements. I want you to read it. The following is one of the statements she made. I am including it because this book shouldn't require the reader to accept my interpretation when Madina's own words can speak for themselves.

Statement > I, Madina Abdullayeva, fully retract my statements given on October 24th 2019 at 10:24am, 11:53am and 3:41pm. I gave these statements whilst in shock, scared and under pressure. These statements are NOT factual and this can be seen by the obvious differences in my statements. They are not real. These statements were the outcome of shock influenced by sedatives given to me to calm down. I told the police on October 25th 2019 I needed to change my statements. Everybody who was with me witnessed this. I didn't lie; I just did not know what I was saying. My beautiful daughter Sophia had just died.

No one wants to listen to me, so now I will say it in court for everyone to hear. My husband Mohamed Barakat had a seizure on the morning of October 24th 2019. He sat on the bed and was holding his chest and saying he was going to have a heart attack when he started to shake and then vomit. Sophia was on the bed next

to him playing with the balls. I went to help Mohamed. He was shaking violently and his hand knocked me. When he didn't respond normally, I ran and got dressed. After shaking Mohamed a few times, he opened his eyes, but it was as if he didn't see me or recognise me. I started to help him up, but he started to struggle like he was scared of me, and one of the swings from his arm hit the back of my head.

I ran to the door and opened it to call for help and an ambulance. I saw the cleaner and told her, “Help me,” and that he hit me, but she didn't understand me, so I ran towards her and told her to call the ambulance and police. When I ran back to the room, the door was locked, so I asked her for the key. At that moment I heard one loud noise, and when I ran back and opened the door I saw Sophia lying at the bathroom door and Mohamed was lying in the bathroom unconscious. I picked Sophia up and ran out of the room screaming, “She's dead, he killed her,” BUT I definitely did not mean by this that he actually killed her or that he had done anything intentionally, as all these people are trying to say. Accidental death is not murder, and life is fragile, especially a baby's life.

Even when I was downstairs in the lobby and still in shock, I was screaming for the hotel security to check on Mohamed in case he was dead or had seriously injured himself. I didn't know what I was saying on October 24th or how the police would use my words and manipulate them and my statements. All I was thinking was that I needed to get back to Sophia, and they wouldn't let me go while my daughter was dying in hospital. I remember hearing the police and hotel staff in the lobby theorising about what had happened and about how they thought the baby had been hit on the wall of the bathroom where there was blood and on the door where the glass was broken, and I started to imagine it and whether it could be true. Why were they saying this? Nobody seemed to realise I was in shock, having just held my daughter in my arms, thinking she was gone.

I was in no mental state to give testimony or undergo interrogation. I needed medical assistance for shock, and they had given me a sedative to calm down. This affected my thinking, and I had not been provided any legal aid. I could hear what the police were all saying and their theories, and they were putting pressure on me to give a statement or they would classify me as a suspect and not let me go. This affected my thinking and influenced my interrogation. They had already made their conclusions about what had happened and even released them to the media, which reported these same conclusions on TV that day within a matter of hours.

The investigator, Nurlan Bulatov, also later said he believed it was an accident, but he said that he would need to finish the investigation. All along I believed he would realise his mistakes and release my husband. I kept applying to the court to reduce the charge from murder to accidental death. The evidence proves that Mohamed did not beat Sophia. The evidence proves that the blood on the bathroom wall was not hers or that the glass was broken by beating her head on the door. The evidence even says there was not any of Mohamed's DNA or blood on Sophia.

The ridiculous notion that the prosecution is presenting to the court is yet another lie. First they accused Mohamed of breaking Sophia's neck, and this was false, proven by the autopsy. Then they said he beat her, which was false and proven by the numerous autopsy opinions and the hospital death certificate. And when they found nothing else, they wanted to say he pushed his body on hers against a wall to kill her. Again, this is categorically impossible to have bilateral symmetrical compression of the skull caused in this way, and the experts have already said this.

The evidence proves Mohamed did not beat and murder Sophia, and this is the truth. Mohamed cannot and should not stand trial as he was not in a normal mental state on the morning of October 24th, and we all witnessed this. He had no idea Sophia had even died. All these witnesses you will call to the court from the hotel have seen my husband many times and have seen him stay at the Intercontinental Hotel many times, even before we were married. They can all tell you what a polite, friendly and respectable man he is. Each one can tell you they have seen him many times.

Please stop this injustice and give me back my husband. He is a good man and was an amazing father who loved his little daughter Sophitoshki and lost her. We are in pain and need each other. Please help us and please believe us. We are telling the truth. You cannot bring back our daughter, but we can at least be fair in this court with her father. He never deserved this. They didn't let him say goodbye to his daughter or have a chance to bury her, and I hope he can forgive us for this.

Everybody has seen me fighting for Mohamed from my first day because Mohamed 100% did not and could never hurt Sophia intentionally. Those are Madina's words. Not mine. And there is a great deal in that statement that matters. She explicitly withdrew the three statements she had made on 24 October. She said they weren't factual. She said she had tried to change them from the following day. She said I hadn't deliberately killed Sophia. She said she believed the death was accidental.

She said she had been under pressure. She said she had been given sedatives. She said the investigator had threatened that she could become a suspect. She was pleading for the court to give her husband back. Yet there was another pattern running through the statement, one that I wouldn't fully understand until years later. Everybody else was to blame. First, Me Madina's first reaction on the morning Sophia died had been to sacrifice me. Whatever explanations came afterwards, that fact remained.

She ran out of that hotel room screaming: “He killed her.” “He beat me.” And according to witnesses, it didn't end at the doorway. She moved around the hotel lobby repeating that Mohamed had killed Sophia. Imagine the power of those words in those first minutes. A baby is dying. Her mother is screaming. Her father is upstairs. There is blood. There is broken glass. Police are arriving. Hotel employees are trying to understand what has happened. And through the middle of all that confusion, one story begins travelling:

Mohamed killed Sophia. People begin forming pictures in their minds before the evidence has even been examined. Someone hears he killed her. Someone else hears he beat me. They repeat it. Other people hear them repeating it. And before long, an allegation begins acquiring the appearance of an established fact. This was the first fire. Madina lit it. Later, she would spend years trying to extinguish it. Then, the Hotel The next explanation was the hotel staff.

They had given her sedatives. That part was true. It was captured on camera, and members of the hotel staff later acknowledged in court that Madina had been given pills to calm her down. Of course that matters. A mother whose baby has just suffered a catastrophic injury is already in an extraordinary psychological state. Add medication and it becomes entirely reasonable to ask whether she was in a condition to undergo formal police interrogation. But the sedatives couldn't explain everything.

They didn't erase what had already come from her mouth. They didn't erase her running from the room. They didn't erase: “He killed her.” They didn't erase: “He beat me.” And they didn't erase witnesses describing her repeating the accusation around the lobby. The medication could help explain her state of mind. It couldn't carry all of the responsibility for what she had done. So responsibility moved again. Then, Nurlan Eventually the investigator became the explanation.

Madina said Nurlan Bolatov had pressured her into giving evidence. And again, this wasn't simply something she invented years afterwards. There was truth in it. The interrogation footage is important. Madina can be seen pleading that she doesn't want to be there. She says she feels sick. She is stressed. She wants to leave. She doesn't want to continue. And despite the legal protection she had as my wife against being compelled to testify against her husband, the investigator can be seen warning her about the consequences of refusing to give evidence.

So yes. There was pressure. That matters. Just as the sedatives matter. Just as the shock matters. But something can be true without being the whole truth. And that was the problem I would have with Madina for years. Every explanation contained something real. But somehow every explanation ended with responsibility somewhere else. The hotel gave me pills. The police pressured me. Nurlan manipulated me. I was frightened. I was in shock. I didn't understand what I was saying.

All of those things might explain pieces of what happened. But they still couldn't answer the question I kept returning to: Why was your first instinct to blame me? Why did he killed her come from your mouth? Why did he beat me come from your mouth? Why did you repeat it? Why did those initial words grow into increasingly elaborate statements? And why would it take years before you could finally tell me everything? The Woman Trying to Put Out Her Own Fire This is where Madina becomes difficult to explain as either victim or villain.

She was both the person whose words had helped start the case against me and one of the people fighting hardest to undo it. She went on television. She filed motions. She wrote statements. She challenged the prosecution. She argued with

Bakirbayev. She tried to have him removed. She told Kazakhstan that I was innocent. She said she had lied. She begged the authorities to give her husband back. Whatever I would later learn about her motives, I refuse to remove those facts from this story simply because they make her character more complicated.

They happened. But there was still one thing she couldn't do. Tell the whole truth. And perhaps that is the difference between retracting a lie and finally confronting why you told it. Madina could tell everyone that Mohamed was innocent. She could say her statements were wrong. She could blame the sedatives. She could blame the police. She could blame Nurlan. She could blame the pressure. She could blame the terror of being made a suspect herself. But eventually there was nobody left to blame.

Except Madina. And reaching that point would take years. Everyone Else Is to Blame Lies are strange things. At first they can protect you. Then you have to protect them. You change one detail to protect another. You create an explanation for why you said something. Then you need another explanation for why the first explanation doesn't quite fit. Eventually you're no longer carrying the lie. The lie is carrying you. I watched this happen to Madina over years.

She was trying to get me out of prison while still refusing to confront everything that had put me there. She was fighting for me while fighting herself. She wanted to correct the consequences without fully confronting the cause. Later, I would come to believe there was another motive behind her desperation to get me back. She missed her old life. She missed the comfort. She missed being pampered. She missed the lifestyle I had provided. But I didn't understand all of that yet.

At this point in the story, I saw my wife fighting to bring me home. And I kept talking to her. Remember what went through my head as Bakirbayev sentenced me? Keep Madina talking. I did. I kept her talking through the retractions. Through the explanations. Through the blame. Through the contradictions. Through the apologies. Through the years. And slowly those years began destroying the walls she had built around the truth. Because whatever you tell the police, whatever you tell a judge, whatever you tell television cameras and whatever you eventually convince yourself to believe, there are moments when you're alone with the person who knows you better than almost anybody else.

And eventually something slips. A sentence. A detail. A contradiction. Another piece of the puzzle. Until years later, after all the statements, all the excuses and all the blame, Madina would finally reach a point where she could no longer contain it. And when the truth finally came, it didn't arrive inside a courtroom. It didn't come before Bakirbayev. It didn't come during an interrogation with Nurlan. It wasn't announced on television. It wasn't beautifully typed by a lawyer and stamped by some government office.

It arrived on WhatsApp. A voice note. Madina's voice. Several years of self-destruction had finally brought her to the point where she could begin saying what she had been unable to say all those years before. That confession belongs

later in this book. When we reach it, I want you to experience it as I did. Because for now, I didn't have the confession. I didn't have the truth. I had a wife running around Kazakhstan telling everyone I was innocent. I had her written retractions.

I had her television appearances. I had the contradictions. I had twenty years. And I had one thought: Keep her talking. Eventually, she would talk. But first, I had to survive long enough to hear it. Because while all of this was happening, I still didn't understand what twenty years in Kazakhstan actually meant. I thought I did. After everything that had happened in detention—the beatings, the psychiatric ward, the injections, the extortion, the humiliation, the electricity, the sleepless nights and the endless months behind steel doors—I thought I already understood prison.

I didn't. Not even close. Detention had been kindergarten. The real nightmare was only beginning.

Chapter 87: Madina: Everyone else is to Blame II

Madina: Everyone Else Is to Blame — Part II

Trying to Correct Her Own Mistakes There are too many documents to put into this book. That sentence itself tells part of the story. If Madina had simply made her accusations on 24 October 2019 and stood by them, there would be very little left to explain. But that isn't what happened. As the months passed, paper began piling upon paper: statements, motions, applications, challenges to the judge, withdrawals of testimony, speeches to the court and, after I was convicted, further submissions on appeal.

I have selected only a handful here. Not because they are the only ones. Because printing everything would turn this chapter into another case file. What matters is the pattern. Madina had helped start something she could no longer control, and now she was running behind it trying to catch it. She had blamed me first. Then came the shock. The sedatives. The hotel staff. The police. The investigator. The pressure. The court. Some of those complaints were supported by evidence. That is precisely what makes this story more complicated than simply saying Madina lied and then invented excuses.

She had made terrible mistakes. But some of the things she later said had been done to her were also documented. And while she still couldn't bring herself to tell the whole truth, she was fighting desperately to correct the consequences of her own words. They Never Explained Her Right Not to Testify One of the most important documents wasn't written by Madina at all. On 22 July 2020, my defence lawyer Darkhan Dyusembekov filed a motion asking the court to declare Madina's interrogation of 24 October 2019 inadmissible as evidence.

This wasn't based merely upon what Madina later claimed had happened. The lawyer had reviewed the video recording of the interrogation itself. His motion states that there were “significant contradictions” between what actually occurred during the recorded interrogation and the protocol prepared by the investigator.

Then comes something even more important. According to the motion, before interrogating Madina, the investigator failed to establish her relationship to me—she was my wife—and therefore failed to explain her right to refuse to testify against her husband.

Instead, the motion says, she was immediately warned about criminal responsibility for giving false testimony, refusing to testify and avoiding testimony. Think about the difference. You have the right not to testify against your husband. Compared with: There can be criminal consequences if you refuse to testify. Those are very different things for a frightened young woman whose daughter has just died to hear. The defence argued that the procedure established by law had been violated and that Madina had been left under a misconception about her right to refuse to testify against me.

So when Madina later blamed the investigation for pressuring her, there was something behind that allegation. But again, there is a difference between explaining what happened during the interrogation and explaining what happened before it. The investigator wasn't standing beside her when she first ran from that room screaming that I had killed Sophia. The police hadn't yet built their case when those first words left her mouth. That part still belonged to Madina.

And eventually even she would acknowledge what those words had done. “Everything They Said Was Repeated From My Words” By December 2020, Madina was no longer merely asking people to believe that she regretted her original statements. She was putting it formally before the court. On 15 December she submitted a document with an extraordinary title: “Waiver of Accusatory Testimony against Mohamed Barakat.” There is no ambiguity in its opening: > “I completely reject the accusatory testimony against my husband Mohamed Barakat…”

She said she had been in shock and under the influence of sedatives. She alleged that police told her she wouldn't see Sophia until she gave evidence against me. She said she had asked for the interrogation to stop and that her right not to testify against her husband had not been explained. Then she finished by asking the court to use her statement as the basis for cancelling all of her previous accusatory testimony against me. Five days later, on 20 December 2020, she addressed the court again.

And buried inside that document is something I consider extremely important. Madina acknowledged what her words had done to the other witnesses. She wrote that the witnesses giving evidence against me didn't know me and that what they were saying had been repeated from her words when she said Mohamed killed her child. There it was. In writing. From Madina herself. She was now describing the chain reaction. She said it. Other people heard it. Other people repeated it.

And those repetitions became testimony against me. This is exactly what I mean when I say that words plant pictures in people's minds. By the time people were being questioned, they weren't approaching an unexplained tragedy with empty minds. They had already heard the baby's mother saying that the father had

killed her. Madina herself was now telling the court that these people had repeated what they heard from her. At the end of that same speech, she completely rejected her earlier testimony.

Then came two simple words: “Please forgive me!” Forgive her for what? That was the question that would remain unanswered for years. She Started Fighting the Judge Madina wasn't only withdrawing her accusations. She began fighting the court itself. On 2 September 2020, she filed a formal motion seeking Bakirbayev's recusal. She wrote that she had become convinced that her rights were repeatedly being violated. She accused Bakirbayev of conducting the proceedings with an “accusatory attitude.”

She complained that when she tried to speak, he interrupted her. She complained that he wasn't properly hearing the defence motions either. And she explicitly wrote: “I believe that the judge is biased.” She tried to remove him. It didn't work. So she tried again. The second document is even more revealing. On 7 October 2020, Madina filed another motion for Bakirbayev's recusal. This time she complained about what was happening to the supposedly open trial.

She wrote that Bakirbayev had removed UK News journalists and members of the Barakat family from the proceedings and questioned why the judge was able to remove some people while keeping those he wanted. Then she wrote something remarkable for the woman legally designated as the victim in the prosecution against me: > “Yes, I am a victim but I am not the only one – my husband is also a victim, we both lost our child…” She went further. She wrote: > “I feel that the court is trying to destroy my husband.”

And she said she would continue fighting for my freedom. Then comes the exchange I mentioned earlier in this book. Memory changes over seven years, so where a contemporary document exists, I prefer the document. Madina recorded Bakirbayev's words like this: > “Today the judge B.E. Bakirbayev asked me a question - whose side are you on? Whom do you protect?” Madina herself responded in the motion that this was an inappropriate question for a judge to ask. She said the participants shouldn't have to determine who was on which side because there was a common case before the court.

There is something almost surreal about it. The prosecution's own victim was trying to tell the court: The man you're prosecuting didn't deliberately kill our daughter. And the judge was asking her: Whose side are you on? Whom do you protect? She was supposed to be their victim. But she wasn't behaving like the victim their case required. She had become inconvenient. Twenty Years Didn't Silence Her Then came the verdict. Twenty years. If Madina's attempts to help me had simply been theatre designed to influence Bakirbayev before sentencing, this would have been the obvious moment for them to end.

They didn't. On 6 March 2021, months after I had received twenty years, Madina was writing to the Judicial Panel of Appeal for Criminal Cases of the Almaty City Court. And once again she returned to where everything had begun: 24 October 2019. She wrote that the charges against her husband had been based

upon her initial testimony from that day, which she said had been given under stress and while under the influence of sedatives. Then she said: > “I completely reject the indictments against my husband, Mohamed Barakat, which I gave to the police on that tragic day.”

She again described the interrogation as having taken place under pressure. She said she had asked them to stop and release her. She again said that police had not explained her right not to testify against her husband and hadn't provided an opportunity for legal assistance. She then attacked the first-instance judgment itself. She said the court had adopted the accusatory position of the investigation without giving proper attention to the defence. She insisted I couldn't have committed an intentional crime against Sophia and asked the appellate court to order another forensic psychiatric examination, specifically referring to the previous conclusion concerning a twilight disorder of consciousness.

The trial was finished. Bakirbayev had spoken. I had twenty years. And Madina was still fighting. That fact belongs in this book. So does the other one. She was still not telling the whole truth. Correcting the Consequences This is what makes those years so difficult to describe. Madina was simultaneously doing two things. She was trying to correct her mistakes. And she was trying to explain them away. Those aren't the same thing. The documents show a woman repeatedly telling courts that her original accusations should not be relied upon. They show her challenging the judge, attacking the investigation, supporting the defence, describing me as another victim of Sophia's death and continuing the fight even after I had been sentenced.

I won't take that away from her. But I also won't allow it to erase what came first. Because buried inside her own documents is the contradiction. Madina herself acknowledged that other witnesses repeated her words when she said Mohamed had killed Sophia. The sedatives didn't say those words. The hotel didn't say those words. Nurlan didn't say those words. Madina did. Everything that happened afterwards can help us understand why her story developed the way it did.

Shock matters. Medication matters. Pressure matters. Being questioned without understanding your rights matters. Fear of becoming a suspect matters. A legal system that frightens people matters. But somewhere underneath all of those explanations remained a truth Madina wasn't yet prepared to confront. She had made a choice in those first moments. Then she had watched that choice grow into something enormous. And now she was desperately trying to stop it. Motion after motion.

Statement after statement. Court after court. Television appearance after television appearance. There are too many documents for me to reproduce them all here. Perhaps that's the point. The paper trail became enormous because the mistake she was trying to correct had become enormous. But paper could only take her so far. She could withdraw her accusations. She could challenge the

judge. She could blame the police. She could explain the sedatives. She could describe the pressure.

She could ask me to forgive her. She could tell the whole of Kazakhstan that Mohamed Barakat was innocent. There was still one final step. One thing no motion could do for her. Madina had to tell the truth about Madina. And she wasn't ready. Not yet. That would take years. Years of living with what had happened. Years of watching me remain inside. Years of explanations and contradictions. Years of trying to repair the consequences without fully confronting their beginning.

Until eventually there would be no judge in the room. No investigator. No prosecutor. No hotel employee. No lawyer drafting the words. Nobody else left to blame. Just Madina. Me. And a WhatsApp voice note. Keep talking, Madina. I had been waiting years. And eventually, she would.

Chapter 88: The Experts He Couldn't Afford to Hear

The Experts He Couldn't Afford to Hear

The problem for Judge Bakirbayev was not simply Madina. By now she had withdrawn the statements that had helped launch the case against me. She had challenged what was happening in court, tried to have Bakirbayev removed and insisted publicly that I had not intentionally killed Sophia. That alone should have caused any court to stop and think. But Bakirbayev had a much bigger problem. The experts. Some of Kazakhstan's most experienced specialists had begun examining different parts of the case. Forensic medicine. Psychiatry. The crime scene. The witness statements. Toxicology.

These weren't all people sitting in one room agreeing with each other. They came from different disciplines and examined different evidence. One of them held a senior expert position within Kazakhstan's own Ministry of Justice. And the more specialists looked at the case, the more problems appeared. I had always believed that this was precisely why experts existed. A judge isn't a forensic doctor. He isn't a psychiatrist. He isn't a criminalistics specialist or forensic linguist. When a case involves questions outside his expertise, qualified people explain the science and the judge uses that knowledge to understand the evidence.

At least that's what I thought. In my trial, expert evidence became another obstacle that somehow had to be pushed aside. I'm going to show you only a few examples. And I'm deliberately not going to explain everything these findings eventually meant. There are things about 24 October 2019 that I haven't told you yet. There is a reason for that. Later in this book, we're going to return to that morning and examine what happened properly, piece by piece. For now, I only want you to understand what Bakirbayev was already being confronted with while deciding whether to send me to prison for twenty years.

Start with Room 801 Before anyone could confidently tell a court what happened inside Room 801, surely the room itself needed to have been properly

investigated. Svetlana Rehson examined the crime-scene materials. Her report identifies her as a Candidate of Legal Sciences and university associate professor with twenty years of practical forensic-expert experience and twenty-four years of scientific and teaching experience in areas including criminal procedure, criminalistics and forensic expertise.

She found problem after problem. The examination of the room didn't begin until some time after the authorities had already taken control of the situation. Because of that delay, Rehson concluded that it was impossible to say that the scene remained in its original state when investigators eventually examined it. Then she looked at the collection and recording of evidence. Objects were described as being packaged one way in the main protocol and differently in the annex.

Packaging wasn't always photographed. Important characteristics of suspected blood traces weren't properly recorded. Fingerprints were lifted without adequate photographic documentation of where they had been found. Microparticles were collected without properly recording the methods used to detect them. Even Sophia's blanket appeared in the scene material while being absent from the annexed list of seized objects. That might sound technical. It isn't. Imagine someone takes an object from a room and later wants to use it to send you to prison.

The obvious questions are: Where exactly was it found? Who collected it? How was it collected? How was it packaged? Can we be certain it is the same object being examined later? That's what crime-scene procedure is there for. Rehson was identifying problems with exactly those safeguards. And then she found evidence that simply hadn't been followed through. Fingerprints suitable for identification had been recovered from several objects, yet she found no corresponding examination establishing who some of those prints belonged to.

Other potentially important objects and surfaces had not been subjected to the kinds of fingerprint, DNA and biological-trace examinations that could have helped reconstruct events. She concluded that the principles of comprehensiveness and completeness in collecting evidence had been violated. I'm going to deliberately leave something out here. Why does that matter? You'll find out later. Because some of the things that weren't properly collected or investigated will become extremely important when we finally return to what happened that morning.

For now, understand only this: An experienced Kazakh specialist had examined the investigation of Room 801 and found serious problems. And she wasn't finished. Paperwork that couldn't even agree with itself Rehson found a remarkable timing discrepancy in the investigative records. According to one set of documents, the inspection of Room 801 continued until 11:50. Another protocol recorded an examination taking place elsewhere between 11:40 and 11:45, involving personnel whose documented activities therefore appeared to overlap.

Rehson openly questioned how that was possible. She also questioned whether the very short recorded duration of the second examination indicated incorrect recording of the time or a superficial examination. Then came an even more serious legal conclusion. Rehson found neither documented consent from Madina and me for the inspection of the hotel room nor an investigating judge's order authorising a compulsory inspection. On that basis, she concluded that the inspection was illegal and that the objects seized during it could not be recognised as admissible evidence.

Read that again. We're not yet arguing about what any particular piece of evidence proves. We're talking about something more basic. Was the crime scene itself lawfully and properly examined? Rehson's final conclusions identified organizational, legal, tactical and forensic violations in the examination and collection of evidence. That was one expert. Now let's move to another. The forensic evidence N.A. Nusupbayev had worked in forensic medicine since 1972.

He examined the case materials, forensic reports, medical documentation, photographs and other evidence. I don't want to explain his findings in detail yet. Doing that would tell you too much about the chapter I am deliberately saving until later. What matters here is very simple. The prosecution had presented a specific mechanism for how Sophia's fatal injuries occurred. The forensic evidence did not reliably establish that mechanism. Nusupbayev identified important unresolved questions surrounding the mechanism of injury and the extent to which the prosecution's reconstruction could actually be supported by the forensic findings.

Some of the underlying expert answers themselves were expressed in terms of possibilities and probabilities rather than a reliably reconstructed sequence. This distinction is enormously important. Possible does not mean proven. Probable does not magically become certain because a prosecutor repeats it in court. And we cannot determine doesn't mean a judge gets to fill in the blank himself. There were other possible mechanisms requiring examination. I'm not going to tell you what they were.

Not yet. Just remember this: The prosecution had a story. The forensic evidence had not securely established that story. Later, we'll come back to why that matters. Then came psychiatry The prosecution also needed the court to accept its interpretation of my condition. Again, an experienced specialist caused problems. N.N. Logacheva was a psychiatrist of the highest category and a forensic psychiatric expert with more than forty years of psychiatric experience and more than twenty years of expert work.

After reviewing the case materials, she concluded with a high degree of probability that at the relevant time I had suffered from a temporary mental disorder in the form of a twilight disorder of consciousness. She also found grounds for a new comprehensive forensic psychological and psychiatric examination. You don't need to understand the psychiatric terminology. Neither did I at first. The important thing is that a highly experienced forensic psychiatrist

was telling the court that there was a serious unresolved issue concerning my mental condition.

That should have been enough to make any judge want to know more. Then came a specialist who was even more difficult to brush aside. The Ministry of Justice Altynay Babykpaeva reviewed the earlier inpatient psychiatric examination. Her position matters. The document identifies her as the Chief Psychiatrist Expert of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan, with twenty-three years of expert experience, a PhD and a Master of Laws. This was no longer simply Mohamed Barakat complaining about the investigation.

This was a senior specialist from within Kazakhstan's own system examining the work of other experts. And she found serious shortcomings. Important materials had not been properly considered. Relevant witness information had not been provided to the inpatient experts. Medical information had not been adequately investigated. Specialist interpretation of medical investigations hadn't been obtained. Possible neurological issues hadn't been properly explored.

She also challenged the basis upon which severe alcoholic intoxication had been established. Her point was beautifully simple. You don't scientifically establish intoxication simply because witnesses say someone looked drunk. She wrote that laboratory confirmation through blood and urine testing was required. And then came her overall assessment of the psychiatric opinion. Negative. Not my description. Not my lawyer's. Hers. The Chief Psychiatrist Expert of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Justice concluded that methodological shortcomings had affected the validity of the conclusions.

Imagine being Bakirbayev. You have an expert opinion before your court. Then one of the country's senior specialists in precisely that field examines it and identifies missing information, methodological problems and inadequate investigation before giving it a negative overall assessment. What should happen next? I would have thought the answer was obvious. Bring the experts into court. Let them explain. Let the prosecution question them. Let my lawyers question them.

Let Bakirbayev question them. And because this was supposed to be an open trial, let journalists sit there and hear the answers. That brings us to another problem. Who was allowed to listen? By this point, what happened inside the courtroom mattered enormously. Madina herself complained about it. In her motion seeking Bakirbayev's removal, she complained that journalists and members of my family had been disconnected from proceedings and questioned why the judge could remove some people while allowing others to remain.

This was supposed to be an open trial. Yet Bakirbayev was selecting which media representatives were able to attend. And the day mattered. Because what a journalist hears determines what a journalist can report. Allow selected media to hear one part of a trial while independent journalists are excluded from another and the public receives a completely different picture of what is happening inside that courtroom. From where I was sitting, the effect was obvious:

Bakirbayev could control which parts of the trial reached the public. And what were some of the most dangerous things for the public to hear? The experts. I didn't need journalists to believe me. I didn't need them to declare me innocent. I needed them to listen. Listen to Rehson. Listen to Nusupbayev. Listen to Logacheva. Listen to Babykpaeva. Listen to the other specialists. Then report what they said. If the prosecution's case was as strong as they claimed, why would that be a problem?

Open the doors. Let everyone hear it. The drugs that weren't there Another narrative had developed around drugs. Again, the evidence created problems. Chemical-toxicological Expert Opinion No. 176 found no narcotic or psychotropic substances in my blood, while the narcological examination concluded that I did not suffer from mental or behavioural disorders resulting from drug or alcohol use and did not require compulsory treatment. Rehson also identified questions concerning other toxicological findings in the case materials, including a result she considered doubtful because expected associated substances had not been identified. She further recorded that examined syringes, needles and pharmaceuticals did not contain traces of narcotic or psychotropic substances.

I'm not going any further into that now either. Later. For this chapter, the pattern is what matters. Every time the prosecution's story appeared simple, another expert opened the file and made it complicated again. Then someone examined the witness statements This was perhaps the easiest expert evidence for me to understand. I'd been reading the witness statements myself. Something was wrong. Different people sounded the same. Not vaguely similar. Not merely remembering the same events.

The wording repeated itself. Our lawyers eventually had the statements professionally examined. Forensic authorship specialist Gulnara Mukhataeva held a state licence and had worked in expert activity, including forensic examination bodies, since 2004. She separated the standard legal wording contained in police protocols from the sections where witnesses were supposed to be describing events in their own free speech. Those sections should naturally contain the linguistic characteristics of the individual speaking.

Instead, she found word-for-word similarities in the descriptive sections of five statements. Three expert interrogation protocols also contained word-for-word similarities. Another examination compared statements from two hotel witnesses. The specialist found that their language contained more characteristics associated with the author or drafter—the investigator than with the people supposedly giving the statements. The material lacked characteristics expected from free speech and contained literal and semantic similarities.

And whose name repeatedly appeared as the investigator conducting those interrogations? N.Zh. Bolatov. This one didn't require a medical degree. Different people. Different interviews. Statements supposedly given in their own words. Yet the expert was finding the same wording. And then those witnesses began appearing in court. Some admitted that they had signed statements they hadn't

properly read. Some admitted the wording wasn't theirs. Suddenly what I'd been seeing in those enormous piles of documents wasn't simply something Mohamed Barakat thought looked suspicious.

An expert had identified the same problem. The question became painfully simple: Whose words were we actually reading? Madina was becoming the smallest problem Now put only these few pieces together. Not everything. Just what I've shown you in this chapter. Madina had withdrawn her accusations. A criminalistics specialist had identified serious legal and forensic problems with the crime-scene examination. A forensic specialist had identified unresolved problems with the prosecution's mechanism of injury.

A highly experienced psychiatrist identified a probable twilight disturbance of consciousness and called for another examination. The Chief Psychiatrist Expert of the Ministry of Justice gave a negative overall assessment of an important psychiatric opinion and identified methodological problems affecting its validity. Toxicology wasn't giving the clean story the prosecution needed. An authorship expert was finding word-for- word similarities in statements supposedly coming independently from different people.

And witnesses were beginning to fall apart when questioned in court. So what exactly were we still doing? That question went around and around in my head. Surely this was the point of a trial. If the experts disagree, bring them in. If the evidence contradicts itself, examine it. If a witness changes his story, question him. If an expert says an examination is defective, let her explain why. If the prosecution believes she's wrong, let them prove it. And let the public watch.

Instead, we were fighting to get experts heard while access to the supposedly open proceedings was being controlled. The more questions appeared, the less interested the court seemed in hearing the answers. Thirty- five minutes What happened later only reinforced that feeling. The Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law monitored my appeal and discussed Kazakhstan's obligation to provide a fair and public hearing, subject only to limited exceptions.

Its report records that my appeal lasted no more than thirty-five minutes. Thirty-five minutes. After a twenty-year murder conviction. The report also noted the court's legal ability to summon and question additional witnesses, experts and specialists and examine additional evidence. Think about the documents I've described in this chapter. Then imagine dealing with the appeal against a twenty-year sentence in thirty- five minutes. That tells you more than another twenty pages of legal argument ever could.

Bakirbayev's real problem Madina was never Bakirbayev's biggest problem. Madina could be attacked for changing her story. She could be described as emotional. She could be portrayed as a wife desperately trying to save her husband. But what about Rehson? What about Nusupbayev? What about Logacheva? What about Mukhataeva? What about the Chief Psychiatrist Expert of

the Ministry of Justice? You can't call all of them grieving wives. You can't say they're all emotional.

And because they came from different disciplines, you couldn't make the entire problem disappear by saying two experts simply disagreed over the same scientific question. They were finding problems in different parts of the same case. The room. The evidence collection. The forensic medicine. The psychiatry. The toxicology. The witness statements. One expert can be wrong. Two experts can disagree. That happens in courtrooms everywhere. But when experienced specialists from completely different disciplines begin independently finding serious problems, surely a judge should become more curious, not less.

Surely he should start asking questions. Why wasn't evidence properly collected? Why did the paperwork contradict itself? Why wasn't the prosecution's mechanism securely established? Why did a highly experienced psychiatrist believe another examination was necessary? Why did the Ministry of Justice's own Chief Psychiatrist Expert give the psychiatric work a negative assessment? Why were different witnesses supposedly speaking in their own words but somehow using identical wording?

And why, in an open trial dealing with all of this, was there a fight over which journalists were allowed to hear it? Those were the questions. I'm deliberately leaving some of the answers out. Because there is another chapter coming much later in this book. In that chapter we will go back to Room 801. We will take the evidence we've accumulated throughout this story and finally put it together. The photographs. The forensic reports. The fingerprints. The DNA.

The medical evidence. The statements. The things investigators examined. And, perhaps even more importantly, the things they didn't. Then I will tell you what I believe happened on 24 October 2019. Not yet. For now, I want you to remember only this: Bakirbayev didn't merely have to ignore Mohamed Barakat shouting from behind a screen that something was terribly wrong. He didn't merely have to get past Madina withdrawing the accusations that helped start the case.

He had to get past Kazakhstan's own experts. And the more of them who opened the case files, the more questions appeared. Yet somehow every unanswered question still led to exactly the same destination. Twenty years. I had always believed that experts existed to help judges understand things they couldn't possibly understand themselves. My trial taught me something else. The greatest expert in the world is useless if the person deciding your future has already decided that he doesn't want to hear what the expert has to say.

And perhaps that's why the doors mattered so much. Why the journalists mattered. Why the cameras mattered. Why allowing experts into that courtroom mattered. Because there was one very simple solution to all of these arguments: Open the doors. Bring in the experts. Let them speak. Let everyone listen. And then let Kazakhstan decide for itself what it had just heard.

Chapter 89: Apologies on Behalf of our System

Apologies on Behalf of Our System

As time went by in C18, something around me began to change. People had lived this case with me. Cellmates came and went. Some stayed for weeks, others for months. They saw the bags of case files arriving. They read through parts of them themselves. They listened to the endless conversations about experts, witnesses, evidence, lawyers and court hearings. They watched Madina come and go, bringing food in those signature blue plastic bags everyone here in Kazakhstan knows, often writing little notes across them.

They weren't reading newspaper headlines anymore. They were living beside the man in those headlines. After the court of first instance, Madina was permitted to start visiting me. As usual, even something as basic as a visit could be improved if somebody was willing to pay. She would bribe the guards to allow us into one of the open cells where we could spend our visit with a little more privacy. By then, Madina had already developed what she apparently thought was the perfect solution to our future.

I had twenty years. Fine. She would rent a house close to whichever lager I was sent to. She would come regularly for visits. She would get pregnant. We would have more children. Those children would grow up visiting their father in prison. And, naturally, in the future she had constructed in her head, my sisters would continue supporting her and the imaginary children she had already begun planning. She spoke about it almost as though we were deciding where to buy our next family home.

What Madina didn't know was that my family had hired a private investigator. While she was planning this future with me, the investigator had been watching her life outside. We had photographs of her dating other men. We also had photographs of her travelling around with Nurlan Bolatov during the first months of the investigation. There is something else I haven't wanted to mention until now because, even today, I don't entirely know what to make of it. But it bothered me then.

And it still bothers me. Within weeks of Sophia's death, Madina had gone out and done her hair and nails. She began buying endless amounts of new clothes. When I saw her at the police station, I commented on it. “Madina, as Muslims we're supposed to mourn the dead for forty days.” She told me that this was simply her way of coping. Perhaps it was. People deal with grief in very different ways. But at the time, combined with everything else happening around me, it only strengthened this terrible feeling inside me that something was seriously wrong with her.

And inside detention there is nowhere to escape from those thoughts. There is also nowhere to escape from everyone else's observations. People watch everything in prison. They have nothing else to do. Who visits you. Who sends food. Who sends money. What somebody writes on your bag. How your wife

behaves when she arrives. Whether she cries. Whether she smiles. Whether she keeps coming back. Prison turns everyone into an amateur detective. And so the same question followed me again and again.

"Is that your second wife?" "No." "Your girlfriend?" "No." "That's Madina." They would stare at me. "Sophia's mother?" "Yes." And then came the same confused expression. Their minds simply couldn't reconcile what they had been told with what they were watching. If Mohamed had murdered his own daughter, why did the child's biological mother desperately want to remain with him? Why was she bringing him food? Why was she writing notes on his bags? Why was she paying guards for better visits?

Why was she planning to move close to his prison? Why was she talking about having more children with him? These weren't lawyers. They weren't forensic specialists. They weren't psychiatrists. They weren't human-rights observers. They were prisoners. Some were educated. Some barely were. Some were businessmen. Some were gangsters. Some were addicts. Some claimed they were innocent themselves. Some had spent half their lives inside institutions like this. But almost everybody eventually arrived at the same basic question:

How does any of this make sense? To me, their confusion was common sense. Unless, apparently, your name was Bakirbayev. By my final months in C18, the atmosphere around me had changed completely. When I first arrived, I was the foreigner from television. The monster from the news. The British Arab pilot accused of murdering his baby daughter. People stared at me. Guards were aggressive. There were threats. Punches. Slaps. Humiliation. The assumption of guilt had arrived before I did.

But these people had now spent more than a year living beside me. They had watched the case develop. They had watched Madina. They had seen the paperwork. Some had read it. They had listened to what happened in court. And slowly the way they looked at me changed. During those final months, I began hearing something almost everywhere. Sometimes from people I barely knew. "Sorry, man." "Sorry, Mohamed." And then the sentence I would hear in different forms for years afterwards:

"It's Kazakhstan." "No justice." Even many of the guards had changed. Those fierce faces softened. The punches and slaps became looks of sympathy. Instead of aggressive grabbing, there would sometimes be a light tap on my shoulder or back as I walked past. No great speech. Nobody was going to stand there wearing a government uniform and announce that the system had failed. But human beings don't always need words. Sometimes someone looks at you and you know exactly what they're trying to say.

Sorry. We know. There's nothing we can do. It began to feel as though the people working inside the machine were apologising on behalf of the machine itself. Then Bakirbayev read the verdict. Twenty years. Whatever people inside C18 had come to believe about me, legally I was now a convicted murderer. Apparently the administration expected me to collapse. After the verdict, they

entered my room every single hour. Bang. Door opens. Light. Someone looks inside.

Door closes. An hour later: Bang. Again. They were checking whether I had committed suicide. The prison nurse even brought me sedatives. I didn't need them. Strangely, suicide wasn't what was going through my head. My immediate problem was much more physical. My knee. One year and eight months inside a box After one year and eight months sitting inside tiny cells with almost no proper movement, my knee had become enormous. It had swollen to around six times its normal size.

Fluid had accumulated inside the joint, and I needed to be taken to hospital to have it drained again. Eventually even the detention centre realised that they couldn't simply send me onwards to prison in that condition. So before the transfer, my knee was drained. The doctor wrote a special instruction stating that I should not undertake heavy or stressful physical movement because it could aggravate the knee. A doctor's note. A medical restriction. A little piece of paper that was supposed to protect me wherever I was going next.

By now I'd spent enough time in Kazakhstan's system to understand exactly how much protection a piece of paper could provide. Still, the knee had been treated. And that meant something else. My time in C18 was finished. I was going to prison. Real prison. Big man's prison. Lager. And suddenly everyone had a story. Everyone had advice. Everyone knew somebody. “Be careful, man.” “I have friends inside.” “I'll tell them you're coming.” “They'll look after you.”

“I know people in 99.” Everyone suddenly had connections waiting for me on the other side. By then, I didn't believe a word anybody said. I'd heard too many promises. Too many lawyers knew the judge. Too many inmates knew prosecutors. Too many guards could arrange something. Too many people knew someone powerful. Too many solutions began with money. C18 had taught me one useful lesson: Believe what people do, not what they tell you they can do. But I watched their faces.

Over one year and eight months I had seen so many men come and go. Big men. Loud men. Men who walked around the cells acting like gangsters. Men who explained prison hierarchy as though they personally controlled half of Kazakhstan's criminal world. Men who boasted about what they would do when they reached lager. Then sentencing day came. And I watched them crumble. I watched the tough faces disappear. I watched men cry when they heard their sentences. I watched others sit silently on their beds with their eyes lowered.

Suddenly fifteen years wasn't a number. Ten years wasn't a number. Five years wasn't a number. It was their life. Some couldn't face the idea of big man's prison at all. They begged to remain in detention. They tried to get work as cleaners. Cooks. Anything. Anything that might keep them in C18 rather than being sent to lager. I had watched men spend months trying to convince everybody how dangerous they were, only to become frightened children when the moment came to leave.

And now some of those same people were looking at me. Their eyes lowered. “Be careful, man.” “We'll try to help you.” “I have friends inside.” Someone shakes my hand. Someone taps me on the shoulder. Someone gives me another name I'm supposed to remember when I arrive. I nod. I thank them. But inside I'm thinking: I don't believe any of you anymore. Everyone around me seemed frightened about what was waiting for me. Strangely, I wasn't. Maybe I should have been.

Perhaps I simply had absolutely no idea what was coming. But what I felt more than fear was something I hadn't expected. Relief. I was finally leaving that cell. After one year and eight months, I might actually be able to walk outside again. I might see the sky. Imagine that. I had just been sentenced to twenty years in prison, and what occupied my mind wasn't twenty years. It wasn't the gangsters. It wasn't prison hierarchy. It wasn't violence. It wasn't even the endless stories everybody had told me about lager.

I wanted to see the sky. I wanted fresh air. I wanted to breathe properly. I wanted to stretch my arms as far apart as they could possibly go without touching another human being or a wall. I wanted to stretch my legs. I wanted to walk more than a few metres. I wanted to feel wind on my face. Sunlight. Clouds. Anything that wasn't a ceiling. Think about how far your definition of happiness has to fall before seeing the sky becomes something you look forward to when being transferred to a maximum-security prison.

For one year and eight months my world had been reduced to boxes. A cell. A corridor. A holding cell. Another cell. The psychiatric ward. Another corridor. A courtroom appearing on a computer screen. Concrete. Metal. Doors. Locks. Faces appearing through peepholes. So while everybody around me talked about what was waiting in Prison 99, all I could think was: Outside. There would be outside. C18 had reduced my ambitions to the most basic things a human being can ask for.

Move. Breathe. Stretch. Look upwards. The time finally came. My belongings were packed into whatever I could carry. Clothes. Documents. Food. The remains of a person's life reduced to bags. I looked around at those walls one last time. All those faces. The men who had come and gone. The men who talked through the night. The men who prayed. The men who fought. The men who stole. The men who shared their last cigarette. The men who claimed they controlled the prison.

The men who cried when their sentences arrived. The men who had looked at me suspiciously when I first arrived and later apologised on behalf of a system none of us controlled. For one year and eight months, this miserable place had been almost my entire world. And now I was leaving it. I had survived C18. But it didn't feel like the end of anything. It felt like I had just completed the introduction to a book I didn't want to read. The warnings continued until the end.

“Keep your head down.” “Don't trust anybody.” “Don't show fear.” “Find the right people.” “Tell them I sent you.” I nodded. What could anyone really prepare me for anymore? I'd been accused of murdering my daughter. I'd been beaten. Electrocuted. Injected. Extorted. Humiliated. I'd watched the evidence change. I'd

watched experts identify problem after problem. I'd watched witnesses fall apart. And I'd watched a judge sentence me to twenty years anyway. What exactly was I supposed to be frightened of now?

I would soon find out. As I prepared to leave C18, everything became strangely quiet inside my head. No dramatic speech. No tears. No great revelation. Just one thought. Here goes nothing. Then another. Here goes everything. My time in detention was over. It was off to Prison 99. Big man's prison. Everyone around me seemed to understand what those words meant. I didn't. Not yet. I had a damaged knee, a doctor's note telling them not to put me through heavy physical strain, twenty years hanging over my head and almost no idea what was waiting for me on the other side.

And strangely, none of that was the thought occupying my mind. I just wanted the doors to open. I wanted fresh air. I wanted space. I wanted to look up. I wanted to see the sky.

Chapter 90: Etap

Etap

The door to Cell 224 in C18 opened one last time. “Grab your belongings. You’re going for etap.” Transfer. I had known this moment was coming, but when the words finally came, I still needed to hear where. “Where am I going? Has the prison been confirmed?” “99th.” So that was it. Prison 99. Big man’s prison. I reached for the miniature Nokia one last time and called my sisters. “That’s it, guys. I’m being transferred.” They immediately started crying. “We’re going to do everything we can to make sure you’re okay. We’re in contact with the embassy. It’s the 99th, right? The 99th?”

“Yes. The 99th.” “I love you all. I’ll call you as soon as I can.” And I hung up. There are strange moments in prison when the value of an object has absolutely nothing to do with what it costs. I was leaving plenty of belongings behind, but the most valuable things I left were that tiny phone and its charger. That little Nokia had been my connection to the outside world. My sisters. My family. Information. Hope. For however long it took me to find another phone, that connection was finished.

My roommate hugged me when I gave him the phone and charger. He was grateful. I picked up what I could carry. Then I walked out of Cell 224. The door closed behind me. C18 was finished. We were taken down into the basement one last time for processing. I recognised nobody. Everyone was doing what prisoners automatically do when they're thrown together before a transfer: studying each other. Who is who? Who looks experienced? Who looks dangerous? Who looks frightened?

Who has money? Who has connections? Who should you stay close to? Nobody wants to arrive somewhere unknown completely alone. I looked around and noticed a tall Russian standing quietly in the corner. There was something

different about him. He wasn't pacing around. He wasn't talking loudly. He wasn't trying to convince anyone that he was important. He was simply standing there, completely calm. I decided to stand beside him. He looked at me. “Mohamed?” I looked straight back at him.

He could see from my face that I had absolutely no idea who he was. Why would I? We had never met. “Slon,” he said. Later I would learn that slon means elephant in Russian. He gave me one piece of advice in his broken English. “Friend. No friends. Understand?” That was roughly how he said it. I interpreted it immediately. Be friendly with everyone. Trust nobody. I would later discover that Slon had already spent more than eight years imprisoned. He had seen it all.

Regime. Beatings. Torture. Prison had hardened him, and he had developed a reputation for taking no shit from anyone. Before prison he had apparently been a multimillionaire. They had taken everything. But I knew none of that while we stood together in the basement. To me he was simply this strange, calm Russian who somehow knew my name and had just given me perhaps the most useful piece of advice I could take into prison. Friend. No friends. Our conversation was interrupted.

“Barakat!” My name was called. The old C18 guards began handing my documents over to the new escort officers. One of them specifically explained my medical condition. “Don’t make him do any hard labour. He has a serious knee condition. Here are the documents from the hospital.” My knee had only recently been drained. After one year and eight months with almost no proper movement, it had swollen to several times its normal size. Fluid had built up inside the joint and the doctor had specifically written that I should not be subjected to heavy or stressful physical activity that could aggravate it.

The old guards were actually trying to make sure the new ones understood. The new guards seemed much more interested in my bags. “This coffee is illegal.” “You have too many cigarettes.” “These T-shirts are forbidden.” Hands went through everything. Another uniform, another building, another completely different interpretation of what I was allowed to possess. Then a voice came from behind me. “Take two packs of cigarettes and put the rest back in his bags.”

By now I had begun to understand basic Russian. The guards turned around. “Who the fuck are you?” A young Russian man stepped forward. “Do you know Kitt?” I’m not going to use Kitt’s real name. But the reaction was immediate. The guards’ eyes opened. The name meant something. Suddenly my supposedly forbidden belongings weren't nearly as important. They shoved practically everything back into my bags, apart from a packet of sunflower seeds and two packs of Marlboros.

I looked at the young Russian. “Thanks.” “I’m boxer,” he said. Then he held out his hand. “Stick with me. Sergei.” Friend. No friends. Slon’s words were already repeating in my head. I shook Sergei’s hand. “Mohamed.” We hadn't even left C18 yet and relationships were already forming. Everybody wanted somebody. Then they loaded us into the transport vehicle. The meat wagon. Inside

was a separate metal compartment used to isolate prisoners considered highly violent or dangerous.

A metal box inside a metal box. Tiny. There were only small holes drilled through it for ventilation. For whatever reason, the guards shoved me inside. The door slammed shut. Almost immediately I could feel the claustrophobia building. I tried to control my thoughts. It was mid-June and the temperature was high. The metal around me was hot. Air came through those little holes, but not enough to stop me thinking about how little air there actually was. Don't think about the walls.

Don't think about the door. Don't think about being trapped inside another box. Just breathe. Slowly. The drive was only around forty-five minutes. Luckily. It felt much longer. Eventually we stopped. The outside doors opened. Light poured in. Then came the noise. Military men. Semi-automatic weapons pointed towards us. German Shepherds barking and lunging forward against their leads. Orders being screamed. “Get out!” “Get down!” “Move!” As we climbed from the vehicle there were slaps to the backs of heads.

Welcome to Prison 99. We were forced down into squatting positions. That was the painful part. The processing itself was bad, but strangely it wasn't as terrifying as I had imagined. The squatting was different. My knee simply couldn't do it. I tried. I stayed down as long as I could. The fluid had only recently been drained from the joint and the hospital had specifically warned against exactly this kind of physical strain. Eventually the pain became too much.

I stood up. Immediately something blunt was driven hard into my kidney. Pain shot through my side. I instinctively turned. Slon was already shaking hands with the guards. I still didn't know that he'd been here before. I could see him pointing towards me and saying something, but he was too far away for me to hear. I assumed he was explaining my knee. He had been standing nearby when the C18 officers handed over my medical documents and warned the escort team about my condition.

Whatever he said worked. They allowed me to stand. Everyone else remained squatting. And without realising it, I had already learned one of my first lessons about Prison 99. A doctor's document could disappear into paperwork. But the right person saying the right thing could make somebody listen immediately. Eventually we were moved through a side door. That was our first real glimpse of lager. Existing inmates noticed us immediately. “Ey! Quarantine!” Voices came from different directions.

Aggressive. Mocking. Intimidating the new arrivals before we'd even properly entered. I didn't understand everything being said, but I didn't need to. I could see it on the faces of the other new prisoners. They understood. Sergei didn't seem bothered. Neither did Slon. I followed everyone inside. And then I couldn't believe what I was looking at. Quarantine had recently been renovated. Everything looked new. Fresh paint. New tiles. A new toilet. A new sink.

Clean surfaces. After one year and eight months listening to stories about lager, I had imagined something from the darkest corner of the Soviet prison system. Instead, my first impression was: This isn't as bad as I expected. There was a young, skinny Turkish guy there. Almost immediately I could see that things were going badly for him. People were watching him. Testing him. Preying on him. His life was already beginning to turn into hell. But for me? So far, so good.

We ate lunch. Standard prison slop. Nothing I hadn't seen before. Then we were taken to collect our prison uniforms. The same plastic clothing I described earlier. Grey. Not just grey. The most depressing shade of grey imaginable. Cheap material with a single fluorescent strip running across the chest and another across the back. We were told to change. These were our clothes now. From here onwards. I looked down at myself. Not so long ago, a uniform had meant something completely different to me.

Now this was the uniform. Cheap grey polyester. Fluorescent strips. Prisoner. Another piece of identity removed. And then came the moment I had been waiting for for one year and eight months. We were taken into a closed outdoor area to walk and smoke. I stepped outside. And looked up. I stopped. The sky. There was nothing blocking it. No ceiling. No concrete roof. No bars directly above my head. Nothing. Just an endless view straight upwards. Sky. I stared.

Clouds. I could see clouds. Then birds. Actual birds flying above us. Free to move in whichever direction they wanted. I felt something building behind my eyes. I tried to control it. One tear escaped anyway and slowly ran down my face. I didn't wipe it away. I just kept looking upwards. For one year and eight months I had wanted this. Something so ordinary that most people barely notice it. People outside walk beneath the sky every single day without looking at it.

They stare at their phones. They complain that it's too hot. Too cold. Too cloudy. They rush from one building to another. Nobody thinks: Look at that. There is nothing above me. I did. Because for one year and eight months there had always been something above me. Concrete. Metal. A ceiling. Bars. Another floor. Another cell. Something. Now there was nothing. Just space. I breathed as deeply as I could. Fresh air. I stretched my shoulders. Moved my arms. Looked up again.

The knee hurt. My kidney hurt from whatever they'd driven into it earlier. I was standing in a maximum- security prison wearing a horrible grey plastic uniform with twenty years hanging over my head. And I was happy. Actually happy. Because I could see the sky. Then I noticed the others. They were doing it too. Men who had spent the morning trying to look hard were standing quietly and looking upwards. Nobody needed to explain it. We had all come from detention.

Different cells. Different cases. Different crimes. Different sentences. Different lives. But we all understood this. We had been locked inside boxes. And suddenly there was sky. For a few minutes nobody could take it away from us. The intimidation could wait. The hierarchy could wait. The gangsters could wait. The guards could wait. Prison 99 could wait. For those few minutes there were

cigarettes in our hands, air in our lungs and an endless open space above our heads.

I watched a bird cross from one side of my vision to the other. No walls for it. No checkpoints. No documents. No permission. It simply went wherever it wanted. I followed it with my eyes until it disappeared. I think all of us standing there felt something similar. We had been through hell. And we had survived. This was our moment. Our little reward. A few minutes to remember that somewhere beyond all this concrete, the world was still there. I had wanted nothing more than to see the sky.

Now I could. I just didn't understand yet what Prison 99 was going to demand from me once they put us back inside. This wasn't freedom. It wasn't even the beginning of freedom. It was an intermission. A cigarette. A breath of fresh air. A few clouds passing overhead. Our break before the punishment continued. That first night in quarantine, I started hearing what Prison 99 really sounded like. Doors opened somewhere along the block. Angry voices. Shouting.

Then the unmistakable sound of fists and feet hitting somebody's body. Thud. Thud. A cry. A groan. Someone begging them to stop. Then silence. And laughter. The guards would continue walking down the corridor as though nothing had happened. Eventually they reached our door. They looked through the peephole. Laughed. Then continued walking. Even their voices sounded heavy. These were big, well-built men. Almost everyone trains inside prison, guards and inmates alike. Physical size matters in a place where intimidation is part of the language.

I waited for our door to open. It didn't. Sergei jumped up and went to the door. He spoke to someone through it for a moment. Then he walked back smiling. “My bros,” he said. That was all. My bros. Another lesson. The same corridor. The same guards. The same prison. But apparently not the same rules for everyone. This continued throughout the fifteen days we spent in quarantine. By then we'd been shown the shower block. We'd received our prison rations. The guards had gone through our belongings so many times that most things of value had disappeared. There was almost nothing left worth taking.

People from inside the prison sent us cigarettes and tea. That meant something here. Cigarettes. Tea. Food. Phones. Small things outside. Currency inside. Slon disappeared on the first day. I didn't understand where he'd gone. Later I learned that he'd simply returned to his old prison family and his old cell. He hadn't been arriving somewhere new at all. He'd been coming home. Then our fifteen days were over. Time to enter the prison properly. “Follow me,” Sergei said.

Everyone else headed in another direction. Only Sergei and I continued towards the third block. Fourth floor. As we walked, people greeted him. Again and again. He was known here. I wasn't. People looked at me and laughed. Not openly aggressive laughter. More like they knew something I didn't. They knew what was coming. I was the foreigner. The British pilot from television. And, most importantly: the rich foreigner. At least that's what they assumed. We reached Cell 16.

The door opened. Standing inside was a man I can only compare to the Hulk from those old movies. Bald. Huge. Built like a wall. He looked at me and then ordered a skinny inmate beside him to translate. “I'm Kitt.” Again, Kitt isn't his real name. Then came his introduction: “I killed three policemen.” I walked over and shook his hand. Then, without thinking too deeply about what I was doing, I gave him a thumbs-up. Three policemen. By that stage of my life, after everything that had happened, one thought flashed through my head:

If only Nurlan Bolatov had been one of them. Kitt looked at me slightly confused. He pointed towards a bed. “You sleep here.” That was apparently settled. Then he ordered several smaller inmates to go and get us food. And food started arriving. Burgers. Samosas. Chicken. Grilled meat. I couldn't understand it. Because the walk to Cell 16 had shown me something completely different. The prison was disgusting. Filthy. Dirty. Men wandered around looking like zombies.

Faces drained of life. Old clothing. Broken surroundings. People who looked as though the prison had been slowly consuming them for years. Then you stepped into Kitt's room. And suddenly you were somewhere else. Renovated. Comfortable. Food everywhere. A completely different standard of existence. Kitt saw me looking around. “Good, good,” he said, pointing proudly at the room. Then he rubbed his fingers together. “Money, money.” And laughed. There it was. The explanation.

Money. Same prison. Different worlds. More large inmates began entering the room. One after another. The space seemed to become smaller by the second. These were intimidating men. Big. Confident. Comfortable in their surroundings. And almost every pair of eyes eventually settled on me. I knew exactly what they were thinking. Rich foreigner. I concentrated on eating. Then another man entered. I recognised him immediately. The Kazakh-Chinese businessman from Cell 212 in C18.

He'd been sentenced for contraband. Except he looked different now. He had a black eye. He rushed towards the food and began eating as though he hadn't been fed properly in a year. I watched him. Something was wrong. Very wrong. It was obvious he'd been targeted. And it was equally obvious why. Money. He was wealthy. And suddenly I began wondering where all this food in Kitt's room had actually come from. The businessman eventually called me outside for a cigarette.

The moment we were away from everyone else, he asked: “How much have they asked you for?” “Nothing so far.” He almost smiled. “They will. They will.” Then he told me what had happened to him. “I paid twenty thousand dollars.” Twenty thousand US dollars. Then he looked at me. “Of course you'll pay more. You're a foreigner.” I looked back towards the cell. The renovated room. The burgers. Chicken. Grilled meat. The powerful men. The smaller inmates running around serving them.

And suddenly the economics of the place were becoming much clearer. Somebody always pays. Kitt was religious. He prayed. When prayer time came, he asked me to pray beside him. I hadn't missed a prayer since Sophia died. Prayer

had become something different for me after losing her. I spoke to her through my prayers. I asked her to forgive me. Forgive me for not being able to save you from your fate. I should have done more. I should have protected you better while you were alive.

A father is supposed to protect his daughter. I should have died before you. And somewhere deep inside me there was a thought I couldn't get rid of: The fact that I'm alive means I failed you. I knew logically that life and death don't work according to what a father wishes. But grief doesn't care much about logic. So I prayed. And I spoke to Sophia. Around me were men convicted of murder, contraband, fraud and crimes I didn't even know about. Men discussing money.

Men calculating who had what. Men deciding who belonged where. And there I was beside Kitt, praying. Talking silently to my dead daughter. At around ten o'clock the cell doors were preparing to close for the night. I looked around properly. And suddenly something became obvious. Kitt. And three wealthy prisoners around him. That was the room. Now I understood. This wasn't simply a cell. It was an arrangement. Then Kitt handed me a smartphone. “Don't let anyone else use it.”

He pointed at me. “This is yours.” A smartphone. My own phone. On my first night inside the prison everyone had spent months warning me about. I stared at it for a second. Then I called my family. The phone rang. Someone answered. And immediately I heard the relief in their voices. “Mohamed!” “I'm okay.” They were relieved to hear me. And I was relieved to hear them. For fifteen days they had been wondering what was happening inside. Now, finally, they knew I had reached the prison and was alive.

But as I sat there holding that smartphone, surrounded by food, renovated walls and men who seemed to control everything around them, I was beginning to understand something they couldn't possibly see from outside. I hadn't simply been transferred from detention into Prison 99. I had entered an economy. There were the prisoners who had nothing. There were the prisoners who worked for others. There were prisoners who were prey. There were prisoners with connections.

There were prisoners with reputations. And there were prisoners with money. Those groups could live only metres apart and experience completely different versions of the same sentence. I had been inside the real prison for only a few hours. Already a bed had been assigned to me. Food had appeared. A smartphone had been placed in my hand. Powerful men had gathered around me. Nobody had asked me for money. Not yet. But the businessman with the black eye had already warned me.

They will. Of course they will. You're a foreigner. And as I spoke to my family that first night from Cell 16, surrounded by comforts that seemed impossible compared with what I'd just seen outside its door, I began to understand something else. None of this was free. I just didn't know the price yet.

Chapter 91: The Price of Protection

The Price of Protection

There was something I hadn't understood when Slon called me by my name in the basement of C18. Information is everything in prison. People don't wait for you to arrive before finding out who you are. Information travels ahead of you. Who has money? Who has family outside? Who has connections? Who is famous? Who is vulnerable? Who is likely to pay? Slon had never met me, but he had already gathered information about me. He knew who I was before I knew who he was.

Eventually I wasn't sent to his block. Had I been, perhaps I would have seen a completely different side of Slon. I'll never know. Inside Prison 99, I began to understand that interesting new arrivals were being identified while they were still in quarantine. People like Kitt were given information about who was coming in, and there was effectively a competition to get the most valuable newcomers into particular cells or blocks. As I came to understand the arrangement, the more valuable the newcomer was considered, the more could be promised to people within the administration to make sure he ended up in the right place.

And once you arrived, the message wasn't complicated: Pay, and you can live at our standard. Don't pay, and your life can become a living hell. And we paid. My family paid tens of thousands of dollars within those first weeks. Food certainly wasn't the problem. Food was arriving from some of the best restaurants in Almaty. My family sent three whole grilled lambs, six turkeys with all the trimmings, hundreds of portions of KFC chicken, and hundreds of burgers from Salaam Bro and Burger King.

There was enough food coming into that prison to feed an army. And yet, somehow, I was still being starved. But before that problem fully developed, my knee had already started deteriorating again. During quarantine, despite the medical documents that had travelled with me from C18, I was made to plough the fields. And when I say plough, I mean it literally. They attached you to a metal plough and made you pull it through the ground like a water buffalo. Think about that for a moment.

I'd spent one year and eight months with almost no proper physical movement. My knee had swollen enormously. Fluid had been drained from the joint immediately before my transfer, and a doctor had specifically written that I shouldn't undertake strenuous physical activity. Then I arrived at Prison 99 and they attached me to a plough. Naturally, the knee deteriorated again. By the time I was living in Cell 16, the problems had returned. I was also being heavily controlled.

I wasn't allowed to wander around the prison. To be perfectly honest, I didn't want to. There was nothing outside that door I was desperate to explore. Instead, people came to me. Throughout the day, heavily built men would walk into Cell 16. And usually there was a skinny prisoner there to translate. His story was

extraordinary. And to be completely clear about where this story comes from: he told it to me himself. This was his own account of what had happened to him.

He told me that he'd been part of the President's protocol connected to the Kazakhstan Embassy in Mexico. While living in Mexico, according to his own account, he'd developed a serious cocaine habit. He'd also had a major crash on a BMW superbike and was eventually sent back to Kazakhstan. But, as he explained it to me, he hadn't returned empty-handed. He told me that he'd used his embassy relocation allowance to ship furniture back to Kazakhstan and had concealed several kilograms of cocaine inside it.

Several kilos. At the time, he told me, a gram of cocaine in Kazakhstan could sell for around $700. He wasn't claiming they'd planted the drugs. He wasn't telling me there had been some great conspiracy against him when he was arrested. He told me the kilos were there. He told me he'd been high on cocaine when they caught him. And he told me he'd signed a confession immediately. He received fifteen years. Yet now that he was inside prison? He was claiming innocence.

That became one of the running jokes of prison life: Everyone is innocent in prison. The irony wasn't lost on me. He had also been through the financial pressure I was now experiencing. He had serious contacts himself, but he told me that even he had paid around $35,000. And now this same man was translating the demands being made of me. They wanted more money. Then more. And more. Eventually I'd had enough. I told my family: “Fuck them. No more.” Everyone had already received huge amounts of money.

“They're taking our money and making themselves rich outside these walls. Stop paying.” My family had been keeping the British Embassy in Astana informed about what was happening. From where I was sitting, they were watching it happen. Then the consequences came. I was taken downstairs. The gangsters started beating me. At first, strangely enough, I remember thinking: This isn't actually that bad. I'd tucked my head underneath my arms and protected myself as much as possible.

I'm a big man myself. I've always been able to take a beating. Punches landed. Kicks landed. But I wasn't really feeling much pain. Then one of them punched me hard in the right ribs. That one was different. A stinger. For several seconds I couldn't breathe. I got up, grabbed the man in front of me and threw him towards the wall. Then I went for the door. They grabbed me from behind. My prison jacket tore. Then my T-shirt. They were trying to drag me back inside.

I kept going. I made it back upstairs to Cell 16. They followed. Kitt stood up. He acted surprised. I didn't believe his performance for a second. I was convinced he was in on it. The men came into the room. “He killed his daughter.” “He's going to confess.” So now I understood. They didn't only want money. They wanted a confession. I looked at them. “You can kill me, but I'll never confess to something I didn't do.” I picked up the Qur'an. I swore by everything sacred to me that I had never touched Sophia.

Kill me. Beat me. Do whatever you want. But I wasn't confessing to killing my daughter. Not ever. Kitt eventually took control of the situation. Later I would learn that he told people there was something about my reaction that made him believe me. Over the years I've seen people confess in less than a minute once a serious beating begins. I understand it. Pain changes people. Fear changes people. But with Sophia there was nothing they could do to me. I didn't care if they killed me.

I would rather die than confess to something I hadn't done to my daughter. And once again, time began doing something that the courts hadn't done. People watched. Prisoners always watch. They watched Madina come for visits. They watched how she behaved around me. They saw a woman whose daughter I had supposedly murdered behaving as though she were desperately in love with me. Then my case files arrived on a disc. I had a portable disc player, which meant I could read the documents and watch material from the case.

Other prisoners became interested. They read. They watched. They asked questions. Some of these men understood criminal cases remarkably well. Years inside meant years studying their own files, other people's files, court decisions, expert reports and criminal procedure. And I discovered one of the strangest contradictions of my entire experience: Sometimes there seemed to be more justice inside the prison than in the legal system that had put us there. The possibility that somebody had been stitched up wasn't shocking to these men.

They'd seen it before. Again and again. Slowly my identity inside Prison 99 changed. I wasn't simply: the foreigner who killed his daughter. I became: the man who'd been stitched up. But the strange form of justice operating inside prison had a much darker side. And I witnessed that too. Remember the Russian man involved in the pyramid scheme? The one who had paid for the VIP-cell arrangement in C18 when I was there with the Turkish man? Eventually he arrived in Prison 99.

One of his victims, I was told, was an elderly Kazakh woman connected to Kitt. The story was that he'd laughed at her during the court proceedings. Kitt hadn't forgotten. That night, when the doors closed at ten, her revenge began. The man was beaten through the night. From around 10 p.m. until the doors opened again at six in the morning. Blood everywhere. Whatever anyone thought about what he'd done outside, I was watching another punishment being imposed inside — one that existed completely outside the sentence handed down by a court.

I couldn't help wondering where the money he'd stolen had eventually ended up. Years later I heard that he died from a heart attack. By then, however, I had my own immediate problems. I was being starved. I could barely walk. My knee had swollen again. One day, while speaking to my sisters, I opened the camera and showed them what I looked like. They recorded the call. They could see my condition. They could see my leg. This time, the embassy intervened. I was finally taken back to hospital for more treatment.

And something almost funny happened that day. The guards left me sitting in the van. The doors were open. I wasn't handcuffed. Then they went to use the toilet. For a moment there was nobody stopping me. I looked at the open doors. I could run. I actually thought about it. Run. But where? I had no money. No family in Kazakhstan. I was wearing a prison uniform. My face had been all over the media. I'd probably have been caught almost immediately. And even if I somehow hadn't been, Kazakhstan's winters can reach around minus thirty. With no shelter, no clothes and no contacts, I might not have survived a night.

So I sat there. The doors were open. There was nobody holding me. Freedom was only a few steps away. And I didn't move. I've thought about that moment many times since. That open door. That missed opportunity. Was it really an opportunity? Probably not. But prison does strange things to your mind. Years later, you still replay the doors that were left open. Then it was back to hell. By now, three of us in particular seemed to be paying for everything: Me. The Kazakh-Chinese businessman.

And Naumov, the Russian. Our families were sending money. Food was arriving in enormous quantities. Other people were eating. Yet somehow the people actually paying for everything could end up surviving on something as ridiculous as one packet of instant noodles every two days. Eventually our families had had enough. They began looking for people in Kazakhstan who could actually help. My father had spent years in an embassy environment in London and knew people who knew people. Through those connections, he eventually found contacts reaching into Kazakhstan's ministries.

At that point, I still thought I understood what was happening. There were gangsters inside the prison. There were guards and police controlling the prison. Two sides. Criminals on one side. The authorities on the other. I thought my problem was that the authorities weren't controlling the gangsters. I was about to discover that, in my experience of Prison 99, the relationship between the two was far more complicated. Because I was about to see something that completely changed my understanding of how this place worked.

I was about to see how the police controlled the gangsters.

Chapter 92: When Kitt Left

When Kitt Left

Kitt had received fifteen years for killing three policemen. He told me the story himself, and he repeated it to me several times. According to Kitt, relatives had called him to a restaurant because they were fighting with three policemen. Kitt arrived carrying a shotgun. Three shots. Three policemen dead. By the time I met him, he'd already served around three years. Everyone seemed frightened of him. Prisoners certainly were. Even the guards treated him differently.

But Kitt's power didn't end at the prison gates. He was extremely well connected outside. Connections matter in Kazakhstan. But by this stage I'd learned

something else: Connections may open the door. Money makes people walk through it. Kitt had money. Or at least his family had found it. They'd sold land and houses. He had several children, including a newborn son he'd never properly had the chance to know. And according to what I heard around him, an enormous amount of money had already changed hands.

Five hundred thousand US dollars. That was the figure I repeatedly heard. The money had supposedly been handed over months earlier, and Kitt was becoming nervous. Nothing had happened. He was beginning to wonder whether he'd been scammed. Then came the morning of his cassation hearing. At around four in the morning, Kitt woke us for Fajr. We prayed together. Afterwards he asked me to lead the dua. He believed that because I was Arab, somehow my dua would be better.

I almost wanted to explain that Allah doesn't operate a priority service for Arabs, but this wasn't really the moment. The giant who frightened half the prison was worried. His cassation hearing was that day. We'd been living together for less than ten days by then. Another man had also joined our room: a tiny Chinese man called John Yu. John was a Muslim convert. He'd found religion in prison. He'd received six years for human trafficking involving people being placed into slave-labour conditions.

So there we were before dawn in Prison 99. Kitt. John. The Kazakh-Chinese businessman. And me. I raised my hands and asked Allah to help Kitt in court. When I glanced sideways, the two Chinese men were praying with an intensity I don't think I'd ever seen before. They looked as though the outcome of the entire universe depended on this dua. I nearly laughed. I tried not to. But I definitely couldn't hide the smile on my face. Then we waited. Later that day I suddenly heard Kitt shouting into the phone:

“Allahu Akbar!” Again. “Allahu Akbar!” And a third time. “Allahu Akbar!” He jumped up. Before I knew what was happening, this enormous man grabbed me and literally lifted me off the floor in a massive hug. “I knew you were a good man!” He was ecstatic. “When I leave, I will help you.” His cassation had succeeded. As it was explained to us, the court had accepted that his actions had been in self-defence. He was getting out. An innocent man. Inside Prison 99, a result like that seemed almost unheard of.

People around Kitt saw it as proof that his connections had delivered. Whether money, influence, legal argument or some combination ultimately produced that decision wasn't something I could independently know from inside a prison cell. What I knew was that Kitt had been expecting something to happen. And now it had. Strangely enough, Kitt had turned out to be something of a blessing in disguise for me. Whether deliberately or simply because I happened to be living under his roof, he'd been protecting me.

His presence alone was protection. People were afraid of him. Before leaving, he called Sergei over. Sergei—the young boxer I'd met on my first day—was Kitt's bratishka from outside. Kitt gestured around the room. “Everything here is

yours." Then he made one thing very clear: "Nobody touches the Arab." And just like that, the following morning Kitt was gone. One of the most powerful men in my immediate world simply disappeared through the prison gates. Sergei remained.

But Sergei couldn't replace Kitt. Nobody could. Still, Kitt's legend remained behind. For a while, that was enough. Nobody interfered with the room. Nobody wanted to be the person who ignored Kitt's final instruction. But there was a problem. I was still the centre of attention. I was still the foreigner. Still the British pilot. Still the man whose family had money. Still the man people believed could be squeezed for more. And there were some very sick puppies around me.

While Kitt had been there, they were under control. Once he was gone, the boundaries began moving. Then the violence returned. At times I found myself tied to a radiator. They beat me with thin metal rods. I was constantly watched. Constantly pressured. Constantly asked for the same thing. Money. Money. More money. More. More. More. I was beginning to lose my mind. It wasn't simply the pain. It was the waiting. Waiting for footsteps. Waiting for the door. Waiting for somebody to walk into the room.

Waiting for another demand. Waiting for another beating. Waiting for the knife. You never completely relaxed because you never knew when the next attack was coming. My family had already paid enormous amounts. Enough was never enough. But something else had been happening outside. My father's contacts were beginning to show what they could actually do. Then one day: BANG. The doors flew open. Something had changed. People around me were suddenly being moved.

Not one. Not two. Everyone. These men had spent thousands turning their rooms into something approaching comfortable accommodation. Renovations. Furniture. Food. Their little kingdoms inside the prison. And suddenly they were being ordered out. They were being sent to the shitty side of the prison. I wasn't. I was staying. I watched them leave. For the first time since arriving in Prison 99, the pressure around me suddenly disappeared. The arrangement didn't last forever.

They would eventually come back. Of course they would. But for roughly ten days, I had peace. Ten days doesn't sound like much. Inside that place, it was enormous. I could sleep without waiting for somebody to walk through the door. I could think. I could breathe. But something more important had happened. They had learned something about me. And about my family. We weren't going to disappear quietly. We weren't going to keep paying forever simply because somebody threatened us.

And we weren't going to stop fighting. I don't want to pretend that my father's contacts simply made a few telephone calls and everyone suddenly obeyed. By then I understood the system better than that. Remember the lesson: Money. Money. Money. Someone high enough had apparently intervened. What conversations took place outside those walls, I didn't hear. What agreements were

made, I didn't see. Whether money changed hands, and between whom, I couldn't personally know.

But inside the prison I saw the result. One day the people terrorising me controlled the environment around me. Then the doors opened. And they were removed. For ten days, I was left alone. That was when I began to understand that my earlier picture of prison had been far too simple. I'd thought there were two sides. The criminals. And the authorities who controlled the criminals. But if somebody outside could reach high enough into the system and suddenly make the men around me disappear, another question became unavoidable:

Who really controlled whom? I was about to find out.

Chapter 93: How Does so Much Love Become so Much Hate

How Does So Much Love Become So Much Hate?

The currency converter kept ticking. Not dollars into tenge. Love into hate. I had loved Madina in a way that once seemed almost impossible to destroy. She was my wife, Sophia's mother, the woman I'd planned my life around. But somewhere along this road, a conversion had begun inside me. Every lie changed the rate. Every contradiction. Every demand. Every half-confession. Every time I watched what my sisters were being put through. Every time I looked around Prison 99 and thought about the chain of events that had brought me there.

The converter kept ticking. Love into disappointment. Disappointment into suspicion. Suspicion into resentment. Resentment into rage. And eventually rage into something I never imagined I could feel towards the woman I had once loved. Hate. The hardest part was that the love didn't disappear all at once. If it had, perhaps everything would have been easier. Instead, the two emotions existed together. I could hate what she'd done and still worry about her. I could dream of finally exposing her and then answer her telephone call with:

“Don't worry, hayatim. Everything will be fine.” I could spend the night imagining her finally facing the consequences of what she'd done and then instinctively comfort her when she called crying. That contradiction was destroying me. And I had to hide all of it. Keeping my emotions under control became one of the hardest things I'd ever learned. Before all this, I was a simple person in that respect. If I didn't like something, I said so. If somebody upset me, they knew. I never understood the point of smiling at somebody while secretly thinking something completely different.

Honesty is the best policy. That's how I'd lived. Now I was learning to look into the eyes of someone I was beginning to hate and tell her everything was going to be fine. Because from almost the first day, the lawyers had drilled one message into my sisters' heads: We need Madina. Only Madina could forgive Mohamed. According to what the lawyers repeatedly told us about Kazakhstan law, my destiny depended heavily upon her position as the victim. That idea became carved so deeply into my sisters' minds that we had enormous arguments about it.

I wanted my shot. A fair chance. A fighting chance. My sisters weren't prepared to risk it. They weren't prepared to gamble with their brother's life. So they tolerated her. For me. They let Madina walk all over them because every time they looked at her, they weren't simply seeing Madina. They were seeing their brother sitting in prison. Her list of demands grew. So did her expenses. She would video-call me wearing a new summer shirt-dress she'd bought. Hair done.

Eyebrows done. Nails done. Cocktail in hand. Friends around her. And my sisters paying. Then one day she made a comment to one of her friends in Russian. She thought I didn't understand. “I don't even need Mohamed anymore. I have his sisters.” They laughed. What a hilarious joke. I burned inside. And said nothing. Tick. The converter moved again. At night, my Game of Thrones list continued. Madina. Nurlan Bolatov. Bakhytzhan Bakirbayev. Janil Bolatov. Gangsters.

Guards. Name after name. Face after face. Everyone I associated in my mind with what my life had become. Whenever I needed a happy memory, whenever I needed to feel love again, I would close my eyes and think of Sophia. Her face. Her smile. The little things she used to do. In a place filled with so much anger, thinking about her was where I went to remember that there had once been something completely pure in my life. But one day, out of sheer desperation, I looked up at the sky and cried out to her.

“Why are you protecting her?” “You know what she's done.” “Look at your father now, Sophia.” “Look at what she's done to us.” Then I fell to the floor in sujood before Allah. Please. Let me expose her for what she is. Please. Night after night, I imagined the same thing. Madina would finally slip up while I was recording her. She'd finally say it. Clearly. Something nobody could explain away. Something nobody could deny. In fact, she'd slipped up so many times before. I'd captured things previously, but changes in smartphones and applications eventually made it much harder to continue recording her.

I'd heard things with my own ears. But who was going to believe me? Sometimes, when I told my sisters what Madina had said, I could hear doubt even in their voices. So in my mind I created the ending myself. I'd finally get the recording. I'd release it to the press. A media frenzy would erupt. Everyone would hear it. The authorities would have no choice but to act. They'd arrest her. And in the darkest version of that fantasy, I imagined sitting opposite Madina and watching her experience everything I'd experienced.

The fear. The interrogation. The cell. The helplessness. The knowledge that somebody else controlled what happened to you next. Except in my angry imagination there was one enormous difference. She actually did it. She wouldn't be desperately trying to prove herself innocent. She'd be guilty. And knowing her family, I imagined they wouldn't care. She'd be alone. Just like she'd been alone during those first nights after Sophia died. Except she hadn't remained alone then.

Because I hadn't allowed it. From detention, I called my sisters. “Go to her.” “Don't leave her alone.” And they went. They slept with Madina between them, one sister on either side, comforting her. Later I discovered something I hadn't

known at the time. They had actually been frightened for their own safety. They'd seen something in Madina much earlier than I had. But they stayed beside her anyway. For me. Then came another moment that changed the way I looked at her.

When I was allowed out of Prison 99 to attend hospital again, Madina came to see me. She arrived absolutely furious. Jumping around. Shouting. Something had happened with her taxi driver. The problem was Kaspi, Kazakhstan's preferred electronic payment method. His car didn't accept it. He wanted cash. They argued. Madina tried to leave. According to her, he held onto her bag as she tried to get out. There was a red mark on her arm. Then she said: “I'm going to call the police and say he tried to rape me.”

I stared at her. “What?” “I'll say he tried to rape me.” “Madina, he could get fifteen years.” “I don't care. He shouldn't have held my bag.” I was shocked. Tick. The converter moved again. That moment stayed with me because I realised what, in my eyes, Madina had become. She had learned something extremely dangerous from everything that had happened since Sophia died. She had learned that an accusation could be a weapon. She'd watched an accusation against me become a criminal case.

She'd watched the police act. She'd watched the prosecutors act. She'd watched the courts act. She'd watched my family spend enormous amounts of money. And now, after an argument with a taxi driver over payment and him holding onto her bag, she could casually talk about accusing another man of attempted rape. An innocent man could lose years of his life. “Madina, he could get fifteen years.” “I don't care.” To me, she had begun behaving like someone who believed the normal rules no longer applied to her.

Frame an innocent man. Manipulate the law. Take money from Mohamed's family. Drugs. Alcohol. Whatever happened, someone else would deal with the consequences. In my eyes, she had become untouchable. Invisible to the law. And dangerous. For a long time by then, I'd also been having the same recurring nightmare. I'm standing in a dark room. Sophia is in my arms. She's frightened. She's holding tightly onto my chest, burying her tiny face against me. She's afraid of something standing in the corner.

A woman. Madina. She's screaming. That scream. The horrible scream I'd heard the first time I spoke to her on the telephone from C18. But in the dream she doesn't look completely human. Her long dark hair hangs across her face like something from a Japanese horror movie. She spins. Disappears into a shadow on the floor. Then reappears closer. Sophia grips me tighter. Madina screams again. She disappears. Then appears even closer. And I wake up covered in sweat.

I never told Madina about that dream. But she had dreams of her own. One day she called me crying. “Mohamed, I dreamed about Sophia.” “What happened?” “She was chasing me.” I waited. “With a knife.” I couldn't understand what I was hearing. “What?” “Sophia was chasing me with a knife.” Our Sophia? Our angel? The purest little thing I'd ever known? Whatever those dreams meant, something seemed to be eating away at Madina from inside. The dreams. The alcohol.

The drugs. The endless new clothes. The hair. The nails. The nights out. No matter what she bought or what she took, nothing seemed capable of washing away whatever was happening inside her. “I'm destroying myself, hayatim,” she told me. And there he was again. The person all of this had created. The man I hated becoming. “Don't worry, Madina.” “Everything will be fine.” “I promise.” Everything will be fine. When I knew absolutely nothing was fine. As time went on, more and more of her calls came from bars.

Madina drunk. Sometimes high. And always the same fragments. Half-confessions. “I didn't mean to do it, Mohamed.” “Sophia hates me now, Mohamed.” “I cheated on you, Mohamed.” Pieces. Never the whole story. Just enough to keep me listening. Just enough to make me wonder whether the next call would finally be the one. I argued constantly with my sisters. “We don't need her anymore.” By then, there was one reason above all others that I'd maintained the relationship.

I wanted to know what happened to Sophia. I needed the truth. My sisters had gradually stopped believing I'd ever get it. “You're never going to find out, Mohamed.” “She'll never confess fully.” “It'll just be more lies.” Eventually I told them about the day she'd laughed with her friend. I don't even need Mohamed anymore. I have his sisters. That was enough. We finally agreed. No more. No more money. No more support. No more allowing her to use my sisters.

No more tolerating everything because lawyers had frightened us into believing my entire future depended upon keeping Madina happy. And with that decision came something much harder for me to accept. Maybe I would never know. Maybe I would never find out exactly what happened to Sophia. Maybe Madina would never tell me. I accepted my fate. Then came our final call. Madina appeared on the screen dressed up with the heaviest makeup I'd ever seen her wearing.

To me, she looked like a witch. She was already angry. “I haven't received any money.” “And you won't receive any more.” “Your sisters aren't stupid, Mohamed. They need me to help you. I'll speak to them myself.” I looked at her. “They've already blocked you.” She didn't believe me. “Try messaging them.” She tried. Blocked. Her anger exploded. “You'll stay in prison until you die, Mohamed.” I looked directly into her eyes. “I want a divorce, Madina.” Her response was immediate.

“You think I'll let another woman near you, Mohamed?” Then came the words that, for me, summed up everything our relationship had become. “You're mine.” “You belong to me.” “I control you.” I stared at the woman on the screen. And the currency converter stopped. There was almost nothing left to exchange. I looked into her eyes. “You died the day Sophia died, Madina.” “The person I'm looking at now isn't Sophia's mother—the woman I used to love.” “Goodbye, Madina.”

One final message arrived from Madina. Fuck you. And that was it. After everything. The marriage. The travelling. The laughter. The plans. The love. Our daughter. The investigation. The courtrooms. The prison visits. The money. The

lies. The endless hope that one day she would finally tell me everything. Two words. Fuck you. I put the phone away. For years I'd been waiting for Madina. Waiting for an explanation. Waiting for the truth. Waiting for her to slip.

Waiting for the confession my sisters believed would never come. Now I stopped waiting. I settled into Prison 99. I joined the club and started giving voluntary English lessons. I started training. Anything to occupy my mind while I waited for cassation. My family's money had been drained. Finding new lawyers meant more financial pressure, more bills, more stress. There wasn't an endless supply of money. For now, I had to wait. At the club I made a friend who spoke English.

His nickname was Shark. Shark began teaching me something no lawyer, embassy official or family member could teach me from outside: How to actually live in prison. How to move. Who to speak to. Who not to speak to. What the unwritten rules were. How to recognise trouble before it arrived. I still had to pay for practically everything. This was Prison 99, after all. But now I was paying much less. Slowly, something changed. The prison hadn't become normal. The people around me hadn't suddenly become safe.

My case hadn't disappeared. Sophia was still gone. My marriage was finished. My family's money had been drained. And I was still facing years behind these walls. But for the first time since arriving, I wasn't simply surviving from one threat to the next. I was learning the environment. Learning its language. Learning its rules. Learning its people. I had spent so long fighting against the idea that this place could become my life that I hadn't noticed what was happening.

I was adapting. Prison 99 wasn't becoming easier. I was becoming better at being a prisoner.

Chapter 94: Dissolving into The System

Dissolving Into the System

As time passed, I started to dissolve into the system. Into the prison. The extraordinary gradually became ordinary. Wake up at six. Go to the club. Train. Eat the prison porridge. Maybe arrange some eggs and cottage cheese from the canteen in exchange for cigarettes. Read a book. Mostly self-help and psychology by then. I was trying to understand people, trying to understand myself, perhaps trying to understand how human beings adapt to places they were never supposed to survive in.

English lessons at ten. Then wait for my family to wake up abroad. Any news? Any luck? Had they found a reasonable lawyer? Could we afford them? Then back to the case. I read those files over and over again. The more I read, the more I understood. Things I hadn't noticed before suddenly stood out. Sentences connected with other sentences. Dates connected with events. Something I'd seen or heard months earlier suddenly made sense. And then came the flashbacks.

Little fragments of those moments returning without warning. A face. A sentence. A room. Something Madina had said. Something an investigator had done. I would sit there putting the pieces together in my head, again and again, trying to reconstruct a life that had been broken into thousands of pieces. Meanwhile, prison kept moving around me. People came. People went. Their memories became stitched into the darkness of those walls. Here today. Gone tomorrow.

Sergio was gone. So were most of the guys I'd arrived with in quarantine. Sergio's ego had grown so enormous inside Prison 99 that I think eventually he started believing his reputation made him untouchable everywhere. Inside these walls, his name meant something. People knew who he was connected to. They knew Kit. They knew the hierarchy. Then Sergio went back to freedom. Several months later, I heard he'd been stabbed to death outside. Apparently the Turkish guy who killed him hadn't heard about his reputation in prison.

That's prison for you. Inside these walls a man can convince himself he's a king. Outside, he's just another man. Time did something strange in there. It stood completely still while somehow months disappeared. Eventually you stopped counting days. Then you stopped counting weeks. You started counting seasons. Winter. Spring. Summer. Another winter. And the dreams continued. So did the nights with my list before I went to sleep. And the fantasy that one day Madina would finally be exposed for everything she'd done.

I'd close my eyes and sometimes enter the same recurring dream. Madina was in prison with me. But she was hiding. Sometimes inside a cupboard. Sometimes underneath one of the metal bunk beds. She was completely naked, desperately trying to conceal herself. There was something strange about her face in those dreams. She was always old. Wrinkled. And everyone could see her. Everyone could see that she was naked no matter how desperately she tried to hide. I'd wake up and call my mother.

“Her face is always old and wrinkled. Everyone can see she's naked.” My mother always gave me the same answer. “Allah will expose her, wallahi, my son. Allah will expose her.” And sometimes I'd almost shout back in desperation: “When?” When? That was the question that followed me everywhere. There was another recurring dream. This one was completely different. I was walking down a road towards a house. I didn't recognise the house, but somehow I knew where I was going.

I knocked on the door. Two strangers opened it. Parents. And they were holding a baby. I looked at the child. “That's Sophia.” I couldn't understand what was happening. “Why do you have my baby?” Then suddenly everything changed. Sophia was in my older sister's arms. And she was so happy. Sophia loved my sisters. Even in my dreams that love was always there—the love in Sophia's eyes for them and the love in their eyes for her. Those dreams felt completely different from the dreams about Madina.

One was exposure. The other was home. By then I'd started speaking Russian. Not perfectly, but enough. Enough to understand. Enough to communicate. Enough that I wasn't the completely lost foreigner who had first arrived. And everybody knew something else by then. I was here for the long run. That knowledge made me increasingly invisible. The novelty of the rich British Arab pilot had started wearing off. Friends? No friends. That lesson had stayed with me from the beginning.

In prison, somebody might not even say hello to you unless they needed something from you that day. I'd become used to it. Used to the mentality. Used to people appearing when they needed cigarettes, food, a favour, a telephone, a translation, a connection—and disappearing again afterwards. So I learned to speak less. Much less. I learned to keep my opinions to myself. Not every question required an answer. Not every argument required my involvement. Not everything I knew needed to be said.

In prison, silence could be worth far more than being right. Then one day a friend called me from freedom. I'd known him from C18. Bolat. A futsal coach and an absolutely enormous Kazakh—about 165 kilograms. A proper gentle giant who snored louder than anything I'd ever heard in my life. He spoke several languages and had lived in France for several years. Bolat had served eight years in prison for attempted murder. According to the story he told me, he'd been drunk. Bolat was a serious alcoholic; even in detention I'd watched him drink alcohol-based hand sanitiser. The man involved, Terpila, was not his friend but a judge's son. During the incident Bolat fired the first shot into the sky. Then Terpila kicked Bolat's husky. Bolat fired the second shot into Terpila's head.

Eight years. When he called me from freedom, there was only one thing I wanted to know. “How did you do it?” He answered in that heavy Kazakh accent of his: “I had a very brave lawyer.” That immediately got my attention. He gave me the lawyer's details. Din-Mukhamed. My sisters called him reluctantly. By this point we'd spent so much money on lawyers and heard so many promises that every new name sounded like another invoice. Then my sister called me. “Mohamed, he's actually a really good find.”

I listened. “He speaks English.” Good start. “And Arabic.” Even better. “He used to live in Egypt.” Then she said the words I'd been waiting to hear: “We're going to hire him.” For the first time in a while, I felt genuinely relieved. Finally. We could start working on my case again. By then I'd been in Prison 99 for around a year and a half. I'd changed my phone four times. Numbers changed. Phones disappeared. Phones were confiscated. New ones appeared. That was normal.

Then one day the phone rang. A video call. Strange. For most of the day my phone stayed hidden, and almost nobody had this number. I looked at the screen. It had to be the new lawyer. Din-Mukhamed. I answered the video call. And froze. It wasn't Din-Mukhamed. It was Madina. “Please forgive me, hayatim.” I stared at the screen. “I'll do anything.” “Please don't put the phone in my face.” “I need you

to forgive me." "All my life is dark without you." "My heart can't love another man."

"I'm dead inside without you, hayatim." After everything. After the final argument. After the money stopped. After telling me I would remain in prison until I died. After telling me I belonged to her. After I asked for a divorce. After that final message. Fuck you. Here she was again. "Please forgive me, hayatim." And without hesitation, I heard myself answer: "I forgive you." Another lie. Another perfectly controlled answer from the man she had created. Because somewhere between C18, the courtroom, the twenty-year sentence, Prison 99, the beatings, the extortion, the dreams, the case files and all those nights lying awake with my thoughts, Captain Mohamed Barakat had been taken apart and reconstructed into something else.

A man who could smile when he wanted to scream. A man who could say everything will be fine when he knew nothing was fine. A man who could say I forgive you while waiting desperately for the truth. A man who had learned that sometimes what you say and what you feel have absolutely nothing to do with each other. A survival version of myself. A prison version. A Frankenstein version of the man once called Captain Mohamed Barakat.

Chapter 95: A Criminal always Returns to the Crime Scene

A Criminal Always Returns to the Crime Scene

A criminal always returns to their crime scene. And I was Madina's crime scene. "How did you get my number?" I asked. "It was so, so difficult, hayatim. I had to call so many people in the prison. I found your winter clothes and I wanted to pass them to you. This winter is so cold. I couldn't stop thinking about you." It was cold. Freezing. And the truth was, I really did need those winter clothes. "Do you want me to switch the camera on?" she asked. "Okay."

The camera came on. Immediately, something felt wrong. Purple illuminated lights. A red bed board. A skanky-looking room. I stared at the screen. "Is this what you're doing now?" "Oh, no, no, no! It's not what you think. I swear!" I didn't push it. There was no point. I already knew how this worked. "How are you, babes?" That word did something to her. Babes. That was what I used to call her. I could almost see the comfort wash over her face. She started fluttering her eyelids and slipped into that cute little voice I remembered so well.

"I can't taste life without you. Not without your forgiveness. Madina and Mohamed forever. M&M. Remember?" Of course I remembered. The Maldives. Our rented water villa. Madina was still pregnant with Sophia. We had written it together in the sand. M&M. Madina and Mohamed. Forever. For a moment I was back there. And I felt a sharp pain in my heart, like someone had pushed a tiny dagger straight into it. Not metaphorically. My heart physically hurt. "I remember, babes…"

For just a second, the memories were winning. Then another thought came immediately behind them. I also haven't forgotten everything you've done to me. And just like that, the pain became blunt again. The Maldives disappeared. The prison returned. Madina began asking questions. Lots of questions. How was I? What had I been doing? What was happening with my case? How much more had I learned? What other details had I figured out? It gradually began to feel less like a conversation between two people who had once loved each other and more like a cross-examination.

She wanted to know how much I knew. I kept my answers simple. "I've been concentrating on surviving." That much was certainly true. Then she started commenting on my appearance. "You look so strong." I had been training constantly by then. "Maybe I should come for a conjugal visit." Every three months, prisoners could be allowed a forty-eight-hour conjugal visit with their legal partner. Then she reminded me of something I already knew all too well. "We're still married, you know. I didn't sign the divorce papers your lawyers sent."

Of course I knew. I had tried to fight for a divorce through the courts. Even then, she hadn't attended. "I know, babes." I paused. "Should we meet?" And just like that, Madina was back online with me. Back in my life. Back to her old tricks. A criminal always returns to the crime scene. And I knew exactly what I was doing by allowing her back. This was my last chance. Maybe my very last chance to find out what happened to Sophia. So I kept playing. "Are you financially okay?" I asked.

Her answer came almost perfectly. "Hayatim, you're the only man who can really understand me. You always support me. You always help me." There it was. "Can you help me, please? I really need money. They're going to throw me out of my apartment soon." I almost could have predicted it word for word. "Let me speak to my family." "I love you, hayatim." I paused. Deliberately. Long enough for her to notice. Long enough for the silence to become uncomfortable. Long enough for her to wonder whether I was going to say it back.

"I love you too, babes," said the man who had stolen my face. Then I called my sisters. Their reaction was immediate. "No!" Almost hysterical voices came through the telephone. "She's going to wriggle her way back into our lives!" "No, Mohamed." "She's going to get pregnant and then we're stuck with her forever." "We're not helping." I tried to explain. "But this could be my last chance to find out what happened to Sophia." "You're never going to know, Mohamed."

"She's going to wrap you around her little finger again." They knew the cycle. They had lived through it with me. They had watched Madina leave. Return. Need something. Disappear. Come back again. And they wanted no part of it anymore. But I couldn't let go of the reason I had answered that call in the first place. Sophia. If there was even the smallest chance that letting Madina back into my life could finally lead me to the truth, I needed to take it. My sisters had drawn their line.

No more money. No more Madina. I understood. But that left me with nowhere to turn. Mohamed is dead, I thought. “Okay,” I said. I hung up. There was only one person left I could call. My mum. An old-age pensioner living on her pension. After everything my family had already spent. After everything they had already sacrificed. Now I was going to ask my mother for help so I could give money to the very woman I believed had helped destroy my life. But Mum was Mum.

My biggest supporter. Always. I explained what was happening. I explained why I wanted to keep Madina talking. I explained that I believed this might be my last opportunity to find out what happened to Sophia. My mother didn’t skip a beat. “Just don’t get her pregnant, okay?” For the first time in what felt like forever, something inside me softened. “I love you, Mum.” And suddenly I realised something. Mohamed wasn’t dead. Not when I heard my mother’s voice.

He was still there. For the next couple of months, the calls continued. I played my part. On her birthday, I sent her flowers. On Valentine’s Day, I sent her flowers again. Food. Cakes. The kinds of things I used to send when our lives were completely different. She was impressed. More than impressed—she was proud of it. She would tell her friends: “You see? Even from prison he can send me flowers and food and cakes!” Some mornings we would sit talking about our old life together. Madina loved reminiscing about me and her.

Strangely, when she remembered those days, Sophia seemed to be missing from the memories most of the time. “I don’t forget how you came and just took me from my family like a real man. Immediately Nikah and then to your home. Kazakh man cannot do this!” She loved remembering that. The foreign pilot who came and took her away. The Nikah. The travelling. The life. The money. Me and her. Madina had always been sloppy. Looking back, I believed it was only because the police and prosecutors wanted me that she had managed to get away with so much without anyone seriously turning their attention towards her.

Nurlan Bolatov himself had once summed up how they viewed the two of us: “Who is she? She’s nothing. Some little village girl from Shelek. He is an airline pilot from a rich Arab family and British!” Yes. Kazakhstan’s finest certainly knew how to solve a case. No mystery too great for these guys. And Madina was still sloppy. During our video calls, I would sometimes catch glimpses of her computer screen behind her. One day I saw two things. ms_akame. Chaturbate.

I had never heard of Chaturbate before. I started learning that there was this whole online world now— OnlyFans, Chaturbate, Stripchat—where people could perform sexually for paying viewers. Madina noticed exactly where my eyes had gone. She drew an imaginary line from my eyes towards the computer behind her. “You have seen me?” “Seen you where?” The man who had stolen my face answered stone cold. I wasn't giving her anything. Another day she said: “My mother says if I visit you, you will kill me for everything I have done to you!”

“Will I?” I looked at her. “And what did you say to your mother?” “I said Mohamed’s heart is too soft. He loves me too much. Only I know Mohamed!” The

man who had stolen my face smiled back at her. “Yes,” I said. “Only you know Mohamed.” For around two months, Madina cross-examined me. Again and again. How much had I learned? What had I discovered in the case? What did I understand now that I hadn't understood before? What other details had I figured out? I told her I'd been concentrating on surviving.

Meanwhile, she made promise after promise. When we were finally face-to-face, she would tell me everything. No telephone. No camera. No distance between us. Face-to-face. She would finally tell me the truth about Sophia. That was what I was waiting for. Then, after around two months, Madina arrived for the long visit. I walked into the visitation room and saw her standing on the bed, staring through the window. She turned around. She looked stunning. She had clearly spent time at the salon with the money I'd sent her. Hair, face, everything done.

And then she saw me. She jumped into my arms. Exactly like the first time I greeted her at the airport in Hong Kong. And something strange happened to me. I started to cry. Not because I had spent years desperately missing Madina. I hadn't held anyone like that in years. There was a woman in my arms. A human being embracing me with affection. After years of guards, gangsters, searches, handcuffs, beatings, prison uniforms, metal doors and men everywhere I looked, suddenly I was holding a woman who had once been my wife in every sense of the word.

And somewhere during that embrace I realised: Mohamed is still alive inside. All those times I'd stood looking at myself in a prison mirror, repeating the same thing: You're not going to lose yourself in here. You're not going to lose yourself in here. Even I had been frightened of what might happen when I finally stood in front of Madina. There had been so much hatred. So much anger. So many nights imagining her being exposed. What if I couldn't control it when she was actually standing in front of me?

And yet here I was. A big soft fool. Never said boo to a goose. She kissed me all over my face. “Let's make love so we can relax,” she said. And eventually, towards the end, she asked me: “Where will you finish?” “Not now, Madina. I'm not ready.” “Okay, hayatim.” That small exchange mattered enormously to me. Because I knew what pregnancy could mean. I knew my sisters' warning. She's going to get pregnant and then we're stuck with her forever. I hadn't forgotten.

Madina had brought a loudspeaker and a flash card with her. After a quick shower, we put some music on and ate. Then a Rihanna song started playing. “Man Down.” Madina had learned the words. Her English had improved. And she started singing along. There were particular lines that hit me immediately—the song begins with the singer saying she didn't mean to end someone's life and can't escape what she's done; then comes the fear of ending up behind bars. Madina was singing those words while looking at me.

And inside my own head, I wasn't hearing Rihanna anymore. I was hearing Madina. I interpreted every word through what had happened to us. I didn't mean

to do it. I can't sleep. I can't get it out of my mind. I'm frightened of going to prison. Something happened that went too far. That was what I heard. I watched her face while she sang. Of all the songs she could have chosen. Of all the songs she could have learned in English. Of all the songs she could sing while sitting with me after promising for two months that she would finally tell me what happened to Sophia.

My mind was racing. Is she telling me? Is this her way of saying it without saying it? Is she watching me to see whether I understand? I didn't know. But those words meant something enormous to me in that room because of everything that had come before them. Then she looked me directly in the eyes. “I don't want to ruin our first visit after such a long time.” I knew exactly what she was talking about. Sophia. “Can I tell you on the next visit, please?” There it was again.

The truth I'd been waiting years for. Moved just a little further away. One more visit. One more promise. One more reason to keep Madina close. “Okay, babes.” But looking back, I don't believe Madina had planned to tell me anything on that visit. Her plan seemed much simpler. Come back. Restore the relationship. Get pregnant. And once there was another child, she would be tied back into my life and my family's life in a way that would be almost impossible to undo.

But there was something Madina hadn't fully accounted for. Prison had taught me patience. Tremendous amounts of patience. And surviving an ordeal like mine had taught me how to control emotions I once would have expressed immediately. For two days she looked into my eyes again and again. “I'll love you until my final breath, hayatim.” “I'm so in love with you.” Again. And again. She was good. She was really good. Because eventually I started becoming confused.

Not about everything she'd done. I hadn't forgotten any of it. But human beings aren't switches. You don't spend years loving someone, build a life with them, have a child together, and then simply erase every memory because your mind tells you that you should hate them. That night Madina slept in my arms like a baby. I didn't close my eyes for a single second. I just watched her. Her face was completely relaxed. Her eyes closed. And suddenly, there she was again.

Sophia's mother. For a moment I looked towards the empty space on the other side of her and almost expected Sophia to struggle to lift her little head. I could see her. That tiny head tilting to one side. That huge smile already shining as her little eyes met mine. Her little body moving backwards and forwards like she was doing Mike Tyson push-ups. I found myself smiling at the memory. For those few seconds, that prison visitation room contained something that hadn't existed anywhere in the world for years.

The three of us. At least inside my head. I leaned over and smelled Madina's forehead. Her familiar scent hit me. Everything about being that physically close to her was familiar, almost intoxicating—the warmth, the smell, the hormones, the memories attached to her body. For a moment my nervous system seemed to remember a life that my mind was desperately trying not to trust. Hong Kong. The

Maldives. Our home. Pregnancy. Sophia. Before Nurlan Bolatov. Before Bakirbayev.

Before C18. Before Prison 99. Before everything. Still, I didn't sleep. Not for one second. Several hours later Madina opened her eyes. She yawned, turned towards me and climbed back into my arms. “I slept like I haven't slept for years.” She settled against me. “When I'm with you, I'm a little girl again, Mohamed. All the bullshit in life is gone.” Then her voice changed. “I destroyed myself without you and Sophia.” There was Sophia. Finally. I looked at her.

“I know.” I held her there for a moment. “And now you need me to save you again.” “Yes,” she said. There was no hesitation. “Please save me.” She held onto me. “Save me…”

Chapter 96: When the Darkness Returns

When the Darkness Returns

The calls continued after that first visit. Slowly, Madina's true colours began showing again. The sweetness never disappeared completely. It just became increasingly conditional. “I need more money, Mohamed. You know what I'm doing. I don't want to live like this anymore!” “Is it my fault you destroyed us?” Her eyes darkened. She flicked her head sharply to the side, almost physically brushing the comment away. “I won't visit you again if you don't want to start a family again. You're just using me!”

There it was. The visit. A new family. Money. And somewhere among all of that was the one thing I actually wanted from her. The truth. To understand Madina, you have to understand where she came from. Madina came from almost nothing. It was only after we were married that I really began to understand the environment she'd grown up in. Her parents were village alcoholics. I remember once walking into their home at around nine in the morning and finding both of them sitting on the couch drinking a bottle of Kazakhstan cognac—the cheapest crap around.

Madina translated what they were saying. They were complaining that there was no work available. I looked towards the kitchen. Three empty bottles were already sitting on the counter. They'd been at it hard. And I remember thinking: Of course there's no work. If you're drunk at nine o'clock in the morning, how could you possibly expect to be earning money? This was the environment Madina had grown up in. Alcohol. Domestic violence. Infidelity. A completely dysfunctional marriage between her mother and father.

According to the stories Madina later told me, her father had once walked into his own bedroom and found his wife, Taxmina, having sex with a man half her age. Later, drunk, he beat the living daylights out of her. Within days, they were back together. That was their relationship. Break each other. Hurt each other. Return to each other. Repeat. Of course, most of these were stories I would hear properly only after I was locked away. Before that, so much of the family had been

presented to me as one big act. The only thing they could never really conceal was the alcoholism.

So when I think about Madina now, I understand what being swept away from all of that must have represented to her. It was the childhood fantasy. The knight in shining armour. And then I arrived. Suddenly the village girl from Shelek was seeing the world. Business-class flights. Five-star hotels. Restaurants where nobody needed to look at the prices before ordering. No wondering how the electricity bill would be paid. No worrying about the rent. A maid coming three times a week.

Walk through a shopping mall, see something you like, take it. For her, the struggle had disappeared. Then I was arrested. And suddenly the man who had provided that world was gone. Madina had to adjust. But I believe she thought that because she had already experienced that lifestyle, she somehow belonged there permanently. So she went looking for its replacement. Another pilot. A businessman. Someone wealthy. Someone who could put everything back exactly where it had been.

But lightning rarely strikes the same place twice. Down she went. Down. And down. Until eventually she hit rock bottom again. By then, in my eyes, she'd already sold her soul to the devil. Now she was selling her body too. And I thought again about the candle. Earlier in my life, I'd thought about how people discard what helped them once they no longer need it. When daylight comes, you extinguish the candle that guided you through the darkness. You don't need it anymore.

You can see. But what happens when darkness returns? You reach for the candle again. I was the candle. Madina wanted her old life back. And she believed that if she could get Mohamed back, everything that came with Mohamed would eventually return too. The money. The travelling. The security. The lifestyle. The family supporting her. The man who fixed everything. Except there was one problem. I hadn't forgotten why I'd allowed her back into my life. “You still haven't told me what happened to Sophia, Madina.”

Her expression changed. “How do you expect me to even think about starting another family with you when you still won't tell me what happened to my daughter?” It was almost as though she'd forgotten that question existed. Madina remembered what Madina needed. I needed closure. I needed the truth. “You promised me you would tell me when we met face-to-face.” Nothing. “You said you didn't want to ruin the first visit and you'd tell me on the next one.” Now we were talking about another family.

Another child. As though we could simply walk around the grave sitting between us. No. “When you keep your promise, then we can discuss a family.” She looked at me. “How can I trust you?” I almost couldn't believe what I was hearing. How can she trust me? Somehow we'd arrived at a point where information about how my daughter died had become a bargaining chip. She

wanted something from me. I wanted the truth about Sophia. And now, in my mind, she was effectively negotiating one against the other.

Give me what I want and perhaps I'll give you what you want. Money. A family. Another child. In exchange for answers about the child I'd already lost. “How can I trust you?” she repeated. I looked at her through the screen. And once again, the man who had stolen my face answered for me. “When have I ever broken a promise?” She looked at me for a moment. Then, just like that, the argument disappeared. “I'll see you next week for our visit,” she said. “Okay, babes.”

The call ended. I sat there looking at the phone. She wanted her candle back. Fine. But this time, before I gave her any light, I wanted the truth about what happened in the darkness.

Chapter 97: The Truth Finally Arrives

The Truth Finally Arrives

The next visit came, and this time the pressure was on. Most prisoners looked forward to visitation. They counted the days until their wives, mothers, fathers or children arrived. For a short time, they could pretend that the world outside still belonged to them. I didn't look forward to mine. Because I knew exactly what Madina wanted. A baby. She was pushing harder and harder for us to start another family, while I was still waiting for her to tell me what had happened to the family we'd already had.

We sat looking at each other. “Do you still find me attractive?” she asked. Obviously I did. Put a man in prison for years and the answer becomes even more obvious. “You know the answer to that, Madina.” I didn't embrace the conversation. I knew what she was doing. We weren't here to discuss whether I found her attractive. There was a question sitting between us that had been there for years. Finally, she spoke. “I can't do it face-to-face, Mohamed.” I waited.

“I thought when I came here I could tell you. Then we would sit and cry together.” Her voice softened. “We never had the chance to cry together after Sophia was gone.” There it was. For a moment, she was touching the one wound that never healed. “Can I just tell you by phone, please?” Another curveball. First she would tell me when she saw me face-to-face. Now that we were face-to-face, she couldn't. Later. By telephone. Again, the truth moved just beyond my reach.

I got up and went for a shower. There was no point exploding. No point forcing her. No point screaming, Tell me now. I came back. We ate. And the rest of the visit passed almost as though we were long-lost lovers reunited after years apart. That was the madness of it. I believed she was getting close. Close to breaking. Close to finally telling me. And I knew that if I pushed too hard, I could lose everything. So I waited. Prison had taught me that much. Patience.

Madina left. And when I returned to normal prison life, something unexpected happened. Madina had accumulated plenty of enemies of her own. Her flatmate in

Almaty had apparently taken my number from Madina's phone and passed it to an old friend of hers with whom Madina had recently had a major falling- out. Her name was Sabina. Messages started arriving. Do you know what Madina is doing? Don't trust her. She is using you. Then: She is a disgusting prostitute.

Sabina had plenty to say. She told me about the enemies Madina had accumulated back in Shelek. About the arguments. About her reputation. She seemed determined to make sure everybody knew who she believed Madina really was. I couldn't have cared less. In my mind, Madina had died the day Sophia died. Whatever she was doing outside wasn't the reason I was still speaking to her. There was only one reason left. Sophia. One day I went outside and looked up at the sky.

Above the prison were the airways—the invisible highways aircraft follow through the sky. An aircraft passed overhead. Hong Kong Air Cargo. I used to be the commander of that aircraft, I thought. For a few moments I wasn't looking at an aeroplane. I was looking at my old life flying over my new one. Captain Mohamed Barakat. Cockpit. Uniform. Flights. Crew. Freedom. The company had done nothing to help me after this nightmare began. I'd been on duty at the InterContinental. The hotel stay formed part of my duty period. I remember thinking that one day, if I ever got out of here, I would look at whether I had some kind of legal claim.

I would never even have been in Kazakhstan if it weren't for that company. How could an airline send its crews into countries where they might face legal systems they knew nothing about and then provide no meaningful legal assistance when disaster struck? And I wondered about the people I'd worked with. How quickly had they believed the headlines? My name must have been one of the biggest subjects of cockpit conversation for months. Maybe years. Speculation.

Rumours. Gossip. Everybody trying to understand how Captain Mohamed Barakat could possibly have done what the newspapers said he'd done. Yet virtually nobody came to help. There's something strange about human beings. Give them an ordinary story about somebody they know and they'll question every detail. Give them something horrific, dramatic and shocking enough, and suddenly they're prepared to believe almost anything. Then the aircraft disappeared into the distance.

And I was still standing inside Prison 99. The calls with Madina continued. So did the arguments. But something was changing. Every time we spoke, she seemed to be losing a little more control. And outside the prison, her own life seemed to be closing in around her. Her friends and family were beginning to hear more about what she had been doing. Sabina had certainly done her part. Then came the call that changed everything. Madina answered the video while getting out of bed.

There was another man there. I saw him. How did she think I hadn't? Or maybe she simply didn't care anymore. Then came the ultimatum. “If you will not get me pregnant, then we're wasting our time.” Something inside me broke. Not

anger. Something much older than anger. A voice of pain that had been locked inside me for years finally came out. And even hearing my own voice frightened me. “How can you expect me to want another family with you when you won't even tell me what happened to Sophia?”

I was struggling to hold myself together. “She was my daughter, Madina.” My voice broke on the final words. My daughter. I started shaking. I couldn't continue. I put the phone down. And I cried. Not for Madina. Not for prison. Not for the twenty-year sentence. Not for the life I'd lost. I cried for Sophia. My little girl. After years of controlling myself, analysing evidence, fighting lawyers and prosecutors, surviving cells and gangsters, pretending to Madina, saying babes, saying I love you, saying I forgive you, waiting and waiting and waiting—

I couldn't hold it anymore. She was my daughter. And Madina had heard it. She'd heard something in my voice that perhaps she had never truly heard before. The pain. Then my phone started receiving WhatsApp voice notes. Messages. More voice notes. I looked at the screen. And for the first time since Sophia died, in that moment, I felt I was hearing the human being in Madina again. I listened. Read. Listened again. My heart started racing. After all these years.

After all the promises. After all the lies. After C18. After the trial. After Bakirbayev. After the twenty- year sentence. After Prison 99. After all those nights staring at the ceiling. After begging Allah. After calling my mother and asking: When? Here it was. Written messages. Voice notes. A confession. I couldn't sit still. I started running around showing the people near me. “Look!” “Listen to this!” “This is it!” I backed up the chat. I took screenshots.

I forwarded the voice notes. I screen-recorded everything. I wasn't going to lose this. Not this time. Not another missing video. Not another disappearing piece of evidence. Not another opportunity that somebody could later pretend had never existed. I copied everything I could. After all these years, I had it. Then reality arrived almost immediately. The gangsters came to see me. “You can't release this conversation.” “What?” “You can't release it. They'll turn the whole prison upside down looking for that phone.”

“But this proves I'm innocent!” To them, that wasn't news. They'd read my case. They'd watched Madina visit me. They had already made up their minds about me long ago. To them, the confession didn't mean freedom. It meant trouble. Searches. Guards. Phones confiscated. Cells torn apart. Everyone punished because of something connected to me. For years I'd imagined this moment so simply. Madina confesses. I get the evidence. I give it to the authorities. The truth comes out.

Instead, even now, I was trapped. I was sitting inside a prison with what I believed was the most important evidence I'd obtained in years hidden on an illegal telephone that I couldn't simply walk into the administration office and hand over without potentially setting off chaos around me. I called Din-Mukhamed. Desperate. Excited. Terrified of losing what I had finally obtained.

We needed a way to get this evidence out of my hands and into the police's hands without turning Prison 99 upside down.

After all those years asking the same question— When? For the first time, I thought I finally had an answer. Now.

Chapter 98: The Truth Put A Target on my Back

The Truth Put a Target on My Back

I called Din-Mukhamed. At first, neither he nor my family could quite believe what they were reading and listening to. Even my own lawyer asked me: “Is this real?” I couldn't believe what I was hearing. “Do you seriously think I'm going to find somebody whose voice is identical to Madina's and get them to record all of this for me?” “It could be AI,” he said. That really pissed me off. “You know, for a lawyer—especially my lawyer—you really need to start getting a grip. Whose side are you on anyway? Do you even know anything about AI? There are checks that can be done. Send it for expertise if you doubt me that much. Get a phonoscopic examination.”

He realised he'd overstepped himself. “We need the original phone,” he said. “Can you get it out?” I looked at the phone in my hand. “I think so.” Then another thought came to me. “Why can't they confiscate Madina's phone? Everything is there.” “They need a reason.” A reason? I had one. “She's doing illegal sex- cam work in Kazakhstan,” I said. “And she's keeping large amounts of cannabis at home. Her uncle sells the stuff. He asks her to store it and tells her she can smoke as much as she likes.”

“I need evidence,” Din-Mukhamed said. I almost laughed. “Oh, well, you're in luck.” Because over the previous months, while Madina thought she was cross-examining me, I'd been watching too. And saving. I started sending everything I had. Links. Videos. The websites. Her screen name. Videos I'd saved of her smoking what I believed were narcotics through bongs. Whatever I had, Din-Mukhamed got. He prepared the complaint. It came into the prison. I signed it.

It was sent. And almost immediately, the threats started coming into Prison 99. Madina's mother, Taxmina, had contacted the Akhis for help. Apparently, she had presented Madina to them as an ukhti. An ukhti wasn't simply a Muslim woman in the way they were using the word. It meant they believed she was a woman of strong Islamic faith—a woman who prayed, covered her hair and lived according to the religion. And now here was a man publicly destroying the reputation of an ukhti with allegations of drugs and sex work.

To them, this wasn't gossip. It was honour. And honour could mean blood. I was told there was a hit on me. This wasn't simply prison rumour either. I still have a recording of Madina's mother's voice, which she sent to a man in Prison 103. From there, contact was made with the Akhis in Prison 99. Information had

travelled from outside, into one prison, then into mine. And now I was waiting to be stabbed. I stopped sleeping properly. Day after day I waited for the attack.

Every movement behind me. Every unfamiliar face. Every man who suddenly walked too close. I knew it was coming. Then they caught me going into the club for my English lessons. Five of them. The shouting started immediately. Arguments. Accusations. Five men around me. “She killed my daughter!” I shouted. There was a blade on the table, used for cutting cloth in the sewing room. I grabbed it. Then I slashed my own left arm. Deep. I held the blade against my bleeding arm.

It wasn't a suicide attempt. It was a message. I'm ready. If this was happening, then it was happening now. I'd spent days waiting for somebody to attack me. I wasn't going to stand there begging five men for mercy. Blood ran down my arm. Then the Blatnoi intervened. Gangsters who were friendly with me stepped in. “We'll talk to him first.” The Akhis argued. “He belongs on our side, not yours,” the Blatnoi told them. “If it's true, we'll hand him over.” That was prison law.

The Akhis and Blatnoi had boundaries. However insane that might sound to someone outside, inside those walls there were rules about who controlled whom, who could intervene where and who had the right to deal with a particular prisoner. You didn't simply overstep the other side. That boundary may have saved my life. By then I'd already spoken to my sisters. The British Embassy was fully involved. Suddenly prison officials and police were running around trying to understand what was happening and whether I was in immediate danger.

The Blatnoi were effectively put on guard to make sure nothing happened to me. Then they came to question me themselves. And they weren't happy. “What the fuck is this shit you're spreading?” They were furious. “Cops? Official complaints? That's not how we live.” From their perspective, I'd brought the authorities into something that could cause searches, investigations and problems throughout the prison. I explained everything. I explained the confession.

The phone. The problem of getting the evidence out. The need to have Madina's own phone secured. I hadn't wanted the administration turning Prison 99 upside down searching for my illegal phone. I needed another way of getting the evidence into official hands. Then came the question that mattered to them. “And what about all the bullshit in the complaint? She's an ukhti. You know we can't defend you if this isn't true.” Fine. I took out what I had. I showed them.

The websites. The screen name. The videos. The bongs. The material showing what I believed she was smoking. They stared. Then they started laughing. Hard. “Call those fucking Akhis here.” More laughter. “Now they owe us.” The whole atmosphere changed. Big pats on my back. Cigarettes came out. Someone asked: “Man, you want some whisky?” “No, man. I'm praying.” Then the Akhis arrived. The Blatnoi were still laughing. “Your ukhti turned out to be a fucking prostitute. Now sit down. We need to talk.”

Then they looked at me. “Mohamed, you can leave.” And then the words I'd been waiting to hear: “Nobody will fucking touch you here.” Blood was still

dripping from the slash in my arm. I still have the scar today. It's deep enough that if you saw it without knowing the story, you might think it came from a suicide attempt. It didn't. I walked back to my cell. And after days of barely sleeping, constantly waiting for the knife— I slept. The Embassy received a full report about what had happened and how the prison had intervened for my safety.

For a moment, one problem appeared to have been contained. Then another arrived. Etap. Transfer. All prisoners who weren't repeat offenders were being moved to Prison 71. My name was on the list. My heart sank. Not again. I'd already learned what transfer meant. It didn't simply mean changing buildings. It meant losing everything you'd spent months or years learning. In Prison 99, I knew the system. I knew the faces. I knew which guards were dangerous. I knew the Blatnoi.

I knew the Akhis. I knew the Kozyols. I knew who could be spoken to. Who couldn't. Who wanted money. Who wanted information. Who might help. Who might hurt you. Most importantly, after everything that had just happened, people knew my situation. They knew about Madina. They knew about the threats. They knew there had been a confession. And, whatever their reasons, people had just stepped in to stop me being attacked. Now I was going to lose all of it. New prison.

New rules. New gangsters. New Akhis. New Kozyols. New guards. New administration. New alliances. New enemies. New everything. And there was an even bigger problem. The phone. Din-Mukhamed had already told me: “We need the original phone.” But there was no way I could take that phone through Etap into another prison. I could preserve backups. The screenshots. The screen recordings. The messages. The voice notes. I could make sure copies existed outside. But the original device itself?

I couldn't take it with me. After all those years waiting for the evidence, now I was being separated from the very phone on which it had arrived. And Prison 71 wasn't like 99. I'd already heard about its reputation. This was a barracks prison. The cells didn't lock at night because there weren't ordinary cells in the way I'd become accustomed to. Around 120 men sleeping side by side on bunk beds. One huge barracks. Then another. And another. Twelve barracks in total.

At night there would be no steel door between me and the people who might want to reach me. No lock. No cell. Just men. Hundreds of them. The toilets were outside and, as they had been described to me, were literally holes in the ground. No proper partitions. No privacy. Men shitting side by side in full view of one another. This was where I was going. Prison 71 already had a terrible reputation among prisoners. I'd seen and heard about videos circulating online that purported to show torture there.

And now my name was on the transfer list. The timing couldn't have been worse. Madina had finally sent me what I'd spent years waiting for. My lawyer was trying to work out how to turn it into evidence. A complaint had been filed. Her mother had reached into the prison world. I'd been threatened. I'd been

confronted by five Akhis. I'd cut my own arm rather than stand there helplessly waiting to be attacked. The Blatnoi had intervened. The Embassy was involved.

The prison authorities knew I was in danger. And just when everyone around me finally understood what was happening— they were moving me somewhere where nobody knew anything. I looked at the scar forming on my arm. Then at the phone. Here we go again. Prison 71. A hundred and twenty men sleeping beside me. No locked door at night. No familiar faces. No protection I could count on. And somewhere outside those walls was the original phone containing the words I'd waited years to hear.

I'd spent years trying to get Madina to tell me the truth. She finally had. And somehow, even the truth had managed to make prison more dangerous.

Chapter 99: what you didn't learn at home, the world will teach you

What You Didn't Learn at Home, the World Will Teach You

As with almost everything I'd seen in Kazakhstan, the moment people heard there was going to be a transfer, the bidding started. Money. Contacts. Favours. Everyone suddenly knew someone. Some prisoners were successful. Their names disappeared from the transfer list and they stayed behind. Mine didn't. While all this was happening, something else was developing thousands of kilometres away in Egypt. My sister had been introduced through a mutual friend she trusted to a man who was apparently very, very powerful in Kazakhstan.

His name was Bolat. Another Bolat. It's an extremely common name in Kazakhstan. This Bolat was supposedly very well connected within the Ministry. He was wealthy, successful, influential—the kind of man who appeared to have no reason to steal money from a desperate family. And that last part mattered. Over the years, we'd encountered plenty of what I came to call “case fixers.” People would come and visit me in prison claiming they could solve everything. They knew the right prosecutor.

The right judge. The right police official. The right person in the Ministry. The right person somewhere. There was always somebody. And there was always a price. Usually an extortionate one. The proposal was almost always the same: Give us the money and wait. That was it. Trust us. Later, I discovered that this had already happened to my sisters during the early stages of my case. In their desperation, they'd handed over large amounts of money and been scammed.

But desperation doesn't teach you to stop hoping. Sometimes it makes you hope even harder. My sister had made a promise to our parents: “No matter what, we'll get Mohamed home.” She carried that promise with her everywhere. And now she thought she'd finally found someone different. He'd been introduced by somebody she trusted. He was important. He was successful. Most importantly, he was already rich. Why would a rich man need to scam her? Bolat listened to my story and sympathised.

Then he explained how things worked. “Kazakhstan police don't do anything unless they're paid. It's unfortunate, but that's the way it is.” Then he told her not to worry about my prison transfer. He would handle it. He asked for a large sum of money. He would speak to the Almaty police chief. He would speak to the head of the prison. And by speak, the understanding was very different from simply having a conversation. He would visit them. Money would exchange hands.

Everything would be taken care of. Madina would finally face justice. Mohamed would be safe. My sister believed him. To his credit—or perhaps simply because it was necessary to make everything believable—he did follow through on part of what he promised. He contacted the prison chief. Then he came to visit me himself. I sat opposite him and listened. I watched him. Sized him up. Something didn't feel right. Another con artist, I thought. As soon as I could, I called my sister.

“Don't trust him.” There was a pause. “It's too late, Mohamed.” My stomach dropped. “I've already given him a large amount.” She still believed in him. “Just be patient and wait.” Patient. Wait. Two words I'd heard far too many times. She desperately wanted him to be genuine. She wanted to believe that finally, after all the people who'd appeared promising solutions, somebody with actual power had arrived. Nearly three years later, as I write this, nothing came from those promises.

Nothing. The money disappeared with him. Every once in a while, a message would arrive saying how embarrassed he was about the situation. And that was about it. But I didn't yet know how that story would end. At the time, I had another problem. My name was still on that transfer list. --- 30 September 2023. Suddenly I heard my name over the loudspeaker. Usually, we'd know about a transfer several days beforehand. Not this time. This was happening now. I scrambled together whatever belongings I could.

There were hurried farewells at the gate. Then I looked around at the group being transferred with me. Around twenty men. Akhis. Of course. The same group I'd just had problems with. Great. Here we go again. The journey itself was almost ridiculous. Five minutes. That was it. Prison 71 was practically next door to Prison 99, alongside 103. Five minutes to enter another world. I had thought Prison 99 was old and disgusting. Then I saw 71. This place looked ancient.

Falling apart. And quarantine was flooded with sewage from the toilets. Not dirty water. Not a bad smell somewhere down the corridor. Sewage. We were literally expected to eat breakfast while our shoes were wet with toilet water containing human waste. I stopped eating. The logic was simple. If I didn't eat, hopefully I wouldn't need to use the toilet. I only wished everyone else had adopted the same strategy. The beds were broken. Eventually I took my mattress off one of them, found a dry corner of the floor and threw it down there.

That became my bed. For two days, I slept on a mattress on the floor in a dry corner surrounded by a quarantine block contaminated with sewage, waiting to be allowed into the actual prison. Eventually some of the men had enough. They began sewing their mouths shut. A protest. Let us out of quarantine. Let us into the

prison. I'd arrived at Prison 71 expecting another confrontation with the Akhis. Instead, something unexpected happened. They treated me well.

Very well, in fact. During those two days, we started talking. The confrontation in Prison 99 had changed something. They'd seen the material. They'd understood that what they'd initially been told about me and Madina wasn't the whole story. And, to their credit, they seemed to understand that they'd made a mistake. One of them eventually asked me: “How did you ever get involved with a woman like that?” I looked at him. There was no clever answer. There still isn't.

Even today I don't know how to answer that question properly. I'd made the biggest error of judgement of my life. And I was still paying for it. Not with embarrassment. Not with a bad divorce. Not with some money lost and a lesson learned. With years of my life. My father has always had a saying: “What you didn't learn in Mama and Papa's home, tomorrow the world will teach you.” I'd heard him say it countless times growing up. Like most things parents repeat, you hear the words without really understanding their weight.

Now I understood. The world had decided to teach me. And what a fucking lesson it had dished out.

Chapter 100: The Kaspi express

The Kaspi Express

Prison 99 and Prison 71 were two completely different worlds. In 99, because of the cell system, inmates could get away with far more nonsense. Each cell became its own little territory. Men generally chose their group, moved into a cell together and stuck with those people. Some prisoners hardly ever left their cells at all. If a cell was left unattended, someone from another cell might run in and steal whatever was within reach —a few packets of cigarettes, a razor, shampoo. Anything really.

But Prison 99 truly came alive at night. At ten o'clock the doors closed. That was when the phones came out. Narcotics were smoked. Alcohol was drunk. Arguments that had started during the day continued through steel doors, men shouting from cell to cell across the corridors. Strangely, by daylight most of it seemed to have been forgotten. Six in the morning, doors opened, everyone came out and life carried on. Usually. Sometimes you got a glimpse of what had been happening during the night.

Like the minister. I can't identify him, but this man was as close to untouchable as you could possibly get inside a Kazakhstan prison. Extremely well educated. An overachiever in practically everything he'd done. Gold medals for Kazakhstan. He'd lived among the country's elite and had seen life at the very top. And even in prison, everyone understood that he still had power. Guards knew it. Inmates knew it. With one telephone call to the right person, he could affect someone's fate even from behind prison walls.

Sometimes at six in the morning he'd come running out of his cell in nothing but his boxer shorts, still drunk from the night before. He'd see a guard walking along the corridor and shout: “I'LL FUCK YOU ALL!” Then he'd turn around and see me standing by the window having a cigarette. His entire personality would change. A smile would appear and, in the most ridiculously posh accent: “Oh, hello.” That was 99. Absolute chaos mixed with absolute hierarchy. The inmates had even fitted their own deadbolts to many of the cell doors. Once the bolt went across from the inside, even the guards couldn't simply open the door.

Think about that for a second. You're in prison. The state has locked you inside. And then the prisoners install another lock to keep the state out. Welcome to Kazakhstan. But to understand how all of this worked, you have to forget for a moment about the official classifications written in Kazakhstan's laws. I'm talking about something else. I'm talking about who actually controls life inside the walls. In prison, we basically understood three different worlds.

Regime. Mixed. Khoot. These weren't the official legal names of the institutions. They were the way we understood how power operated inside them. At one extreme was regime. The red system. Administration dominates everything. The Kozyols—the prisoners cooperating with the administration—have enormous power over the other inmates. Names like Karaganda and Prison 11 terrified people. Men who'd been through those places told stories that were difficult to listen to.

According to their accounts, the breaking process could begin from quarantine. Beatings. Heads pushed into buckets of water. Constant humiliation. You wake at six. Wash. Form up. March to breakfast. Eat quickly. March back. March around the courtyard until duties are assigned. Then work. Clean. Repair. Move. Summer heat. Kazakhstan winter. It doesn't matter. The purpose, as prisoners understood it, was constant control. There's no lying on your bunk reading a psychology book.

No afternoon nap. No sitting around cooking with your friends. Get caught sleeping when you shouldn't and, according to the men who came back from those institutions, the consequences could be brutal. Broken teeth. Broken noses. Broken ribs. Broken ankles. I'd met men who returned from what we called regime. Some of them looked like living zombies. Their bodies had returned. Their minds seemed to have stayed behind. And then there was the opposite end. Khoot.

That was the word we used. The concept is often described elsewhere in post-Soviet prison terminology as the black system. Khoot meant that the inmates controlled almost everything inside. The guards controlled the perimeter. Inside the perimeter, prisoner hierarchy and prisoner rules dominated everyday life. And if you were a Kozyol, Khoot was your nightmare. Because all that authority you had while standing behind the administration disappeared when you entered a place controlled by the very prisoners you'd spent years policing.

Then there was the middle. Mixed. This was the balancing act. Administration had power. Kozyols had power. Blatnoi had power. Different groups had their

own relationships with the authorities, their own territory, their own arrangements and their own boundaries. Everybody understood roughly how far they could push before somebody pushed back. And suddenly the entire prison system began making sense to me. Gangster getting too powerful? Fine. Regime. Send him somewhere the Kozyols and administration can break him every day for years.

Kozyol getting too comfortable? Stops listening to his masters? Fine. Khoot. Send him somewhere controlled by gangsters and see how long that confidence lasts. Able to balance somewhere between the two? Wonderful. You stay in mixed conditions. And the particular version of mixed conditions I'd experienced had another nickname. Kaspi lager. Because money could change almost everything. Kaspi is Kazakhstan's electronic payment system, and inside prison it became part of the joke.

Want better conditions? Kaspi. Want something overlooked? Kaspi. Want somebody to bring something? Kaspi. Different groups had their own dealings with the cops. Different cells had their arrangements. Different people paid different people. Top up your Kaspi and welcome aboard the Kaspi Express. And this wasn't always cash hidden in mattresses. Even prosecutors had discovered prisoners using Kaspi accounts in their own names, accessing them through Face ID and making instant transfers.

The digital age had reached Kazakhstan's prisons. --- Every time I moved cells in Prison 99, I'd end up buying things to repair the place. New sinks. Toilets. Cabinets. Paint. Filler. Wooden trim. On the fourth floor, we'd even paid to install water pumps along the main corridors so water could finally reach us properly. We bought refrigerators. Microwaves. Convection ovens. Induction cookers. We were prisoners renovating state property with our own money so that it became possible to live in.

And once we'd finished, prison life could sometimes become almost surreal. There were moments when it reminded me of Goodfellas. Those prison scenes where they're preparing lunch. Someone had managed to find a clove of garlic. Someone else had pasta. Raw meat had somehow been smuggled through the visitation block. Someone was chopping. Someone was frying. Someone was arguing about how the meat should be cooked. For half an hour, a filthy Kazakhstan prison cell smelled like someone's family kitchen.

We prepared much of our own food. In fact, according to the way inmates talked about it, if every prisoner actually turned up for breakfast, lunch and dinner every single day, the prison system would be bankrupt within a week. And prisoners knew it. Sometimes when inmates were fighting for better conditions or more rights, they didn't refuse the prison food. They did the opposite. Everyone agreed: Go to every meal. Breakfast. Lunch. Dinner. Every prisoner.

Every day. Feed us. Eventually the pressure would build and the administration would negotiate. Only in prison could eating breakfast become industrial action. --- Prison 71 was different. The barracks system changed everything. There weren't little locked kingdoms where five or ten men could

disappear behind a steel door at ten o'clock and do whatever they wanted. Here, you lived surrounded by people. Dozens and dozens of them. Everyone saw everything. After those two days in that sewage-filled quarantine, I was finally going inside.

And somebody was waiting for me. Daniar. Dani. We already knew each other from Prison 99. He was wealthy and extremely well connected. He told me he'd been convicted of smuggling truckloads of gold into Kazakhstan. His family looked after him extremely well in prison. In 99, he'd even opened his own chicken farm in the work zone. It was clever. It meant he could spend most of the day away from the residential prison section. But Dani had also witnessed what happened to me when I first arrived in 99.

He'd seen the pressure. The demands for money. The people controlling me. And he'd tried to help. He hadn't offered some heroic rescue. He'd simply given me a piece of friendly advice. “If it gets too much, you can request isolation.” That was it. One sentence. The people controlling me found out. They beat him badly for it. Broke his nose. That was what helping somebody could cost you. And now here he was again. Waiting for me in Prison 71. I was supposed to go to Barrack 8.

The Eighth was where many of the VIP prisoners were placed. On paper that sounded perfect for me. Dani immediately told me otherwise. He'd already been there. He'd already experienced exactly what being a wealthy prisoner in the Eighth could mean. They'd beaten him for money. “Don't go there,” he told me. “Come to the Eleventh. We have friends.” We? At the time, I didn't understand what he meant. There was something about Dani that I hadn't known in Prison 99.

Dani was an Akhi. And Barracks 10 and 11 were together, one above the other, behind the same gate. They were Akhi barracks. I almost had to appreciate the irony. I'd just been transferred alongside around twenty Akhis. Only days earlier, men from the same group had been threatening me. I'd been confronted by five of them. I'd been waiting to be stabbed. I'd cut my own arm to show them that if they came for me, I was ready. Then they'd seen the evidence. They'd realised what had actually happened.

And now, in the next prison, an Akhi I'd already known for years was standing there offering me protection from the VIP barrack I'd originally been assigned to. Prison alliances changed quickly. Sometimes your enemy yesterday was the person protecting you tomorrow. Sometimes the person smiling while protecting you was already calculating what you were worth. Friends, no friends. Sloane's words came back to me again. I looked towards Barrack 8. Then towards Dani.

“Come,” he said. I picked up my belongings. New prison. New rules. New hierarchy. I still didn't know exactly what waited for me behind that gate. But I'd learned enough by now to understand one thing. In Kazakhstan's prisons, the sign above the door didn't tell you who controlled what was behind it. You had to walk inside to find out. So I followed Daniar into the Eleventh.

Chapter 101: Big Bro is Here

Big Bro Is Here

As I entered Barrack 11, I was greeted by a heavily built man who immediately pulled me into a hug. This was Si. Obviously, I won't use his real name. Daniar had intercepted me before I could be sent to Barrack 8, and judging by the look on his face, he was quite proud of himself for delivering his catch directly to Si. Before I go any further, you need to understand what one of these barracks actually looked like, because this was completely different from the cell system I'd left behind in Prison 99.

The main hall was filled with metal bunk beds standing side by side. Between roughly every four beds was a small partition, just enough to give the illusion of having your own little space. Small bedside cabinets held whatever possessions a prisoner considered important: a toothbrush, a book, a small jar of coffee or creatine, socks—whatever you'd managed to accumulate and decided was worth keeping close. At the end of the sleeping hall was a short corridor.

There was a small kitchen, although calling it a kitchen was generous. You weren't really supposed to cook there. It was somewhere to drink tea and heat meals that had been stored in the refrigerators or freezers. Generally, there were four or five fridges and freezers, a couple of microwaves, a large boiler constantly dispensing hot water for tea and coffee, and four or five tables surrounded by stools. Next came the television room. One television, with benches arranged in front of it like a miniature cinema.

Then the washroom: multiple sinks, small mirrors and a single shower. And there was a small indoor toilet. For most of us, that toilet was for pissing only. Unless, of course, you were the smotryashchiy. The smotryashchiy was the man at the top of that particular barrack's informal hierarchy. The top dog. The man through whom everything important passed. Disputes, decisions, discipline, relationships with other groups —everything happening within his particular territory eventually reached him.

In Barrack 11, that was Si. You could even see the hierarchy from the sleeping arrangements. The smotryashchiy slept at the top left of the barrack. Nobody slept above him. His own soldiers slept around him. He had his own private room and, in our barrack at least, another extraordinary privilege. He was the only man allowed to use the indoor toilet for a number two. Everyone else had to go downstairs and outside. Even in the middle of a Kazakhstan winter.

The toilets outside had virtually no privacy. You squatted beside other men in plain sight. The outdoor cinema. You could sit there freezing while watching the other zoo animals defecate in the wild. Apparently even taking a shit had its place in the prison hierarchy. --- Si led us into his private room. Naturally, it had been renovated. Tea. Coffee. Juices. Food. Sweets. Everything was already waiting for us. The usual signs that you'd entered the part of prison where somebody important lived.

Dani introduced me almost as though he'd brought home a valuable acquisition. A man, he explained, who could bring many benefits to their community. I listened. By then I'd been training for a long time. Physically, I wasn't the timid man who had first entered this system. My head was shaved bald. I carried the scars on my forehead. The slash across my arm from what had happened in 99 hadn't even healed yet. Only a week earlier I'd been preparing myself to be stabbed.

I showed Si respect, but he didn't sense fear. There wasn't much of that left to show. Then the connections started appearing. Si knew the gang that had held me captive when I first arrived in Prison 99. He knew them extremely well. Because, according to him, he'd once been one of them. In fact, in his account, he'd effectively been their leader before finding religion. Now he was a leader among the Akhis. I listened carefully. I explained that I had absolutely no problem living together with Muslim brothers. I was Muslim. I prayed. I fasted. My faith had become one of the things that kept me together through everything that had happened.

But I wasn't pledging allegiance to anybody. They used religious terminology when discussing belief and loyalty, and tawheed was a word I heard repeatedly, but for me the issue was much simpler. I worshipped Allah. I wasn't joining a prison gang. I also told Si something I'd already noticed. The gangsters prayed too. They fasted. Some of them knew their religion extremely well. So when I looked at the behaviour of certain Akhis and compared it with the Blatnoi, sometimes I struggled to see much difference.

Beat someone. Humiliate someone. Extort money. Control people. Then add a few extra Alhamdulillahs and Mashallahs to the conversation. That didn't suddenly make the behaviour Islamic. From what I witnessed inside these prisons, the Akhis could also provide somewhere to belong for prisoners who had nowhere else to turn within the traditional criminal hierarchy. Rapists. Paedophiles. Drug dealers—barygas, as they were called in prison slang. Certain convictions meant a man could never be accepted within the traditional gangster hierarchy.

But among the Akhis, I'd watched men find another route. Repent. Learn. Pray. Follow. The devil had led you astray. Your old life was behind you. And suddenly someone who had occupied the lowest levels of prison society had a community again. Some genuinely changed. I met sincere Muslims in prison and I would never put every religious prisoner into the same category. But I also witnessed religion being used as a tool of control. Find someone weak. Give him somewhere to belong.

Teach him. Influence him. And gradually you could convince him to do things he might never have considered doing alone. That was why I didn't see the Akhis I encountered simply as a religious group. To me, they operated much more like a prison gang that had mastered the use of religion as an organising language. And that could become extremely dangerous. Kazakhstan had already experienced violent prison escapes involving prisoners described by the authorities as religious

extremists. There was even a Kazakh film, The Sixth Post, based on the notorious 2010 Aktau prison escape.

The possibility of radicalisation wasn't theoretical. The KNB knew that. They monitored this world closely. For the moment, however, there seemed to be a balance. The Akhis dealt with the administration at a level both sides could tolerate. But prison balances are fragile. And someone had just changed the equation. Large numbers of prisoners were being transferred. New prisons. New barracks. Old loyalties being carried into environments where completely different hierarchies already existed.

What happens when you move large groups of prisoners into a new prison, bring all their old allegiances with them and expect everybody simply to get along? We were about to find out. --- From September onwards, the tension kept building. The Akhis were pushing to make Prison 71 a lager they controlled. The Blatnoi weren't having any of it. Fights started breaking out. One confrontation. Then another. September became October. October became November. And by then I'd realised something important.

Prison 71 was much more serious than 99. Almost everybody seemed to be tooled up. Small axes. Knives. Short metal rods. Weapons concealed under clothing, around beds, wherever they could be hidden. It no longer felt like people were preparing for the possibility that something might happen. Everybody seemed to know that eventually it would. Then came that cold, foggy November night. I'd been asleep. Sometime around eleven or midnight, Dani was suddenly in my face.

“Wake up!” I opened my eyes. “It's all going down.” I got up. Then I heard it. From outside came a huge chant. Not one man. Many. Allahu Akbar! Again. Allahu Akbar! The Akhis were moving as though they were entering some kind of religious war. Against other Muslims. Until today, I still can't understand the ridiculousness of that mentality. Muslims declaring a religious war against Muslims. Men had T-shirts wrapped around their faces. Hoods up. Dressed in black.

Within minutes, the stabbings began. Then the cameras started disappearing. Prisoners had discovered that the plastic containers used for yoghurt or sour cream fitted perfectly over the CCTV cameras. One after another, the cameras were covered. The sirens began screaming. The whole prison seemed to erupt at once. But the National Guard hadn't arrived yet. Until they did, there were only the ordinary prison officers working that night. Maybe fifty men. Against a prison population of around a thousand.

And this is where I have to give credit where credit is due. These were the same guards we dealt with every day. The same scummy men constantly asking prisoners for cigarettes. Drinks. Favours. The same uniforms I'd come to associate with corruption, demands and the everyday bullshit of prison life. I didn't like these people. I had very little respect for most of them. But that night I saw another

side of them. They didn't simply lock themselves somewhere safe and wait for the prisoners to finish killing one another.

They went towards the fighting. I watched men I'd spent months thinking of as nothing more than corrupt officials putting their own safety at risk, running towards clashes between armed prisoners and trying to keep the situation under as much control as fifty men possibly could in a prison containing around a thousand inmates. They couldn't stop everything. Nobody could expect them to. But they held things together as best they could while waiting for reinforcements.

Whatever those men had done before that night, whatever they'd demanded from prisoners and whatever they'd do afterwards, I have to acknowledge what I saw with my own eyes. That night, they did their job. And then came a sound I will never forget. Semi-automatic rifle fire. Not one shot. Not even a few isolated shots. They came one after another, rapid and sharp, somewhere beyond the prison walls. Crack. Crack. Crack. Crack. Crack. The sound reminded me of heavy raindrops falling one after another, except every drop was the unmistakable crack of a rifle.

The shots seemed to sprinkle out into the cold, foggy night air, disappearing somewhere beyond what we could see. For some reason, that sound has stayed with me more clearly than almost anything else from that night. The fog. The sirens. Men running through the prison with their faces covered. And those rifles firing into the darkness like raindrops. They were warning shots coming from the direction of the nearby military barracks. The National Guard had been deployed.

Everyone knew what that meant. They're coming. --- And they came. The National Guard crashed through the gates. Masked. Helmets. Full riot gear. They moved quickly. Within around thirty minutes of their arrival, it was over. Thirty minutes. Prison 71 was under control. Everybody knew what came next. Men returned to their bunks. Weapons disappeared. Faces were uncovered. The war chants stopped. People suddenly remembered they were prisoners again. When the National Guard entered the barracks, everyone went down.

Face to the floor. Hands behind the back. The local prison guards accompanied them. And those guards knew exactly who they were looking for. They'd been there. They'd watched it happen. They knew the main provocateurs. One by one, men were identified. You. Get up. You. Get up. Another. Another. They were removed and taken to SUS. Isolation. For the next few weeks, Prison 71 changed completely. Regime. The freedom disappeared. The prison had shown the administration what could happen when the balance shifted too far.

Now the administration was reminding everybody who ultimately owned the walls. But almost immediately another story began travelling through the prison. Quietly at first. A whisper. Someone was coming. Not just another prisoner. A man whose reputation was already known throughout Kazakhstan's prison system. Almost seven feet tall. Pure muscle. According to the stories circulating among prisoners, he'd been through everything. Regime. Isolation. The worst conditions the prison system could throw at somebody.

I was even told he'd spent several years in an underground prison. Whether every story surrounding him was true, I couldn't possibly know. But I didn't need to. The reaction of the prisoners told me everything I needed to know about his reputation. People feared him. And now the word was that he was being brought back to Prison 71. Why? According to everyone around me, the answer was simple. To take control of the prison. --- It was around eleven o'clock the following night.

Suddenly people started moving towards the windows. “He's here.” Another voice. “He's here.” Then another. “He's here.” I got up and joined them. Fog covered the main courtyard. For a moment there was nothing. Then a figure emerged through it. Even from the window, his size was unmistakable. Almost seven feet tall. A huge, heavily built man walking across the main courtyard through the fog. Everyone watched. No shouting now. No chanting. No threats between the Blatnoi and the Akhis.

Just prisoners staring silently through the windows. He crossed the courtyard and disappeared towards the yard serving Barracks Eight and Nine. The night before, Prison 71 had erupted. Men had stabbed one another. Cameras had been covered. Sirens had screamed. The ordinary prison guards—the same men we'd cursed every day—had put themselves in harm's way trying to hold the situation together until reinforcements arrived. Then came that unforgettable sound of semi-automatic rifles sprinkling into the foggy night like raindrops.

The National Guard had crashed through the gates. Thirty minutes later, the prison was under control. The main provocateurs were now sitting in isolation. Prison 71 was under regime conditions. And now another message had just walked across the courtyard through the same fog. Someone beside me said it quietly: “Big Bro is here.” I kept staring through the window long after he'd disappeared. The message was already travelling through the barracks. The fighting was over.

At least for now. Big Bro was here to rule.

Chapter 102: The Man with The Horses Whip

The Man With the Horse Whip

After the riot, the prison administration made its position increasingly clear. They didn't like dealing with the Akhis. From everything I saw, they considered them unpredictable, ideological and difficult to control. The Blatnoi were different. The administration understood them, and they understood the administration. Everybody understood the currency. A stable prison meant money. A quiet prison meant nobody had to work too hard. And if there's one thing I'd learned about the prison system by then, it was that the administration loved money almost as much as it loved not having to work.

So the balance began changing. The strongest Akhi fighters were separated. Men were transferred to other prisons. Their power base was dismantled piece by piece. And sitting at the top of the new order was the enormous man I'd watched

walking through the fog. Big Bro. I started catching glimpses of him around the prison. Sometimes I'd see him entering or leaving Number 12. Number 12 was the prison officers' block. That alone told you something. Then one day his enormous head appeared through a window in Barrack 8.

He called out for Jaffa. Jaffa had effectively become the remaining leader of the Akhis. He was strong. Well built. But short. Standing beside Big Bro, there wouldn't even have been a comparison. Big Bro gave him a message. “Tell your whole barrack they're moving to the Third by this evening.” That was it. No negotiation. No committee meeting. No discussion about where anybody wanted to live. By evening, something even more interesting happened. The guards disappeared.

The gates were unlocked. And the remaining Akhis, now considerably less confident than they'd been before the riot, began moving their belongings to Barrack 3. A large gangster arrived to oversee the operation. I knew him from 99. He saw me. “Ey, pilotos!” Then he smiled. “Man, you're welcome to stay.” I could have stayed. Dani looked at me. “Don't leave me in this mess alone.” He said it quietly. I owed Dani. This was the man who'd tried to help me in 99 and had his nose broken for it.

Some debts aren't financial. “Don't worry,” I told him. “I'm moving with you.” So off I went to the Third. The moment I entered, I understood where we'd been sent. The Third was a dump. This was where you found the men without family support. Without money. Without Kaspi. The difference was visible immediately. So once again we started repairing a Kazakhstan prison with our families' money. Only recently, Dani and I had spent around 700,000 tenge paving the yard serving Barracks 10 and 11 with fresh cement. We'd arranged for a truck to come inside and pour it.

Now here we were again. New barrack. Same story. Repair this. Buy that. Fix this. Replace that. There was something beautifully absurd about the arrangement. Lock us up, then make our families pay to make the prison fit for human habitation. Welcome back aboard the Kaspi Express. But the physical condition of the Third wasn't the real problem. The hierarchy among the Akhis had been shattered. The strongest men were gone. Those left behind were lower-level members fighting among themselves for status and authority.

Everybody wanted respect. Nobody really had it. And slowly it became a free-for-all. This was where I began encountering some of the most absurd religious arguments I'd heard in prison. Some of the more extreme men wanted television banned. Not pornography. Not violent films. Television. Even the news. Even the weather forecast. Why? Because, according to them, weather forecasting was haram. It predicted the future. I couldn't help myself. I tried explaining meteorology.

Maybe that was my mistake. As a pilot, weather wasn't mystical to me. Over generations, human beings had learned to observe patterns: wind direction, temperature, humidity, dew point, pressure and countless other factors. Put those

observations together and you can calculate the probability of certain weather conditions developing. You're not claiming knowledge of the unseen. You're assessing probability based on information. I tried an even simpler example.

"If you're a child and you drink boiling-hot tea and burn your mouth, what happens the next time somebody gives you boiling-hot tea?" You already know there's a very high probability you're going to burn your lips and tongue again. That's not predicting the unseen. That's learning from experience. Apparently this explanation didn't help my case. Shaitan. Devil. Now I was moving against the will of Allah. This, to me, demonstrated the danger of taking mentally disturbed, poorly educated prisoners and heavily indoctrinating them.

Religion wasn't the problem. Ignorance combined with absolute certainty was the problem. And I was getting tired of it. Then another familiar face arrived. Eric. Seeing him immediately lifted my spirits. Eric had run the sewing department around the club where I'd given English lessons. He was younger than me, and I'd come to think of him almost as a little brother. A sportsman. Excellent boxer. Lean. Fast. Agile. He'd entered the prison system at only nineteen years old. By the time he met Big Bro, he was around twenty- eight.

Nine years inside. He understood this world. Eric had also previously been in the same prison as Big Bro, and the two had become close. There was another thing Eric brought to prison. Fashion. Prison uniforms were supposed to look depressing. Eric apparently took that as a personal challenge. He found excellent materials and made clothing that almost looked designer-made—good cuts, proper fit, grey or black fabric and, naturally, the all-important fluorescent strip that transformed your designer prison collection back into officially acceptable convict clothing.

Big Bro had probably the best prison wardrobe around. Courtesy of Eric. Eric came to see me in the Third. He looked around. Then looked at me. "What are you doing here, Akhi?" He laughed. "Don't say that, bro. These people are nuts." Eric knew exactly what I meant. He'd been part of that world himself years earlier. Eric was a Muslim convert and remained a practising Muslim, but he no longer functioned as part of their prison gang. Now he sat with the Blatnoi.

"Come join our family." Then he gave me another piece of news. Our minister friend was coming from 99. Yes. That minister. The same man who used to emerge from his cell at six in the morning in his boxer shorts, drunk, scream abuse at the guards and then turn towards me with that wonderfully educated accent: "Oh, hello." He was coming to 71. And he was joining Big Bro's family. I'd always been genuinely fond of him. I could listen to his stories for hours. In my opinion, his stories were real because he'd actually lived at levels of society most people only read about.

He'd seen everything. He was also an excellent boxer and extraordinarily fit for his age. Eric trained him three times a week. And meanwhile I was sitting in Barrack 3 arguing with psychopaths about whether reading an English book instead of continuously reading the Qur'an made me a bad Muslim. I'd had

enough. It was time to move. I went to meet Big Bro properly. And he wasn't what I'd expected. The enormous monster I'd watched walking through the fog turned out to be remarkably calm.

He was educated. He'd studied in Beijing. And what struck me most was his diplomatic sense. He listened. He didn't need to shout. He didn't need to prove how dangerous he was every five minutes. Everybody already knew. Physically, the man was a fighting machine. But his mind interested me more. He was extremely calculating. Years inside the prison system appeared to have taught him one particularly valuable skill: never show people what you're thinking. His emotions were controlled.

His face revealed very little. The combination made him far more intimidating than somebody constantly shouting and threatening everyone. I decided to move. As I walked out of Barrack 3, voices followed me. “Don't come running back when they beat you!” I kept walking. When I entered the Ninth, I was greeted remarkably well. Almost too well. My prison instincts immediately started talking. Is this a trick? I'd learned what happened when people were excessively friendly.

But so far, so good. And in fact, moving there turned out to be one of the best decisions I'd made in prison. Big Bro was surprisingly civilised. Yes, he enforced standards. Absolutely. But there was a problem. I liked his standards. Cleanliness. Order. Discipline. No unnecessary chaos. The place was remarkably clean, and a major renovation was beginning. Under his influence, I watched sections of Prison 71 being transformed. By the standards of what I'd seen elsewhere, they were dragging the place towards something resembling 2024.

And something else started happening. High-profile prisoners began arriving. Ministers. Mayors. Extremely wealthy businessmen. From what I observed, the administration now had someone capable of maintaining order around men whose presence could otherwise create enormous complications. And Big Bro understood something many people in prison didn't. Not everyone should be treated the same way. He knew how to speak to different people at their own level. A minister was a minister.

A businessman was a businessman. A gangster was a gangster. A frightened young prisoner was something else entirely. He seemed able to read people almost instantly. Slowly I began understanding where his reputation came from. It wasn't simply his size. It wasn't simply his fighting ability. It was control. Nobody I'd met could control an environment the way this man could. But let's not romanticise him. Because when somebody seriously broke his rules, there was another side.

Big Bro didn't generally need to punch people with his fists. He'd developed his own system. The first time I saw what he used, I immediately recognised it. A horse whip. The kind of short riding crop a jockey uses to make a racehorse run faster. That was Big Bro's instrument. And perhaps the worst part wasn't even the pain. It was the humiliation. A grown man ordered down. Made to lie there. Then— Crack. The body tightens. Again. Crack. Again. Until the shouting begins.

Then the screaming. Men who thought they were hard discovering exactly how many strikes they could endure before pride disappeared and they began begging for it to stop. I had lived among gangsters before. I'd seen fists. Feet. Metal rods. I'd seen men beaten bloody. But Big Bro understood something different. Fear doesn't always require a hospital. Sometimes humiliation travels through a prison faster than violence. You heard the screams. You knew what they meant.

And the next morning nobody needed to explain the rules again. The Akhis had tried to take control of Prison 71 through numbers, ideology and force. They'd failed. Their strongest fighters had been scattered. The remainder had been pushed into the Third. The administration had the stability it wanted. The Blatnoi had the prison order they understood. And sitting at the top of it all was the enormous man I'd first watched appear silently through the November fog.

By then nobody needed to whisper: “Big Bro is here.” Everybody knew. And everybody was in line.

Chapter 103: Kaspi express, Full Steam Ahead

Kaspi Express — Full Steam Ahead

There was another side to Big Bro that I hadn't expected when I first saw that enormous figure walking through the fog. Big Bro was fair. Not soft. There was a big difference. He had a remarkable talent for looking at people and working out where they naturally belonged. If you approached him and asked for a position or responsibility, he would assess you. If he thought you were capable, most of the time he'd give you the opportunity. There was only one problem.

Screw it up and your ass was on the line. Literally. One serious mistake and it was whipping time. Word about the system Big Bro was creating in 71 started travelling through other prisons. Gangsters elsewhere had serious questions about some of the rules he was introducing, but inside these walls nobody was interfering with the laws he'd laid down. Our own prison family operated fairly too. Everyone contributed. We trained together. Everyone was fit. Everyone ate well.

We pooled our money and bought huge quantities of raw meat and fresh produce and, through the mysterious influence of Big Bro, somehow all of it would find its way into the large walk-in freezers in the prison canteen. But I had a problem with that canteen. A serious one. In the Kazakhstan prisons I'd experienced, kitchen work was generally associated with prisoners at the bottom of the informal hierarchy, including men convicted of paedophilia. And honestly, some of the men I saw working there had the worst personal hygiene imaginable.

They stank. They were filthy. And these were the people preparing food we were expected to eat. For a while, that's exactly what happened. Then I'd had enough. --- Before prison, I loved cooking. It relaxed me. And I was good at it. I watched every cooking programme I could find. Gordon Ramsay. Marco Pierre

White. Wolfgang Puck. I watched them constantly. During my travels I'd even taken cooking classes. At home, the kitchen belonged to me. Madina and Sophia absolutely adored my food.

When I visited my family, they looked forward to seeing what I was going to make. Even Christmas became an excuse to cook. We never officially celebrated Christmas as a religious occasion, but living in Britain meant that every supermarket suddenly filled with turkey, stuffing, Brussels sprouts, carrots, turnips, gravy and everything else needed for an enormous roast dinner. And I was the absolute master of that meal. My younger sister would go mad in Marks & Spencer buying everything. Her husband and I would wear red Santa Claus T-shirts while everyone else wore green Santa's-helper shirts.

Then I'd take over the kitchen. Those memories belonged to another life. My family around me. Sophia enjoying the food I'd made. Everyone waiting to see what was coming out of the kitchen next. And now here I was, standing inside a Kazakhstan prison watching filthy men preparing food. Something had to change. So I went to Big Bro. “I don't like the way these guys maintain their hygiene. We eat this food. This backwards thinking about kitchen work has to stop.”

He listened. “Look at the outside world. Many of the greatest chefs in the world are men. They make tremendous salaries. Television is filled with cooking programmes watched by millions of people. Cooking isn't some degrading job.” Then I gave him my proposal. “Let me go in there. Let me revamp the canteen kitchen and teach them how our food should be prepared.” That was one of the advantages of dealing with Big Bro. No committee. No endless meetings. No months of paperwork.

He made a decision. And just like that, it was done. --- An announcement went throughout the prison. Kitchen work was no longer a trash job. If you genuinely loved cooking and knew what you were doing, come forward. There was another incentive. The salary was extremely attractive by prison standards. Around $200 a month. Suddenly we discovered something. The prison was full of men who loved to cook. People volunteered. Good cooks. Men who actually took pride in food.

And almost immediately the place began changing. Not just our private meals. Even the ordinary prison food being served to inmates every day began improving. Within a month, the kitchen was spotless. A shower was installed so the people preparing food could actually maintain proper hygiene. Floors were cleaned properly. Work surfaces were clean. Dishes were washed with detergent. Not a single fly. No filth lying around. No disgusting smell. And with me at the helm, the menu started changing.

Roast chicken and roasted potatoes. Smoked-paprika chicken. Tom yum. Stir-fried beef with oyster sauce. Teriyaki duck. Proper food. The meals arriving in our barrack became infamous throughout the prison. People started talking about what we were eating. Families gradually needed to deliver less and less food. Even the prison administration was happy. Why wouldn't they be? The

kitchen was spotless. The complaints disappeared. People were being fed better. And nobody from the administration had to do any of the work.

Perfect. --- Meanwhile, the rest of the prison was changing around us. Ventilation systems in the barracks were repaired. Ceiling fans were installed. Huge televisions—around a hundred inches—started appearing in the cinema rooms. New benches were made with surfaces that could actually be wiped and cleaned properly. An old building was converted into a proper gym with modern equipment. Then the work zone started improving. And that's when another idea came into my head.

I approached Big Bro again. “Can you give me a kitchen in the work zone? I want to open a restaurant.” He looked at me. “What are you going to make?” “Anything.” He thought for a moment. “What about döner kebabs?” “Easy.” Decision made. Now I had a restaurant. --- The next day I started buying equipment. Toasters. Döner grills. Ovens. Fryers. Electric carving knives. Large refrigerators. Freezers. Then I started contacting suppliers. And I'd already made my decision.

If we were doing this, we were buying the best ingredients I could get. I'd had enough of the prison mentality: They're prisoners. They deserve to eat shit. Why? These men had money. Their families were already going shopping outside, buying food and then going through the trouble of arranging for it to be delivered into the prison. Why not simplify everything? Fresh ingredients delivered here. Hot food cooked on site. And if we're going to make it, we're going to make it properly.

Döners. Burgers. Good meat. Good bread. Good ingredients. Fresh. Hot. Made right there. Then came Big Bro's first tasting. He took a bite. I watched him. Then suddenly this mammoth of a man came rushing towards me. Huge smile across his face. Like a Cheshire cat. He grabbed me in one of those enormous hugs, shook my hand and couldn't stop smiling. Man, the whole freaking prison was ecstatic. And once again I understood one of Big Bro's greatest talents. He knew how to give the right opportunity to the right person.

--- Before long, fully functioning kulinariyas, as everyone called them in Russian, were supplying much of the prison's food needs. And now things became ridiculous. Southern fried chicken. Pizza. Oven-baked samsa. Whole roasted lamb. Plov. Hand-rolled lagman noodles. Roast chicken. Döners. Burgers. You name it, somebody was making it. And some of that food was as good as—sometimes better than—what you could buy outside. Kaspi Express was running at full steam.

Families were sending less food. Prisoners were eating better. The guards and administration were in heaven. They received free food day and night. And years later, when I read what investigators and journalists uncovered about Institution 57, some of what had seemed like the strange internal world of prison was suddenly appearing in black and white outside the walls. Orda.kz later reported on money transfers, prisoners with access to enormous amounts of money, expensive food entering the institutions and prison officials accused of facilitating privileges

and receiving payments. The investigation was eventually referred to the Almaty Region Department of the KNB.

But while we were cooking, renovating and watching Prison 71 transform around us, something much more serious was beginning to happen behind the scenes. The administration itself was about to be shaken. --- The prison chief at the time was Petr Pisarev. And this is where I no longer have to rely only on what I remember from inside the prison. There is now a court judgment. On 7 March 2024, Pisarev was detained on suspicion of receiving a bribe. Orda later examined the judgment in detail. According to its reporting, Pisarev had worked at Institution 57 for a little over two years, initially as deputy head responsible for regime and operational work and later as the head of the institution. The criminal case concerned bribes allegedly taken during 2022 and 2023.

And there is one detail in that reporting that jumps off the page for me now. The culinary workshop. Orda reported that one of the episodes in Pisarev's criminal case concerned a prisoner who worked in a culinary workshop in the prison's industrial zone. According to the judgment described by Orda, Pisarev and his deputy for regime and operational work, Nurlan Bidaybekov, demanded money from that prisoner. Think about what you've just been reading in this memoir.

The kitchens. The food. The work zone. Kaspi transfers. The relationship between prisoners and administration. At the time, I was experiencing this world from the inside. Later, parts of that same prison economy would appear in court documents and investigative journalism. Pisarev was eventually convicted of repeatedly receiving bribes through extortion. His sentence? Nine years in prison. The Almaty Regional Court upheld that sentence on 2 April 2025. His deputy, Nurlan Bidaybekov, would also later be convicted in a separate bribery case and receive three years and six months.

So the irony was extraordinary. We were prisoners. They were the administration. They had the keys. They wore the uniforms. They decided who was searched, who was punished, what was prohibited and what wasn't. And eventually some of the men running the prison would themselves be standing before judges accused of corruption. But something else about the Pisarev investigation matters to my story. Who arrested the prison chief? Not the ordinary prison administration.

Not another group of inmates. The KNB was involved in the investigation that brought the prison leadership under scrutiny. Orda reported that operational measures concerning officials of Institution 57 and the regional penitentiary leadership were initiated in 2023 and that the case was referred to the Almaty Region Department of the KNB. Until this point in my story, you've met the police. Prosecutors. Judges. Prison guards. Blatnoi. Akhis. Smotryashchiye.

You've seen how money moved. How influence moved. How Kaspi moved. And how power inside a Kazakhstan prison didn't always belong to the person whose name was written on the office door. But there was another organisation

watching all of this. And very soon, my relationship with that organisation would become personal. This is where I introduce the KNB.

Chapter 104: The Recording that Disappeared

The Recording That Disappeared

While all of this was happening around me—the transfers, the gangsters, the Akhis, the November events, the changing balance of power inside the prisons—another battle had been crawling along quietly in the background. My case. And Din-Mohamed worked extremely slowly. Painfully slowly. By then I had learned that there were two completely different clocks in prison. There was the clock inside the walls, where your life could change in thirty seconds, and there was the legal clock, where you could wait a year for somebody to move a piece of paper from one desk to another.

Back in 99, a series of events had finally attracted serious attention from the British Embassy. The British Ambassador at the time was Kathy Leach. After everything my family and I had been reporting, she contacted Kazakhstan's Human Rights Commissioner, Elvira Azimova. Eventually, Azimova arranged a video meeting with me. For once I thought: Good. Finally. Somebody at this level is going to hear directly from me. I sat in front of the camera and explained what had been happening to me over the years.

The case. The prison. The treatment. The beatings. The system. At one point I took off my shirt and showed her. I wasn't interested in diplomatic language anymore. “Your system is extremely corrupt,” I told her. Her reaction surprised me. “Corrupt?” she replied, almost outraged by the accusation. “Show me corruption!” I remember looking at her and thinking: There it is. At that moment, rightly or wrongly, something changed in the way I saw her. I was sitting inside the system telling the Human Rights Commissioner what I had experienced, showing her what had happened to my body, and somehow the word corruption appeared to offend her more than what I was describing.

Not long afterwards, Elvira Azimova would become Chair of Kazakhstan's Constitutional Court. God help Kazakhstan, I thought. But something else happened during that Zoom meeting. I noticed the recording indicator. Top right of the screen. They were recording me. I pointed it out immediately. “Firstly, you're recording this conversation without asking my permission. Secondly, if you're recording it, I want a copy.” I wanted a record of what I had said. I wanted my complaints preserved exactly as I had made them.

Immediately afterwards I contacted Din-Mohamed. “Submit a request for that recording.” He did. And eventually the official paper trail confirmed the meeting had taken place. My complaints were referred onwards. The authorities knew what I had raised. But the recording? By some mysterious occurrence, there had been another technical problem. They couldn't provide it. For technical reasons. Of

course. I had watched the recording indicator myself. I had challenged them about recording me during the conversation.

I had asked for a copy while the meeting was still taking place. And when I subsequently requested it officially, somehow the recording could no longer be provided. Another technical error. Another piece of evidence that existed until somebody asked to see it. --- A Special Prosecutor eventually came to the prison. After everything I'd complained about, everything my family had raised and everything the British Embassy had been pushing, I expected a serious conversation.

He said one sentence to me. “You have the right to apply to the Court of Cassation.” That was it. His conversation with the deputy prison chief was considerably more animated. I couldn't hear what they were saying from where I stood, but there was plenty of pointing and hand gestures. Now, I don't claim to be an expert in translating Kazakh hand gestures, but from where I was standing it looked something like: If I receive one more complaint from the British Embassy, I'll personally come back here and fuck you myself.

Whatever he actually said, the message appeared to have landed. --- There's something else about my time in 99 that I haven't explained properly. The club. I didn't simply wander into the club one morning and decide to start teaching English. The prison administration put me there. It was their solution. Keep Mohamed somewhere controlled. Keep him occupied. Keep him under observation. And, importantly, keep him relatively safe. At the time, Nurjaan Akilbayesh was in charge of the club.

When I arrived, he greeted me with a smile while Shark translated. “You'll be safe here. You can conduct your English lessons and meet other inmates under safe conditions.” Then came the other part. “You can have a phone. Just don't get caught with it.” We shook hands and I went downstairs. A few minutes later Shark came to speak to me. “You're going to need a thousand dollars for the phone and everything else.” He handed me a Vivo. Chinese phone. Nothing special.

But to me it was exactly what I needed. He showed me the internet connection. High speed. For a prisoner, that little screen was a window through the walls. “Can I pay five hundred this month and five hundred next month?” “Hold on.” Shark disappeared upstairs. Five minutes later he returned. “Okay. Akilbayesh agreed.” Deal done. Kaspi Express. --- I became genuinely happy in that club. I taught English. I trained. I had somewhere I could interact with people without constantly wondering who was about to drag me into a room.

For the first time in a long time, somebody in the prison administration had created conditions that actually improved my life. I was so grateful that I contacted the British Embassy and asked them to write a thank-you letter for the prison deputy and Akilbayesh. I genuinely meant it. At that point they had helped me. What I didn't realise was what would happen to that letter. It was published in an internal prison- administration journal. A British Embassy letter praising officials apparently looked rather good on a career record.

And both men went upwards. The deputy eventually became chief. Akilbayesh moved into the DUIS structure, overseeing several prisons. Years later our paths would cross again. Prison is strange like that. People disappear from your story and then suddenly walk back into it wearing a different uniform with a different title. --- Meanwhile, Din-Mohamed continued working at a speed that made continental drift look energetic. When the General Prosecutor's Office learned that he had taken over my case, the documents were taken and sent to Astana.

At the same time, following my contact with the Human Rights Commissioner, the violations I had raised were sent to the General Prosecutor's Office for review. I thought: Finally. Now somebody is going to sit down and look at this properly. The forensic problems. The evidence. The witnesses. The procedures. The violations. Everything. Instead, the General Prosecutor's Office kept the documents for more than a year. Again we waited. And waited. Eventually I did what I had learned to do whenever the Kazakhstan system stopped moving.

I contacted the British Embassy. The Embassy contacted the General Prosecutor's Office. And eventually —after all that time—they found a violation. I remember hearing what they'd discovered and almost not believing it. Of everything in my case, this was what they had chosen. The court had imposed a five-year prohibition connected to my return to Kazakhstan after completing my sentence. That additional punishment was illegal. So a court hearing was convened in Astana to remove it.

I couldn't get my head around the absurdity. They had reviewed my case and discovered that part of my sentence was unlawful. There it was. An actual illegality. And what happened? They removed that part. Fine. Problem solved. What about everything else? What about all the violations that could affect the actual conviction? Silence. Apparently the great injustice requiring correction was what might happen to me after I had finished serving the enormous prison sentence they had already given me.

I was sitting inside thinking: Thank Allah you've sorted that out. I was really worried about what would happen after I got out. --- All of this was happening in the background while my physical world was changing completely. 99. The transfer. 71. The Akhis. The November riot. Big Bro. The kitchens. The work zone. Different dramas were happening simultaneously, but they were all parts of the same life. Then the leadership of 71 itself began changing. After the previous chief was removed and eventually convicted, a familiar face reappeared.

Akilbayesh. This time he arrived as the prison deputy. I remember seeing him and thinking: Great. A friendly face. At first, that's exactly what he was. We knew each other. There was history between us. He remembered the club. I remembered what he'd done for me in 99. Everything was friendly. For now. --- Working in the work zone introduced me to another man. Everyone called him Rus. His full name was Ruslan Yerdenayev, the former chairman of Kazakhstan's Unified

Accumulative Pension Fund. He spoke perfect English and was serving a twelve-year sentence.

Rus was close friends with a small Russian guy called Andrew. Andrew occupied the club in 71. But Andrew wasn't simply another prisoner hanging around the club. He was the eyes and ears of the KNB inside 71. At least, that was how his role was understood inside the prison. Until then, the KNB had existed in my mind mostly through stories. And they weren't pleasant stories. People whispered about them. People feared them. You heard stories about what they could do, how far their reach extended and what happened when they became interested in somebody.

I had never imagined that my own experience with them would develop the way it did. Rus and Andrew had heard about my case. Eventually they invited me for lunch. We sat together and talked. I explained what had happened. Then they heard the recordings. Madina's recordings. Their reaction was immediate. They went absolutely ballistic. For years I had watched people receive evidence from my case and respond with procedure. Applications. Delays. Referrals. Technical problems.

Come back later. Wrong jurisdiction. Send it somewhere else. Wait for a response. Andrew didn't react like that. He reacted like a human being hearing something he believed was a serious injustice. “What the fuck is this?” He got on the phone. Immediately. He started speaking to his KNB contacts. He explained what he'd heard. The recordings. The case. The situation. The injustice as he saw it. And I sat there watching. This was my first real glimpse into how the KNB operated from the inside.

They came back with a simple position. It was my recording. I had the right to release it. For the first time, the organisation I had previously associated with frightening prison stories was being presented to me from an entirely different angle. And my own view began to change. Over the years that followed, my experiences would lead me to a conclusion I never would have expected when I first entered prison: whatever terrible stories I had heard about the KNB, I would also see circumstances in which their presence prevented the prison world around me from descending into complete pandemonium.

That was my experience. And for me, increasingly, they became the part of the Kazakhstan system I believed might actually be capable of confronting things that everybody else appeared frightened, unwilling or too compromised to touch. I finally had people inside the system hearing what I had been saying. They had heard the recordings. They understood their significance. Andrew had direct communication with the KNB. And they were telling me I could release them.

After years of waiting, something finally felt as though it might move. There was only one problem. The same problem that had followed me quietly through everything else. Din-Mohamed worked extremely slowly.

Chapter 105: The Door Opens

The Door Opens

Sitting with Andrew and Rus taught me a lot. Sometimes more than sitting with lawyers ever had. One day I was complaining about Din-Mohamed again. Too slow. Everything was too slow. Motion. Wait. Complaint. Wait. Telephone call. Wait. Another promise. Wait. Rus had absolutely no patience for lawyers. Which was ironic, considering that his own wife, Elena, had gone so far in fighting his case that she eventually became a fully licensed lawyer herself. But Rus's experience with lawyers had left him bitter. During his criminal case, his family had paid enormous sums of money to lawyers who, according to what Rus told me, promised that money would be used to resolve his situation. It didn't resolve anything. His family eventually complained. Those lawyers—Alexander Blok and Gulnara Smagul—would themselves later be convicted of fraud and incitement to bribery and sentenced to eleven years in prison. Their version of events was different and they disputed the accusations, but as far as Rus was concerned, his experience had destroyed whatever faith he'd once had in lawyers.

Orda +1 So there I was complaining about my lawyer when one of them looked at me as though I was an idiot. “Why doesn't your family file the motions for you on eGov?” “What's eGov?” They both looked at me. I'd been imprisoned in Kazakhstan for years and nobody had ever explained this to me. eGov was Kazakhstan's electronic government system—a doorway connecting ordinary people directly with state institutions. And suddenly something clicked in my head. “Hold on. Everybody in Kazakhstan's prisons can complain online except me?” I was a British citizen. I couldn't access the system. I couldn't submit anything electronically. I couldn't directly reach the departments making decisions about my life. “I am the only person being silenced here.” I contacted Din-Mohamed. Then I contacted the British Embassy. I made the same argument to both. This wasn't fair. If Kazakhstan provided prisoners with an electronic mechanism through which they could exercise their rights, then being a foreigner shouldn't mean I was excluded from that mechanism entirely. They got to work. And eventually I received something that would change the way my family fought my case. A Kazakhstan IIN. Then an eGov account. My mother could access it from outside. And suddenly the door opened. My mother could submit applications and complaints on my behalf directly into the Kazakhstan government system. Police. Prosecutors. Departments. General Prosecutor's Office. All the way up to the President's Administration. No lawyer standing between us. No waiting for Din-Mohamed to finally get around to pressing send. My mother could do it herself. And if there's one person you don't want to give unlimited access to a government complaints portal when her son is sitting in prison, it's my mother. She went to work. But I still had another problem. I'd already received the message through Andrew's KNB contacts that I had the right to release Madina's recordings. But KNB permission wasn't the only permission

that mattered inside prison. There was still Big Bro. And there was absolutely no way, I thought, that Big Bro was going to allow me to create a media explosion from inside his prison. Then Allah sent the solution from somewhere I could never have predicted. Akilbayesh. For reasons I couldn't understand at the time, Akilbayesh had started attacking Big Bro. He simply didn't like him. The tension between them kept growing until one day Big Bro called me over. “Akilbayesh is a fucking problem.” Then he asked me something I wasn't expecting. “Tell me about that phone he sold you in 99.” So I told him everything. The club. Shark. The Vivo. The thousand dollars. Five hundred one month, five hundred the next. The arrangement. And then I told him about the other things I had preserved. The recordings. The evidence. Everything I'd been sitting on. A youngster nearby translated as I spoke. Big Bro stared at me. “Fuck me. You've been sitting on all this for years?” “Did I have another option?” I looked at him. “Prison rules, man.” He understood exactly what I meant. For years I had possessed material that could potentially help expose what had happened in my case, while simultaneously living inside a world where releasing it could bring searches, punishment and violence down on everybody around me. Big Bro's expression changed. There was determination in his face now. “Fuck Akilbayesh all the way.” Then came the words I'd been waiting years to hear. “Release everything. Tell the full story.” Just like that. I had permission from everyone who actually mattered in my world. And Andrew was already moving. He had excellent contacts in the media. He sat there going through my case files. Page after page. Document after document. And Andrew wasn't missing anything. Every few minutes he'd stop. Look again. Turn back a page. Then he'd look at Rus. “Russa, look at the amount of shit in this guy's files.” Another document. Another contradiction. Another question. Then Andrew picked up his phone. He called a journalist. Not just any journalist. Someone who had reported on my case years earlier. Back then, like almost everybody else in the media, she'd largely been working from information released by the prosecution and investigative authorities. Now Andrew was showing her what was sitting on the other side of the story. He explained something. Silence. Then I heard her reaction. “No way.” A pause. “Can you prove that?” Andrew photographed the document. Send. Another page. Send. Another. Send. And another. The process continued. For years the prosecution had controlled the information that reached the public about me. Now somebody from the media was looking directly at the material behind the headlines. Before long, the journalist had been introduced to my mother. My mother. My true hero throughout all of this. And now the two of them were talking about my case day and night. The journalist wanted the recordings. She wanted to break the story. And the timing couldn't have been better. Because my mother had already been firing applications through eGov. One after another. Different departments. Different authorities. The legal system. The General Prosecutor's Office. The President's Administration. She kept sending them. And they kept closing them. Rejected. Closed. Passed elsewhere. No meaningful explanation. Another motion. Closed. Another complaint. Closed. But

now we believed we had another route. The media. We understood that publication could potentially force the authorities to confront material they had been ignoring when it arrived simply as another complaint. And suddenly all those nights I'd spent imagining this exact moment came rushing back. The headlines. The recordings becoming public. The media storm. People finally asking questions. Authorities finally having to respond. For years I'd imagined it before falling asleep. I'd imagined Madina finally making the mistake that couldn't be taken back. I'd imagined getting the evidence out. I'd imagined people hearing it. I'd imagined the story exploding. And every time I'd opened my eyes again—prison ceiling. Nothing had changed. But this time I wasn't dreaming. There was a journalist on the other end of the telephone. Andrew had my case files spread out in front of him. Rus was sitting beside us. My mother was outside hammering the government through eGov. The KNB contacts Andrew had spoken to had raised no objection to me releasing my recordings. Big Bro had looked me in the eye and said: Release everything. Tell the full story. After all these years, every door that had been closed seemed to be opening at the same time. And I found myself asking questions I was almost frightened to ask. Is this it? Is it really about to happen? Has Allah finally answered my prayers? And then the thought that mattered more than all the others. I looked towards the sky. Sophia, can you see what's about to happen?

Chapter 106: The Story Nobody Wanted

The Story Nobody Wanted

Things rarely happen the way you imagine them. For years I had imagined this moment. The recordings would come out. The newspapers would explode. People would hear Madina's own words and immediately ask the obvious question: If this woman is saying these things, why is Mohamed Barakat sitting in prison for murdering his daughter? It seemed simple. At least, that was how it worked in my imagination. Reality was very different. People had been ravenously hungry for the original story.

A mad British Muslim pilot who brutally beat his wife and murdered his own daughter in a fit of rage. An airline captain. A foreigner. A five-star hotel. A beautiful young wife. A dead baby. Now that was news. The human mind is a strange organ. Give people something horrific enough and they can't look away. But when the truth starts coming out years later, somehow it isn't interesting enough. Tell people that the original story might have been wrong. Tell them evidence might have been ignored.

Tell them an innocent man might have spent years sitting in prison. Suddenly the story isn't nearly as exciting. What disturbed me even more was how easily the original narrative had travelled around the world. Unverified and, in my view, fabricated information published in Kazakhstan could be repeated internationally as though it were established fact. The prosecution and investigative authorities

had been able to put their version into the public domain while I sat inside detention unable to answer it.

Then international newspapers simply picked it up. Copy. Paste. Publish. While reading my case files over and over again, my eyes kept passing across one particular name. A Russian journalist who worked with major British newspapers. Her name was actually in the case materials. So were her contact details. She had formally requested information so she could cover my story. I resented her. Deeply. Because she had helped carry that original story far beyond Kazakhstan.

New York. Albania. Spain. Italy. Indonesia. Yemen. Nigeria. The Philippines. My name had travelled around the planet while I sat inside a cell. Now Orda had published almost three articles examining what was emerging from the other side of the case. And still the rest of the Kazakhstan media weren't biting. Nobody wanted the risk. Publishing something that directly challenged the prosecution or Ministry of Internal Affairs was a completely different proposition from repeating information those same institutions had originally released.

I called Mum. “Should we send everything to that journalist in Moscow?” There was a pause. Mum didn't like her. Neither did I. She was reluctant. “Mum, everything and anything is worth a shot.” Eventually she agreed. I gave her the name and the telephone number written in my case files. Several years had passed since that journalist first wrote about me. It was a long shot. Mum sent her a message. And something remarkable happened. She replied. She remembered my case clearly.

And then she said something neither of us expected. Something has always bothered me about that case. That sentence changed everything. She was an investigative journalist, and once she started looking at what we had, she dug straight in. The recordings. The documents. The expert material. The contradictions. The evidence she hadn't seen when she first reported the prosecution's version years earlier. For the first time, she was looking at my case from the other side.

Then came the first major article in the British press. And that set off a chain reaction. The story had broken through the wall. Kazakhstan media could now report on what was already being reported internationally. One outlet picked it up. Then another. The story began moving. And finally— we had the prosecutors' attention. --- By now the police had questioned Madina about the recordings. Her position was clear. The voice wasn't hers. She formally denied it in her police statement.

I almost had to admire the confidence. There it was again. Deny. Deny. Deny. But this time there was a problem. There was a scientific way of answering the question. Test the voice. I believed the police and prosecutors thought they had finally found their way out of this mess. Send the recordings for phonoscopic examination. Prove the voice wasn't Madina. Then publicly destroy everything I'd been saying. Mohamed Barakat fabricated the recordings. Mohamed Barakat lied.

Mohamed Barakat tried to manipulate his case. And perhaps, I feared, they could even find a way to add more years to the twenty I already had. So when I learned that the recordings were going for examination, I wasn't celebrating. I was terrified. Because this was Kazakhstan. I'd seen too much by then. I'd seen what could happen to documents. I'd seen what could happen to evidence. I'd seen expert conclusions change. I knew exactly whose voice was on those recordings.

I had been married to that woman. I'd spent years listening to that voice. Happy. Angry. Drunk. Crying. Laughing. Whispering. Lying. I didn't need an expert to tell me whose voice it was. But the world did. And I waited. --- Meanwhile, Madina somehow found me again. Different prison. Different phone. Different number. It didn't matter. One day a message appeared from a number I didn't recognise. We need to talk. Madina. “What about?” She asked for a video call.

Fine. I answered. The camera opened. She was sitting behind a desk with a sign above her. Wildberries. Kazakhstan's equivalent of Amazon. She was here to show me how well she was doing. She walked outside with the phone and showed me a second-hand Mercedes E-Class she'd bought. During her time on Stripchat —or whatever platform she had been using—she told me she'd met a Japanese businessman who would send her a few thousand dollars here, another few thousand there.

Probably insignificant money to him. Allah knows what he expected from her in return. I let her finish showing me everything. “Great,” I said. “Does this mean we can finally get divorced?” “Nooooo.” Long. Drawn out. Condescending. Then she smiled. “I told my father I'm going to keep you dangling in prison without a woman.” I looked at her. “What did your father reply?” “He said I should be careful with you. He said, ‘As a man, Mohamed won't sit quietly after everything you've done to him.’”

I almost smiled. “Wise words from your father.” She looked at me through the screen. “Look at you, Mohamed. You're finished.” Am I really? I thought. Needless to say, when I sent another divorce request through my lawyer, she didn't respond. --- Then came the wait for the phonoscopic results. Every day I thought about it. What are they going to do? I knew the voice was hers. But knowing something and proving something inside the Kazakhstan legal system had become two completely different things in my mind.

Part of me even believed Madina had denied it with such confidence that perhaps she'd convinced them too. Maybe they genuinely expected the examination to prove that Mohamed was lying. Then the bombshell landed. Expert Conclusion No. 10980. The experts had analysed the recordings. Old methods. New methods. Comparison samples. The result was clear. The female voice on the recordings belonged to Madina Abdullayeva. I read it again. Madina had formally told the police:

It isn't my voice. Now the forensic examination said: It is. And the examination found no signs that the recordings had been edited. There it was.

Black and white. Not Mohamed saying it. Not my mother saying it. Not my sisters. Not Andrew. Not Rus. Not a journalist. The state's own forensic examination. The voice was Madina Abdullayeva's. And the second media storm began. --- This time Kazakhstan media came onboard. The story started spreading. The recordings.

The confession. The expert examination. The questions surrounding my conviction. Now people weren't simply reading an allegation from a prisoner saying his former wife had confessed. There was a police statement in which Madina denied that the voice was hers. And there was a forensic expert conclusion identifying that voice as hers. Suddenly the story had become much harder to bury. For years I had dreamed about the media storm. Now I was watching it happen.

Then Din-Mohamed received a telephone call. Madina wanted to sign the divorce papers. I almost laughed when I heard. After all those years. After refusing. After ignoring the paperwork. After telling me: You're mine. You belong to me. I'll keep you dangling in prison without another woman. Suddenly Madina wanted a divorce. But there was something she wanted in return. “Please ask Mohamed to stop releasing these personal conversations between us.” I sat there thinking about that last video call.

Her sitting behind the Wildberries desk. The Mercedes. The smile. The confidence. And those words: Look at you, Mohamed. You're finished. Am I really finished, Madina? Or have I only just started? Not long afterwards, she left Kazakhstan and went to Russia for a while. And I remained exactly where I had been. Behind prison walls. Still serving twenty years. Still officially convicted of murdering my daughter. But something fundamental had changed. For years I had been begging people to listen to me.

Now they didn't have to. Madina had formally denied to the police that the voice was hers. The experts had answered that question. The recordings were out. The media were finally listening. And this time— they knew it was her voice.

Chapter 107: The Second Bombshell

The Second Bombshell

The second bombshell to hit the prosecution came from somewhere none of us could have predicted. It had nothing to do with my case. Nothing to do with Madina. Nothing to do with Nurlan Bolatov. Nothing to do with Sophia or anyone involved in the investigation against me. It came from another murder case entirely. Kuandyk Bishimbayev. Bishimbayev was a former minister in Kazakhstan, and his prosecution for the killing of his wife, Saltanat Nukenova, became one of the most high-profile criminal cases the country had ever seen.

The case caused an enormous public outcry. Domestic violence had become a national conversation, and the authorities were under intense pressure to show the public that this case would be handled properly. The trial was broadcast live. The

country could watch. Court sessions. Witnesses. Lawyers. Experts. Evidence. Everything happening in front of the public. I wasn't the one sitting in prison watching the entire trial. Din- Mohamed was. And as my lawyer watched, he began noticing something that had nothing to do with Bishimbayev himself.

He was seeing what a Kazakhstan murder trial looked like when the whole country was watching. And the differences between his case and mine were stark. Evidence was being produced openly. Video footage was shown and examined. Experts were challenged. Lawyers argued their positions. The judge made rulings and explained the legal basis for them. The amount of video evidence alone made the comparison impossible to ignore. My alleged crime had supposedly taken place inside the InterContinental Hotel in Almaty.

A five-star international hotel. Cameras everywhere. Yet in my case, the relevant footage hadn't simply disappeared because somebody forgot to preserve it. According to the testimony of the hotel's head of security in my trial, investigator Nurlan Bolatov had personally gone to the hotel, sat with him and deleted the footage. Think about that. A murder investigation. A hotel covered with cameras. Potential evidence. And the investigator responsible for the case goes there and deletes it.

Then compare that with what Din-Mohamed was watching in the Bishimbayev trial. Video. Video. More video. Preserved. Presented. Examined. Used as evidence. But even that wasn't the bombshell. The bombshell came when Bishimbayev's defence attempted to introduce its own forensic opinion concerning Saltanat Nukenova's death. Judge Aizhan Kulbayeva rejected it. Din-Mohamed immediately paid attention. Because the court identified two separate problems with what the defence had done.

The first was procedural. The defence had obtained the expert opinion without properly informing and involving the prosecution and investigative side. Din-Mohamed immediately saw the parallel. That's exactly what we've been complaining about. In my case, my defence had complained that crucial repeat forensic work had been undertaken without properly informing us and without giving the defence the procedural participation it should have had. We had raised that issue again and again.

But then Judge Kulbayeva moved to the second reason. And this was where everything changed. Regulation 400. The experts whose opinion Bishimbayev's defence wanted admitted had reached conclusions concerning Saltanat's death without physically examining her corpse. The court wouldn't allow it. The principle was clear. An expert couldn't determine the cause of death simply from medical documents and other materials without the required physical examination of the corpse.

Din-Mohamed knew immediately what he was hearing. Because this wasn't something new to us. We had been saying exactly the same thing for years. --- Sophia had already been buried when the authorities decided they wanted another forensic opinion. Her body wasn't exhumed. There was no new physical

examination of her corpse. Yet somehow Opinion No. 28 was produced. And that repeat opinion became enormously important to the prosecution's case against me. We challenged it.

Again. And again. And again. And we weren't simply saying: Mohamed thinks this is illegal. By then we had accumulated evidence from multiple directions pointing to exactly the same problem. Some of Kazakhstan's leading forensic specialists had disputed Opinion No. 28. Not one. Not two. We had at least five of Kazakhstan's top forensic experts challenging the second opinion and its forensic basis, including the fundamental problem of attempting to reach those conclusions without physically examining Sophia's corpse.

These were experts. People who understood autopsies. People who understood forensic medicine. People who understood what could and couldn't scientifically be concluded from the materials available. Still nothing changed. Then came something even harder for the authorities to explain away. The Ministry of Justice itself. We had written confirmation. The Ministry's response supported the very regulatory point we'd been making: determinations of this nature concerning cause of death and the relevant injuries could not simply be made from documents and photographs without the required examination of the corpse.

There it was. In writing. From the Kazakhstan Ministry of Justice. So understand where we were by the time Din-Mohamed watched the Bishimbayev trial. We already had the regulation. We already had the forensic experts. We already had the Ministry of Justice's written confirmation. We had complained about Opinion No. 28 through every level we could reach. Prosecutors. Courts. The General Prosecutor's Office. Government bodies. Eventually even the President's Administration.

Over and over again we raised the same basic question: How can Opinion No. 28 legally and scientifically stand when Sophia's corpse wasn't physically examined for that repeat expertise? And somehow nobody wanted to confront the question. A response would arrive. Another office. Another piece of paper. Another explanation. Another referral. Another refusal. But never the obvious answer. Then along came Bishimbayev. A case that had absolutely nothing to do with Mohamed Barakat.

And Kazakhstan's own legal system demonstrated the answer for us. --- That's what made Din- Mohamed's discovery so powerful. Judge Kulbayeva wasn't helping me. She wasn't considering my case. She wasn't talking about Sophia. She wasn't looking at Opinion No. 28. She probably had no idea that somewhere inside a Kazakhstan prison sat a British pilot whose lawyer was watching her ruling and recognising every word. She was simply applying the law in the case in front of her.

Bishimbayev's defence presented an expert opinion. The court examined how it had been obtained. The other side hadn't been properly involved. Problem. The corpse hadn't been physically examined. Problem. Regulation 400. Evidence rejected. That was it. Simple. And that simplicity was devastating. Because now

we had two unmistakable, completely separate confirmations from within Kazakhstan's own state and legal system. First, the Ministry of Justice had confirmed the regulatory problem to us in writing.

Then, independently, Judge Kulbayeva applied that same principle in another murder trial. And surrounding both of those were the forensic specialists who had already challenged Opinion No. 28. How many times did the same thing need to be proved? How many experts? How many letters? How many complaints? How many government departments? Did we need the Ministry of Justice? We had it. Did we need forensic experts? We had them. Did we need an example of the courts actually applying the rule?

Now we had that too. Yet Opinion No. 28 remained in my case. --- And that's where the double standard became impossible for me to ignore. Put the two cases beside each other. In the Bishimbayev case, the defence wanted to introduce forensic evidence obtained without properly involving the other side. Rejected. The defence wanted to rely upon an opinion reached without physical examination of the corpse. Rejected. Regulation 400. Now look at mine. The prosecution obtained the repeat forensic Opinion No. 28.

My defence complained about the procedure. Sophia wasn't exhumed. Her corpse wasn't physically examined for that repeat expertise. Leading forensic specialists disputed it. The Ministry of Justice gave us written confirmation supporting the regulatory objection. And yet— accepted. Not merely accepted. Used against me. Same country. Same legal system. Same forensic regulations. So what was different? Which side needed the evidence. That was the conclusion I couldn't escape.

When the law protected the prosecution in the Bishimbayev case, the law was clear. Procedure mattered. Notification mattered. Forensic regulations mattered. Physical examination of the corpse mattered. Everything had to be done correctly. Good. That's exactly how a criminal justice system should operate. But where was that same protection when I was the defendant? Where was that concern for procedural fairness when my defence complained? Where was Regulation 400 when Sophia's body hadn't been physically examined?

Where was the concern for preservation of evidence when the hotel's head of security testified that Nurlan Bolatov had personally sat with him and deleted footage? Why did the rules suddenly become so precise when Bishimbayev's defence needed evidence admitted, yet apparently become flexible when the prosecution needed Opinion No. 28 against me? It seemed to me that in Kazakhstan the prosecution always got what it wanted, no matter what the law actually said.

When a rule helped the prosecution, suddenly every word mattered. When the same rule threatened the prosecution's case, somehow there was always another interpretation. Another technicality. Another response. Another office. Another refusal. Or simply silence. --- There was something almost poetic about the way these two bombshells had arrived. The first came from the centre of my own case.

Madina formally denied to the police that the voice on the recordings belonged to her.

Then the forensic examination identified the voice as hers. The second bombshell came from a case that had absolutely nothing to do with mine. A former minister was accused of killing his wife. Kazakhstan put his trial in front of the entire nation to demonstrate how justice should work. And while doing so, the legal system inadvertently demonstrated one of the central things we'd been saying was wrong with my case. We didn't discover Regulation 400 because of Bishimbayev.

That's important. We already knew. The experts had told us. The Ministry of Justice had confirmed the problem in writing. We had been shouting about it through every legal avenue available to us. What Bishimbayev gave us was different. Application. Din-Mohamed watched a Kazakhstan judge take that principle and actually use it. No argument. No excuses. No endless correspondence. The rule said you couldn't do it. So she didn't allow it. And suddenly we could hold two cases beside each other and say:

Explain this. Not our interpretation. Not Mohamed's interpretation. Not his mother's interpretation. Not simply one expert's opinion. Your Ministry. Your regulations. Your judge. Your court. Your own application of your own law. Why did it apply there— but not here? --- There was one final thing about the Bishimbayev case that stayed with me. Judge Aizhan Kulbayeva was hailed by many people as a national hero. People admired her. Her strength. Her professionalism.

Her control of the courtroom. Her insistence on procedure. Her willingness to apply the law regardless of who was standing in front of her. And I understood why people respected her. I respected that too. But there was something incredibly sad about it. A judge had become a national hero simply for doing her job properly. Think about that. She hadn't performed a miracle. She hadn't invented a new legal system. She hadn't rewritten Kazakhstan's Criminal Procedure Code.

She hadn't created Regulation 400. She had simply looked at the evidence. Looked at the procedure. Looked at the law. And applied it. Exactly what a judge is supposed to do. Yet the reaction to her showed me something much bigger. For me, it demonstrated just how desperate the people of Kazakhstan were to see judges who simply did their jobs according to the law. When ordinary justice becomes extraordinary, something is seriously wrong. When applying the law makes somebody a national hero, what does that tell you about people's expectations of the system?

I didn't resent Judge Kulbayeva for the praise. Quite the opposite. I wished there were a thousand more like her. But sitting inside prison, there was one question I couldn't get out of my head. Where was my Judge Kulbayeva? Where was the judge who would pick up Regulation 400, read it and simply apply it? Where was the judge who would look at Opinion No. 28 and ask the obvious

question? Where was the judge who would look at the Ministry of Justice's written confirmation?

Where was the judge who would listen to five forensic experts? Where was the judge who would ask why a repeat forensic opinion concerning my daughter's death had been allowed to stand when the very principle Kazakhstan's courts applied elsewhere said it shouldn't? I wasn't asking anybody to bend the law for Mohamed Barakat. That was the entire point. I was asking them not to bend it. The Bishimbayev case hadn't discovered the problem with Opinion No. 28. We already had the experts.

We already had the Ministry. We already had the regulation. What the Bishimbayev case did was something perhaps even more important. It exposed the double standard. And Kazakhstan had broadcast it live to the entire nation.

Chapter 108: investigating Themselves

Investigating Themselves

I was going through an emotional rollercoaster. Every development seemed to bring me to the edge of believing that finally—finally—something was going to happen. I kept waiting for them to arrest Madina. She had left Kazakhstan several times. First Russia, and she was called back by the police. Then Vietnam, and again she was called back. To us, her behaviour was deeply suspicious, and by then everyone involved knew what was happening. Still I waited. Surely now.

Surely after everything that has come out, they have to act. The recordings were public. Madina had formally denied to the police that the voice belonged to her. The phonoscopic examination had established that it did. The media had begun reporting the story. The problems surrounding Opinion No. 28 were no longer something that could simply be dismissed as Mohamed Barakat complaining from a prison cell. We had multiple leading forensic experts disputing it.

We had written confirmation from the Ministry of Justice supporting the very regulatory problem we'd been raising. And then the Bishimbayev case had independently demonstrated how Regulation 400 was actually applied by a Kazakhstan court when the whole country was watching. My family kept complaining. Higher. And higher. And higher. Eventually an order came down from the General Prosecutor's Office. The matters we had raised were to be investigated. Madina's recorded confessions.

Her alleged illegal online activities. The circumstances surrounding forensic Opinion No. 28. For a moment, it felt like we'd finally broken through. People around me couldn't believe we'd managed to get this far. After years of doors being slammed in our faces, the General Prosecutor's Office itself had now ordered action. So I waited. And waited. And then we realised something almost unbelievable. Nobody had even interviewed me. I was the man sitting in prison.

I had received the recordings. I had communicated with Madina. I knew the circumstances in which those conversations had taken place. I had preserved the material. I was the person serving twenty years for the crime those recordings directly concerned. And yet the police hadn't even interviewed me. Eventually we actually had to complain about that. How can you claim to be properly investigating this material without even questioning the convicted man at the centre of it?

In my opinion, by then what I was watching amounted to blatant obstruction. But there was a much larger problem. And this one wasn't simply my opinion. We had already documented it. --- The Self-Review Paradox Long before this latest investigation, we had identified a structural problem running through the complaint process. We called it the self-review paradox. Or, perhaps more accurately, the circular accountability loop. We had seen it repeatedly in the documentary trail created by our own complaints.

You complain that an institution or officials within it have violated the law. The institution rejects your complaint. So you go higher. The higher authority receives it. And what happens? The complaint travels straight back down through the same institutional chain whose conduct you're challenging. Then that structure effectively becomes part of the process determining whether anything improper happened in the first place. Who investigates the investigators?

We had asked that question so many times that eventually we wrote publicly about the problem. Stop for a moment and imagine what this means in ordinary life. Imagine you're deliberately speeding down the highway. You're doing 150 kilometres an hour. You're caught. But instead of a police officer issuing the ticket, somebody hands you the ticket book. “Here you go. Investigate yourself. Decide whether you were speeding. And if you conclude that you were, issue yourself the punishment.”

How many of you would write yourselves that ticket? Be serious. Almost none. Now replace the speeding ticket with something infinitely more serious. A murder investigation. Destruction of evidence. Forensic procedures. Prosecutorial decisions. Court proceedings. A twenty-year prison sentence. Potential criminal responsibility if serious violations were ever established. And now ask the institutions whose actions are being challenged to determine whether those actions were lawful.

We had watched the pattern happen repeatedly. Complaint. Referral downward. Review inside the same institutional circle. No violation found. Case closed. Complain higher. Back down it goes. Another review. Another rejection. Another piece of paper. And around again. That's the circular accountability loop. A complaint can appear to have been reviewed over and over again while never truly escaping the institutional structure whose conduct is actually being challenged.

And now, after perhaps the biggest breakthrough we'd had in years, we were watching the same mechanism operate again. --- By then I had spent a very long

time in Kazakhstan. I wasn't the foreign airline captain who'd arrived at the InterContinental anymore. I'd seen Kazakhstan from places most foreigners would never see. Police cells. Detention centres. Courtrooms. Prisons. I'd watched how relationships worked. How money worked. How influence worked. How prisoners dealt with guards.

How guards dealt with administrators. How administrators dealt with the people above them. And how complaints travelled through the legal system. Personally, I had reached a much darker conclusion. I strongly believed that people implicated in what had happened in my case had every possible incentive to use whatever influence was available to stop the whole thing from being pulled apart. Because imagine the consequences if my conviction were overturned for the reasons we were alleging.

This wouldn't simply be about opening a prison gate and allowing Mohamed Barakat to walk out. There would be another question. Who put him there? What happens if evidence was unlawfully destroyed? What happens if forensic procedures were unlawfully conducted? What happens if evidence was manipulated? What happens if serious procedural violations were knowingly ignored? What happens if an innocent man was convicted and then kept in prison despite evidence capable of exposing what had happened?

What happens to the investigators? The prosecutors? The officials who approved decisions? The people who signed their names to documents along the way? Kazakhstan's laws can impose serious consequences for official misconduct. So ask yourself another simple question. If properly reopening my case could potentially expose people involved in the original investigation and prosecution to consequences themselves — how enthusiastic would those same institutions be about investigating their own conduct?

I had my answer. --- The General Prosecutor's Office had ordered an investigation. So we waited. And the waiting dragged on. Weeks. Months. Requests. Complaints. More waiting. Meanwhile, something else was happening. The media storm was dying. That's how news works. Something explodes. Everyone talks about it. Then another story arrives. Then another. Yesterday's headline becomes last week's story. Last week's story becomes something people vaguely remember.

The pressure disappears. And true to form, the Prosecutor's Office dragged the response out long enough for the media frenzy surrounding my case to cool. Then, quietly— they shut it down again. Around the same period, other troubling things began happening. CentralMedia told us that it had suffered a cyberattack. My article disappeared from its website. Then my eGov access was blocked. The very system my mother had been using to send complaints and applications throughout Kazakhstan's state structure suddenly became inaccessible to us.

And then came one of the most disturbing responses we'd received from the General Prosecutor's Office. After everything we'd uncovered— after Madina's recorded statements; after her formal denial that the voice was hers; after the

forensic examination identified it as her voice; after the questions surrounding Opinion No. 28; after multiple forensic experts disputed it; after the Ministry of Justice's written confirmation; after the Bishimbayev case publicly demonstrated the application of Regulation 400;

after complaint upon complaint; after media coverage; after the General Prosecutor's Office itself had ordered investigative action— a response arrived taking the position that I had no opportunity through that route to appeal my conviction. Another door closed. Again. --- But I'd been here before. Years earlier, I had said something to Nurlan Bolatov. Something I still believe today. You cannot silence the innocent. You can imprison him. You can take away his telephone.

You can block his complaints. You can shut down another review. You can block his eGov. You can wait until journalists lose interest. You can send his complaint from one government office to another until it eventually lands back in the hands of the very institutional structure he complained about. You can bury him beneath official responses. You can lock him behind concrete walls. But you cannot force a man to accept responsibility for something he knows he didn't do.

And you cannot stop him telling his story forever. So here I am. Writing it. All of it. The InterContinental. Room 801. The investigation. Nurlan Bolatov. The deleted footage. The forensic evidence. Opinion No. 28. The experts. The Ministry of Justice. The trial. The appeals. Madina. The recordings. The prisons. The beatings. The extortion. The people who helped me. The people who failed me. The documents. The complaints. The circular accountability loop. The Kazakhstan legal system as I experienced it from inside its police cells, courts and prisons.

And the response of the British government as I experienced it as one of its citizens imprisoned thousands of miles from home. This isn't the story I ever imagined I would spend my life writing. I was an airline captain. I wanted to fly aeroplanes. I wanted to raise my daughter. I wanted to go to work and come home. Sophia should have been growing up while I grew older. Instead, Sophia died. I went to prison. And somewhere during all those years, documenting what happened became part of surviving it.

For years, other people told the story of Mohamed Barakat. Investigators. Prosecutors. Courts. Journalists. Officials. Everybody seemed entitled to write their version of who I was and what happened inside that hotel room. Back then I was locked away and almost voiceless while their version travelled around the world. But as I once told Nurlan Bolatov: You cannot silence the innocent. And after all these years, there's one fundamental difference between the man who said those words then and the man writing these words now.

Back then, all I had was my voice. Now I have the evidence.

Chapter 109: Help is on the Way

Help Is on the Way

One of the greatest lessons this ordeal has taught me is about people. People you know. People you think you know. People you expect will stand beside you when everything falls apart. And people you never imagined would. Prison has a strange way of stripping relationships down to their foundations. When your life is going well, everybody can be your friend. There are dinners, holidays, telephone calls, laughter, photographs, birthdays. You never really know which relationships are built to survive anything because they've never had to.

Then your world collapses. The headlines come. Your name becomes toxic. People whisper. People speculate. Some disappear without saying a word. Others surprise you in ways you will remember for the rest of your life. And as the news of what had been uncovered in my case finally began breaking in the UK, something amazing happened. Help was on the way. First and foremost, there are two people I need to thank. Dr V and Janara. They know who they are to me. For obvious reasons, I don't need to explain everything they did or everything that connects us. They know.

What matters is that these were two people I never imagined would become heroes in this long ordeal. Yet they did. Without them, almost nobody would have heard about the turn of events that began exposing what had happened in my case. Life teaches you not to be too certain about people. Sometimes the person you expect to fight for you disappears. And sometimes somebody you never expected to step forward walks straight into the storm. Dr V and Janara did. For that, I will never forget them.

But they weren't alone. There were other heroes. Some of them never appeared in newspapers. Nobody interviewed them. Nobody photographed them. Most people will never know how many hours they spent behind the scenes. But I know. They created social-media accounts to get my story out. They provided financial support. They contacted government departments and public bodies. They wrote emails. They made telephone calls. They attended meetings with Members of Parliament on my behalf.

They spoke to people I couldn't reach from inside a Kazakhstan prison. They gave their time when they had families, careers and problems of their own. And perhaps most importantly, when supporting me became uncomfortable, they didn't run away. My case became sensitive within parts of the Muslim community. People could point at things I'd done in my private life and say: But Mohamed drank alcohol. Others could look at Madina and everything surrounding her life and somehow use her actions as another reason to judge me.

My friends refused to accept that logic. Their position was simple. Whatever Mohamed's imperfections were, an innocent man shouldn't sit in prison for a murder he didn't commit. If he drank alcohol, then he drank alcohol. That doesn't make him a murderer. Whatever his ex-wife did with her life was her responsibility. It didn't make him a murderer either. You don't have to approve of every decision somebody has ever made to stand up when you believe an injustice has been done to them.

And these men understood that. Shehab. Kash. Ali. Adam Abdul Basir. Amr. Hilal. Aziz. Zee. Emilio. Childhood friends. Men who had known me before any of this existed. Before Kazakhstan. Before Room 801. Before courtrooms and prisons. Before my name appeared in newspapers around the world. Life had moved on for all of us. Everybody had grown older. Careers. Businesses. Wives. Children. Responsibilities. Their own problems. Their own lives. It would have been incredibly easy for any one of them to say:

Mohamed's situation is terrible, but what can I do? Or: This isn't my problem. Or perhaps the easiest sentence of all: Someone else will help him. But they didn't. They grouped together. They organised. They gave what they could. One person could make a call. Another knew somebody who might listen. Someone could help financially. Someone could contact an official. Someone could work on social media. Someone could attend a meeting. Someone could speak when I couldn't.

Piece by piece, they built a support network around an old friend sitting thousands of miles away in prison. They refused to sit and watch. They refused to turn their backs and pretend this wasn't their problem simply because it wasn't their fight. They made it their fight. And perhaps that's what friendship really is. Not the people standing beside you in the photograph when everything is going well. It's the people who are still standing there after everybody else has left.

Prison showed me some terrible sides of human nature. I've seen greed. Betrayal. Cowardice. People exploiting desperation. People asking families for money because they know they'll pay anything to save somebody they love. I've watched people change completely when they think there's nothing left you can offer them. But it has shown me the opposite too. Loyalty. Generosity. Courage. Friendship. People doing things for somebody when there is absolutely nothing in it for themselves.

And those are the people you remember. Not because they promised they would be there. Because they were there. When I needed voices outside these walls, they became those voices. When I needed doors knocked on, they knocked. When I needed somebody sitting across the table from an MP, somebody went and sat there. When I needed my story carried beyond these walls, they carried it. And they're still doing it now. Years later. Still making calls. Still attending meetings.

Still pushing. Still refusing to accept that an old friend should simply disappear into a prison system thousands of miles away while everybody gets on with their lives. There are debts in life that can't be repaid with money. This is one of them. So I want their names written here. Not buried somewhere in an acknowledgements page that most people will skip. Here. Inside the story. Because they became part of the story. Dr V. Janara. Shehab. Kash. Ali. Adam Abdul Basir.

Amr. Hilal. Aziz. Zee. Emilio. You know what you've done for me. You know what your families have sacrificed while you've spent your time helping mine. And I know it too. Allah yebarek feekum wa fi ahlikum. May Allah bless every one of you and your families. I am eternally grateful. This ordeal has taught me

never to assume I know who will be standing beside me when the worst day arrives. Some people I expected to see disappeared. Others came from places I never expected.

And when almost every door appeared closed, when the legal system seemed determined to swallow everything we'd uncovered, when the media attention began fading and another investigation was quietly being shut down, there were still people outside who weren't prepared to let the story die. For years I'd been fighting from inside. Now others were beginning to fight from outside. And for the first time in a very long time, something was changing. Help was on the way.

Chapter 110: When does Britain Decide to Help?

When Does Britain Decide to Help?

For years, one sentence from the British Government has followed me through this case: “We cannot interfere in the judicial system of another country.” I've heard different versions of it so many times that I've become tired of hearing it. I understand the principle. Of course Britain cannot simply order a foreign judge to release a British citizen. It cannot walk into a Kazakhstan courtroom, overturn my conviction and bring me home. That isn't what I've been asking for.

My problem is that the word “interfere” seems to expand or contract depending on the circumstances. Because the more I learned about Britain's relationship with Kazakhstan, the more questions I had. The British Government already knows there are serious problems here. It says so itself. Its own published guidance on doing business in Kazakhstan acknowledges that Kazakhstan continues to perform below international standards in areas of human rights. British government material has raised concerns surrounding the rule of law, judicial independence, political pluralism, freedom of expression and corruption.

This isn't Mohamed Barakat writing angrily from a prison cell. This is the British Government's own assessment of the country in which one of its citizens has been sentenced to twenty years for murder. And yet Britain has been perfectly willing to become deeply involved in building confidence in another part of Kazakhstan's legal landscape. Look at the Astana International Financial Centre. The AIFC Court was created as a separate commercial jurisdiction operating according to common-law principles. Some of Britain's most distinguished judges have sat at its highest levels, including Lord Woolf, Lord Mance and Lord Burnett.

Why? Because international businesses and investors want confidence. They want independent judges. They want predictable law. They want to know that if hundreds of millions of pounds are invested in Kazakhstan and a dispute develops, there is a legal environment in which they can have confidence. I understand that. What I don't understand is the contradiction. Britain can enthusiastically support British legal expertise and common-law institutions that provide confidence for international commerce in Kazakhstan, while a British citizen convicted in

Kazakhstan's ordinary criminal justice system can raise allegation after allegation about evidence, forensic procedures and fair-trial violations and repeatedly hear:

We cannot interfere. I'm not suggesting that the AIFC Court and Kazakhstan's criminal courts are the same legal system. They aren't. Nor am I claiming that the British Government appoints AIFC judges. It doesn't. My point is much simpler. When international investment requires confidence in Kazakhstan, Britain has been willing to lend some of the finest names in British justice to a legal institution designed to provide that confidence. So what about British citizens?

What happens when we need confidence in justice? --- The contradiction becomes even harder for me to understand because Britain's own consular policy doesn't actually say that officials must remain silent whenever a foreign court is involved. The UK Government's own guidance for British prisoners in Kazakhstan says that where treatment falls below internationally accepted standards, Britain can consider approaching the authorities. That can include concerns about whether a trial followed internationally recognised standards.

So I've spent years asking myself: Where exactly is the line? When does raising concerns become “interference”? When does diplomatic representation become justified? How serious must the evidence become? How many alleged violations must accumulate? How many experts have to raise concerns? How many complaints must be filed? How many years must a British citizen spend behind bars? Because by now Britain knew what we were alleging. The Embassy knew. The Foreign Office knew.

They knew about my treatment in detention. They knew about the forensic disputes. They knew about the problems surrounding Opinion No. 28. They knew about the recordings. They knew about the complaints. They knew about the years my family had spent trying to have the case properly reviewed. And the British Government itself publicly acknowledged wider concerns about the country in which all of this had happened. So what more was required? --- I began looking at other British citizens imprisoned abroad.

That gave me even more questions. Take Jim Fitton. He was a British geologist arrested in Iraq after taking pottery fragments from an archaeological site. He was convicted and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. The British Government couldn't interfere with Iraq's judicial system either. And yet that didn't mean Britain did nothing. The British Embassy visited him repeatedly. British officials engaged with the Iraqi authorities. A formal diplomatic note was used. The matter reached Parliament. James Cleverly publicly explained that the British Government was engaging with Iraq at senior levels and would continue doing so.

Fitton's fifteen-year sentence was eventually overturned. Then there were Aiden Aslin and Shaun Pinner, British nationals captured while fighting for Ukraine and sentenced to death by a Russian-backed court in occupied Ukraine. Their circumstances were completely different from mine, and I'm not pretending otherwise. But Britain didn't respond by saying, Foreign legal system, nothing we

can do. The British Government became deeply engaged. International diplomacy followed. They eventually came home.

Other cases caught my attention too. British nationals accused of drugs offences abroad. A young pregnant British woman arrested in Georgia. Britons facing serious sentences in the Middle East. Some were guilty. Some admitted what they had done. Some cases involved completely different political and legal circumstances. I'm not saying they shouldn't have been helped. Of course they should have been helped. They're British citizens. My question is the opposite.

Why shouldn't I be? I don't want another British prisoner to receive less assistance so that my treatment appears equal. I want to understand why the Government can sometimes interpret “we cannot interfere” as entirely compatible with intensive diplomatic engagement, ministerial representations, formal communications with foreign governments and public pressure— while in another case the same principle seems to become a wall. What is the policy? What is the threshold?

Who makes that decision? And most importantly: Can the British citizen sitting in the foreign prison actually know the answer? --- The deeper I looked, the stranger it became. Britain wasn't unaware of Kazakhstan's human-rights problems. British ministers had discussed them publicly. After the violence of January 2022, Lord Ahmad raised human-rights concerns directly with Kazakhstan. The situation in Kazakhstan was discussed in Parliament. Possible anti-corruption sanctions against individuals connected to Kazakhstan were discussed too, with James Cleverly explaining Britain's ability to impose sanctions against individuals involved in serious corruption.

So Britain understood that everything wasn't fine here. At the same time, the relationship between the two countries kept growing. Trade. Investment. Oil and gas. Critical minerals. Education. British universities. Business. Strategic cooperation. And I understand diplomacy. Countries have interests. Governments have to maintain relationships even with states whose systems they criticise. Britain cannot stop trading with every country whose justice system falls below British standards.

But surely this makes the protection of citizens more important, not less. If your own Government warns British businesses about governance, corruption and rule-of-law risks in a country, what happens when a British citizen falls directly into the criminal justice system of that same country? That's the question that haunted me. --- My family had also tried the political route at home. Our local MP was James Murray. My family first contacted his office around the end of 2024.

We waited. And waited. Months went by. My family were already fighting on every possible front, and they believed their Member of Parliament would at least examine what had happened to one of his constituents. But substantive progress didn't come. Eventually Adam began chasing the matter. Towards the end of 2025, Adam attended a community-centre gathering with my mother where James

Murray's office was confronted with a very simple question: What had actually been done about Mohamed's case?

After more than a year, the explanation we were given was extraordinary. Because of changes within the Foreign Office, my paperwork may have been misplaced. I remember thinking about that from prison. Misplaced. I wasn't asking about a parking ticket. I was serving twenty years for murder in Kazakhstan. My family had been telling people that we believed there was evidence capable of demonstrating a grave miscarriage of justice. And after more than a year of waiting, paperwork might have been misplaced somewhere during changes in the Foreign Office.

There is something particularly cruel about bureaucracy when you're in prison. For the person sitting behind the desk, a missing document is an administrative problem. For the person behind bars, that missing document represents months of his life. You can replace paperwork. You cannot give me that year back. --- I started thinking more and more about what an embassy actually means. As a child, my understanding was simple. If you're British and something terrible happens to you abroad, the British Embassy is there to help you.

Obviously adulthood teaches you that reality is more complicated. An embassy isn't your lawyer. It cannot overturn your conviction. It cannot pay your legal fees. It cannot demand special treatment simply because you hold a British passport. I understand all of that. But there is a huge space between overturning a foreign conviction and doing nothing about credible allegations of serious injustice. Britain's own policy recognises that space. Embassies can make representations.

They can raise welfare concerns. They can attend or monitor proceedings in appropriate circumstances. Ministers can raise cases with their counterparts. Diplomatic notes can be sent. Questions can be asked. Concerns about international standards can be raised. Foreign governments can be pressed for answers without Britain ordering their courts what verdict to reach. That isn't the same thing as interfering with judicial independence. Sometimes it is simply diplomacy.

And this isn't unique to Britain. I looked at how other major Western countries protect citizens abroad. The United States makes clear that its consular officers cannot get Americans out of prison simply because they're American, but its officials can visit detainees, communicate with authorities and monitor aspects of legal proceedings. Australia similarly says it cannot interfere in another country's judicial process, while setting out substantial consular functions concerning detainees' welfare, access to lawyers and treatment.

Canada has gone even further internationally in campaigning against arbitrary detention and building international cooperation around the issue. None of these countries can magically rescue every citizen who gets arrested abroad. Nor should they. But they recognise something fundamental. A passport has to mean

something when its holder is at his most vulnerable. --- And this brings me to the British public. Because ultimately these embassies belong to you too.

You pay for them. Your taxes fund the Foreign Office. Your taxes fund Britain's diplomatic missions around the world. Your Government tells you that consular assistance is a vital public service. So I want to ask you a question. Not as Mohamed Barakat the convicted prisoner. Not as the man whose face appeared beneath terrible headlines. But simply as another British citizen. Are you satisfied with this? Are you satisfied that consular assistance remains discretionary without an easily understandable public threshold explaining when serious diplomatic representations should be made?

Are you satisfied that one family can spend years trying to understand why another British prisoner appears to receive intensive government engagement while their relative repeatedly hears that Britain cannot interfere? And are you comfortable knowing that this question might only become important to you on the worst day of your life? Because nobody expects to need an embassy. I certainly didn't. I was an airline pilot. I travelled constantly. Embassies were buildings I passed.

Flags behind gates. Something you might need if you lost your passport. Then one day I was arrested. And suddenly that flag meant everything. --- I'm not asking Britain to declare me innocent. That is an important distinction. I'm asking Britain to look seriously at what happened to one of its citizens and use the diplomatic mechanisms already available to it when credible concerns arise about whether international standards have been respected. Ask the questions.

Raise the evidence. Demand proper answers. Make representations where appropriate. Observe what happens next. And don't allow the words “we cannot interfere” to become an excuse for avoiding the much harder question: “What can we do?” Because after everything documented throughout this story, that's the question I believe the British Government should have been asking. And if Britain itself says Kazakhstan continues to fall below international standards in important areas, if Britain recognises concerns surrounding rule of law and judicial independence, if British ministers have raised human rights with Kazakhstan, and if British legal expertise can help provide international investors with confidence through the AIFC—

then surely a British citizen serving twenty years deserves something more than sympathetic observation. I don't want special justice because I'm British. I don't want Kazakhstan ordered to release me because I carry a British passport. I want the opposite. I want the same thing Britain promises to promote around the world. Independent justice. Due process. International standards. Accountability. And a fair examination of the evidence. Perhaps I'm asking the wrong question when I ask why Britain hasn't interfered.

So I'll ask another. One directed not at Kazakhstan, but at my own Government: How bad does the treatment of a British citizen abroad have to

become before Britain decides that speaking quietly from the sidelines is no longer enough?

Chapter 111: Some Will Laugh, Some Will Cry

Some Will Laugh, Some Will Cry

After enough years in prison, you start hearing stories that sound like jokes. Not funny stories. Stories so ridiculous that your brain rejects them the first time you hear them. A man tells you what happened in his case and you stare at him. “No. That can't possibly be right.” He explains it again. Someone else sitting at the table confirms it. You laugh. He laughs. Everybody laughs. Then somebody brings the documents. The judgments come out. The appeals.

The expert opinions. The subsequent court decisions. You start reading. And slowly the laughter stops. I've said throughout this book that if somebody took certain parts of my case and put them into a fictional novel, readers would probably complain that the story was unrealistic. But prison taught me something uncomfortable. My case wasn't the only unbelievable one. There were men around me whose stories produced exactly the same question: How can both of these things possibly be true?

One of those men was my friend Rus. --- Five Billion Tenge Ruslan Yerdenayev had once occupied one of the most important positions in Kazakhstan's financial system. He headed the Unified Accumulative Pension Fund — ENPF. When I met him in prison, he spoke perfect English. He was intelligent, highly educated and understood Kazakhstan from a completely different level from most of the prisoners I'd encountered. As I explained earlier, sitting with Rus and Andrew taught me an enormous amount about how the country worked.

Rus also hated lawyers with a passion. His wife had actually become a fully licensed lawyer so that she could defend him during his own case. His experiences had left him with almost no faith in the profession. But it was his own criminal case that fascinated me. Rus had been sentenced to twelve years in prison in a case involving five billion tenge belonging to Kazakhstan's pension fund. Five billion. That's the sort of number that creates headlines. Former pension-fund chairman.

Billions missing. Corruption. Prison. For somebody scrolling through the news on his phone, that's probably enough. Another corrupt official. Good. Lock him up. Swipe. Next article. Except Rus's story didn't end with the criminal judgment. Years later, what happened to those five billion tenge became considerably more complicated. The criminal case concerned five billion tenge invested by ENPF in bonds issued by Buzgul Aurum. The company had placed five billion tenge in Asia Credit Bank and subsequently borrowed approximately 4.9 billion from that same bank. When that loan wasn't repaid, the bank took the five-billion- tenge deposit against it.

Then another Kazakhstan court entered the story. On 15 December 2020, the Specialized Interdistrict Economic Court of Almaty found that Asia Credit Bank's

writing-off of those five billion tenge from Buzgul Aurum's account had been unlawful. That decision was subsequently upheld on appeal in March 2021. Stop there. Read that again. Rus was sitting in prison after a criminal case in which five billion tenge had been treated as losses connected with the defendants' conduct.

Then another Kazakhstan court examined what happened to those same five billion tenge and found that the bank had unlawfully written them off from the company's account. And Rus remained in prison. It gets better. Or worse. Depending on whether you're laughing or crying. The convicted men remained liable for compensation. According to later reporting by Orda.kz, while sitting in prison they collectively repaid approximately 1.1 billion tenge. Think about the situation.

You're sitting in prison. The state says billions were lost and you must repay them. Meanwhile, a civil court has determined that the bank unlawfully wrote off the five-billion-tenge deposit. And you're still paying. Rus and the others weren't simply sitting around complaining either. They were trying to point towards assets from which the state could recover money. Another convicted man, Dabyr Medetbekov, went to the administrative court seeking action concerning Buzgul Aurum's assets.

In February 2025, that claim was rejected. So now try explaining the situation to somebody without smiling at the absurdity. The prisoners were effectively saying: There's an asset. Go after it. Recover the money. And the answer was no. Meanwhile: You still owe us the money. At some point it starts sounding like a comedy sketch. Except Rus wasn't telling me this story from a comedy club. He was telling it to me from prison. Twelve years. That's the part a newspaper headline doesn't adequately communicate.

Twelve birthdays. Twelve summers. Twelve winters. Family members getting older. Children growing up. Parents dying. Life continuing outside while yours remains trapped behind a wall. And there was another remarkable feature: at least one of the other defendants in the broader case had already been released. So even within the same story, different defendants could experience completely different outcomes. I'd sit listening to Rus explaining everything and wonder:

How can a legal system produce two realities at the same time? Then I'd remember my own case. Perhaps that's why Rus and I understood one another. --- “But She Says She Wasn't Raped” Then there were cases that were even harder to explain. Rape is one of the most serious accusations that can be made against another human being. It should be investigated seriously. Victims deserve protection. Real perpetrators deserve punishment. And precisely because the accusation is so serious, the evidence must be treated with equal seriousness.

I learned about a case involving teenage boys convicted of raping a fourteen-year-old girl. Then something extraordinary happened. The girl described as the victim appeared publicly with her mother and said she hadn't been raped. Not an anonymous account on social media. Not a rumour circulating around prison. The girl herself. Her mother. Publicly. They appeared at a press conference

at the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law. Reporting on the case also described witnesses maintaining that the rape had not occurred.

And yet the teenagers were convicted. Try explaining that in one sentence: Boys were convicted of raping a girl who publicly said she wasn't raped. Your immediate reaction should be: What am I missing? There must be something else. There must be evidence we don't know about. There must be an explanation. And that's a perfectly reasonable reaction. Criminal cases shouldn't be reduced carelessly to one sentence. But that's exactly why such an extraordinary contradiction should produce questions rather than indifference.

If the person identified as the victim is publicly saying the central crime didn't happen, surely somebody has to stop and examine very carefully how a conviction was reached. And this wasn't the only such case. In another case in Aktau, a man received ten years in prison for rape. The woman subsequently wrote to the court saying there had been no rape, that she had gone to him voluntarily and that their sexual relationship had been consensual. Yet the conviction remained.

Again: What? Read it again. A man receives ten years for rape. The woman says there was no rape. The man remains convicted. Of course, there can be legitimate reasons why a court doesn't automatically accept a recantation. Victims can be pressured. They can be threatened. They can become frightened. A conviction cannot simply disappear every time somebody changes a statement. I understand that. But neither can the contradiction simply disappear. If the alleged victim says the crime for which somebody is serving ten years didn't happen, the justice system should be capable of independently and convincingly explaining why the conviction nevertheless remains safe.

Because there's a human being sitting behind that sentence. Ten years isn't a legal abstraction when you're living it. --- Who Did He Bribe? Then there was another case I encountered in prison that I still want to document completely before using the individuals' full names. We knew the businessman as Sirogga. The story as it was explained to me was that he had been convicted of bribing a police officer. The police officer was convicted too. Simple enough.

One person gives the bribe. One person receives the bribe. Both are convicted. Then, years later, the supposed recipient was found not guilty of receiving the bribe. And Sirogga remained in prison for giving it. I remember thinking about the obvious question: Who exactly did he bribe? Perhaps when I eventually obtain both judgments there will be a complicated legal explanation capable of reconciling those outcomes. If there is, I'll write it. I'm not interested in complaining about injustice while committing an injustice against somebody else by presenting something I cannot yet document as established fact.

But as the case was known to us inside prison, the contradiction was breathtaking. A bribe normally requires two sides. Someone gives. Someone receives. If the legal system ultimately determines that the supposed recipient didn't receive it, what happens to the conviction of the supposed giver? It's exactly

the sort of story that makes everybody around a prison table laugh. So where did the bribe go? Did it disappear halfway across the desk? Who received it?

Everybody laughs. Then you remember that one of the men is still serving the sentence. And suddenly the joke isn't funny anymore. --- Impossible Stories The longer I remained inside Kazakhstan's prison system, the more stories like these I heard. But I learned something else too. Prison is full of innocent men. Just ask them. Almost everybody has an explanation. Some prisoners lie. Some minimise what they did. Some conveniently leave out the one fact that completely changes their story.

Some have repeated their version for so many years that perhaps they've even convinced themselves. I learned very quickly not to believe something merely because another prisoner told me convincingly. That's why documents matter. That's why judgments matter. That's why expert opinions matter. That's why independent reporting matters. That's why I became obsessed with evidence in my own case. Don't believe Mohamed because Mohamed tells you he's innocent. Look at the evidence.

And I apply the same standard to everybody else. That's what made cases like Rus's so disturbing. There were documents. There were judgments. There were dates. There were amounts. There were subsequent proceedings. Things that couldn't simply be dismissed as another prisoner telling me a good story. Slowly I began to understand that the important question wasn't whether every prisoner claiming injustice was innocent. Obviously not. The question was whether the system was capable of recognising and correcting serious contradictions when they could actually be demonstrated.

Every justice system makes mistakes. Britain does. America does. Every country does. Human beings investigate crimes. Human beings prosecute them. Human beings judge them. Human beings make mistakes. The real test of a justice system isn't whether it ever gets something wrong. The real test comes afterwards. What happens when evidence appears suggesting that something may have gone terribly wrong? Does the system become curious? Or defensive? Does somebody independently examine the evidence?

Or does the institution protect its previous decision? Can a court say: We got this wrong? Can a prosecutor say: This conviction is no longer safe? Can an investigator admit: I made a mistake? Can the system correct itself? Those questions mattered enormously to me. Because they were my questions too. But then I started noticing something else. And this is where the story becomes even more uncomfortable. What happens when the accused isn't an ordinary citizen?

What happens when the accused works for the system itself? --- When the Accused Wear Uniforms Look at the Atbasar prison case. In 2023, footage emerged showing prisoners being brutally beaten and mistreated inside the prison. One of the prisoners was activist Timur Danebayev. This wasn't simply another inmate sitting behind a locked door saying: The guards tortured me. There was video. Actual footage. The Kazakhstan authorities confirmed the authenticity of

footage from the prison, and twelve employees of the penitentiary system eventually stood accused of torture.

Now compare what happened next with some of the cases you've just read. In February 2025, all twelve were acquitted. The prosecution appealed. The acquittal was overturned. They went back to court. In December 2025, all twelve were acquitted again. The prosecution appealed again. Then, in March 2026, the second acquittal was overturned as well, and yet another retrial was ordered. Just look at that sequence. Video footage of prisoners being beaten. Twelve prison employees prosecuted.

Acquitted. Acquittal overturned. Tried again. Acquitted again. Acquittal overturned again. Another trial. Now go back through the cases you've just read. Think about the teenagers convicted of rape when the girl identified as the victim and her mother publicly said no rape had taken place. Think about the man sentenced to ten years whose supposed victim subsequently told the court their sexual relationship had been consensual. Think about Rus and the five billion tenge, and what another Kazakhstan court subsequently determined about the bank's writing-off of that money.

Then look at Atbasar. Do you see the difference? Because I do. When an ordinary person is accused, extraordinary contradictions can apparently coexist with years of imprisonment. But put employees of the state in the dock, even in a case involving video footage of brutality inside a prison, and suddenly obtaining and sustaining a conviction appears extraordinarily difficult. Is that a coincidence? I don't believe it is. I've spent too many years inside Kazakhstan's prisons to pretend I haven't seen how complaints against officials can work.

A prisoner says he was beaten. Where's the evidence? He says he was tortured. Where's the evidence? He complains about the prison administration. No violation established. I've made complaints myself. I've watched other prisoners make them. Again and again, the question comes back: Where is your proof? Fine. Then what happens when somebody actually has the proof? What happens when there's a camera? What happens when footage emerges showing what was happening inside the prison?

Atbasar gives me a deeply uncomfortable answer. Even video footage didn't produce a straightforward path to a final conviction of the officers who were prosecuted. And I'm supposed to look at all of that and believe that the fact the defendants worked for the penitentiary system had absolutely nothing to do with how difficult the process became? Maybe some readers will. I don't. That doesn't mean twelve people should automatically be convicted because they wear uniforms.

Of course not. Every defendant deserves a fair trial. Every individual charge has to be proved against the individual accused. The prosecution must establish criminal responsibility. Presumption of innocence has to mean something. I believe those principles passionately. That's precisely why the contrast bothers me. Where is this extraordinary caution when the accused is an ordinary person?

Where is this determination to make absolutely certain that the evidence supports the conviction when somebody like Rus is sitting in prison?

Where is it when contradictory evidence appears years after conviction? Where is it when an alleged victim herself says the crime didn't happen? Where is that endless institutional hesitation then? I've watched prisoners and their families struggle for years simply to persuade somebody to look again at evidence. I've watched complaints return to the very institutions being complained about. I've watched men explain contradictions between official decisions while another birthday passes behind bars.

But when members of the system themselves find their way into the dock, suddenly the road towards a final conviction can become remarkably complicated. Perhaps it is coincidence. Perhaps every stage can be explained individually. Perhaps lawyers can point me towards procedural reasons for every acquittal, every reversal and every retrial. But after everything I've witnessed inside this system, I don't believe the contrast should simply be ignored. And I'm asking the reader to make up his or her own mind.

Don't take my word for it. Read the cases. Look at the judgments. Look at the footage. Look at what happened afterwards. Then ask yourself: Does everybody appear to receive the same benefit of doubt? --- The Families Don't Laugh From outside prison, absurd cases can be entertaining. People love strange stories. You read one on your phone and send it to somebody. Look at this. Can you believe it? Maybe you laugh. Even we laughed sometimes. Prison humour is different.

Sometimes laughter is simply another survival mechanism. I've watched men describe the worst moments of their lives while laughing so hard they could barely finish the sentence. Then later that night you see the same man sitting alone. No audience. No jokes. Just staring into space. That's when you understand. Somebody outside is serving the sentence too. A mother wakes in the middle of the night and checks her phone. A father grows older while trying to find another lawyer.

A wife travels hours for a prison visit. Children don't understand why Dad isn't coming home. Families sell things. Borrow money. Pay lawyers. Write complaints. Wait for appeals. They learn words like cassation, expert examination, procedural violation and newly discovered circumstances that they never wanted to know. One year becomes two. Two becomes five. Five becomes ten. Photographs change. Children become teenagers. Parents become old. Some die before the prisoner comes home.

There is nothing funny about that. And perhaps that's the biggest difference between the reader and the prisoner. You can read Rus's story and say: “That's ridiculous.” Then turn the page. Rus couldn't turn the page. He woke up inside it every morning. The teenagers convicted of rape couldn't close the newspaper and make their story disappear. Their mothers couldn't. The man serving ten years couldn't. Sirogga couldn't. I couldn't. Our families couldn't. And those prisoners

shown being beaten inside Atbasar couldn't simply switch off the footage and return to normal life either.

--- When I first entered prison, I thought my story was uniquely impossible. The fingerprints. The DNA. The CCTV. The forensic contradictions. The witnesses. The deleted evidence. Opinion No. 28. Everything I would discover during the years that followed. I used to think: Surely nobody else has a case this insane. Then I started meeting people. Reading their documents. Listening to their families. Watching other cases unfold. And slowly my question changed.

It was no longer: How could this happen to me? It became: How many times has this happened? I still don't know the answer. Maybe nobody does. But I know enough now to understand that when somebody tells you an impossible story from inside a prison, there are two equally dangerous mistakes you can make. The first is believing everything. The second is believing nothing. So don't believe us simply because we tell you we're innocent. Investigate. Read. Check the evidence.

Compare the judgments. Ask uncomfortable questions. And when two official conclusions appear impossible to reconcile, don't laugh and move on. Ask why. And when the accused happens to work for the institution responsible for imprisoning everybody else, watch even more carefully. Ask whether the same standards are being applied. Ask whether the same determination to prosecute exists. Ask whether the same benefit of doubt exists for the ordinary defendant. Ask why seemingly overwhelming evidence can sometimes produce years of procedural uncertainty when officials are standing in the dock, while ordinary defendants can spend those same years desperately trying to persuade the system merely to reconsider evidence pointing the other way.

Some people reading these stories will laugh. I understand why. Sometimes even we did. Some will laugh. Some will cry. But somewhere tonight a mother is lying awake wondering whether her son will ever come home. Somewhere a wife is looking at photographs from a life that existed before prison. Somewhere children are growing up without their father. Somewhere a prisoner who says he was tortured is wondering whether anybody will ever believe him. And somewhere behind a concrete wall, another man is lying on a metal bunk staring at the ceiling, replaying the same question for the thousandth time:

How can this possibly be happening? For the reader, it's an unbelievable story. For the family, it's a tragedy. For the prisoner, there is no punchline. The lights will come on again in the morning. The doors will open. Another number will be called. Another day will disappear from his sentence. You can close this book. He cannot close the prison door from his side. Some will laugh. Some will cry. Those living it simply have to survive it.

Chapter 112: Are you an Ostrich?

Are You an Ostrich?

When I first started writing this book, I made a conscious decision to stay away from politics as much as possible. Looking back now, that was probably impossible from the beginning. My story didn't happen in a vacuum. It happened in Kazakhstan. It happened at a particular moment in Kazakhstan's history. It involved its police, prosecutors, courts, prisons and senior state institutions. It involved a British citizen and therefore, eventually, the British Government.

And while my own life was collapsing inside Room 801, much larger political and financial battles involving Kazakhstan were already taking place thousands of miles away. At first, I knew absolutely nothing about them. Then people started making sure I did. --- Something Else Was Happening in London In 2019, while my own case was beginning in Kazakhstan, Britain's National Crime Agency was using one of its relatively new weapons against suspected illicit wealth: Unexplained Wealth Orders.

In May 2019, the NCA obtained orders over three prime London properties originally purchased for more than £80 million and held through offshore companies. The NCA initially described the properties as linked to a politically exposed person. It later became public that the properties were associated with Dariga Nazarbayeva and her son Nurali Aliyev, the daughter and grandson of Kazakhstan's then recently departed president, Nursultan Nazarbayev. I want to be very clear about what happened afterwards, because I'm not interested in doing to somebody else what I say was done to me.

The National Crime Agency's case was subsequently defeated. In 2020, the High Court discharged the orders, rejecting key assumptions underlying the NCA's case. So I am not saying that the UWO proceedings proved criminality by Nazarbayev's family. They didn't. My point is about timing. Because all of this was happening at almost exactly the same time my own case was developing in Kazakhstan. And I had no idea. Yet while I was in detention, the subject was repeatedly brought to my attention.

People connected my being British with what Britain was doing to wealthy Kazakh interests in London. I remember thinking: What the hell has any of that got to do with me? I'm an airline pilot. I'm sitting in detention because my daughter has died. I don't work for the National Crime Agency. I don't issue Unexplained Wealth Orders. I don't decide what the British courts do. I didn't even know these investigations existed. But apparently my British passport was enough for other people's political and financial disputes with Britain to enter the atmosphere surrounding me.

Years later, when I began reading more widely, I realised just how significant the subject had become. Kazakhstan's former ruling elite and the movement of Kazakh wealth into Britain had become an issue in Westminster too. In 2022, Parliament debated possible anti-corruption sanctions against individuals associated with Kazakhstan and explicitly discussed wealth linked to Nazarbayev's circle. Again, none of that proves that my prosecution was politically ordered.

I cannot write a document into existence that I don't possess. But neither would I be honest if I pretended this political background didn't exist. Especially because, when I later went through my own case files, I found documents from very early in the investigation signed or issued at senior levels of the General Prosecutor's Office. My case had attracted attention far above an ordinary district investigation remarkably quickly. My family eventually raised those concerns with the British Embassy and the Foreign Office.

So when people repeatedly brought British actions against Kazakh elites into conversations around me, while senior authorities were already closely following my case, I remembered it. I still remember it. And I would be foolish to leave it out of this book simply because politics makes people uncomfortable. --- Nobody Lives Outside Politics Anymore The truth is that I wanted this book to be about evidence. About my daughter. About the investigation. About what happened to me.

But look at the world around us. Ukraine. Gaza. Iran. Sanctions. Tariffs. Donald Trump. Benjamin Netanyahu. Elon Musk. Tommy Robinson. Epstein. Mass demonstrations across Britain, Europe, the United States, Australia and elsewhere. Wars, elections, billionaires, governments, algorithms, propaganda, social media and political movements enter our lives whether we invite them in or not. You might hate politics. Politics doesn't necessarily hate you. It might simply find you anyway.

I know because I spent most of my previous life assuming none of this had anything to do with me. I flew aeroplanes. I travelled. I stayed in hotels. I ate in restaurants. I came home. I looked after my family. Politics was something people argued about on television. Then one day my daughter died in a hotel room in Kazakhstan and suddenly prosecutors, embassies, ministers, parliamentarians, international organisations and governments became part of my daily vocabulary.

So I want the reader to ask a question that I never thought seriously enough about before all this happened: How much protection do you actually have when you leave your own country? At one point, a discussion about my case appeared on PPRuNe, probably the largest professional pilots' forum in the world. It began with what I thought was an important question: what protection do airline pilots actually have when their work sends them into countries where the rule of law cannot be taken for granted? Pilots spend their careers crossing borders because airlines tell them to. What happens when something goes catastrophically wrong while they are abroad? But somewhere along the way, something strange happened. The discussion stopped being about the protection of pilots and started becoming about whether I could really be British. "British called Mohamed Barakat? Can you confirm that?" one poster asked. As though the name Mohamed somehow required an explanation before the word British could be placed beside it. I read it and thought how what has the world come to? Here was a British airline captain sitting in a foreign prison for twenty years under the most questionable circumstances possible and for some people the difficult question

was not what protection a pilot should expect from his country when abroad in a corrupt country. It was whether a British man could possibly be called Mohamed.

--- Could This Happen to You? Perhaps you're reading this in Britain. Maybe you travel twice a year. Maybe your a professional Airline Pilot. Dubai. Turkey. Thailand. Kazakhstan. Egypt. Georgia. Somewhere cheap. Somewhere warm. Somewhere beautiful. Somewhere you've been sent to work or on a business trip. You book your hotel. You buy insurance. You check your passport has six months left on it. You check the weather. You might even check the crime rate. Then you go.

I did that for years. But how many of us actually investigate the criminal justice system of the country we're entering? How independent are the courts? Can police obtain access to your phone? What happens if evidence disappears? Can you record an interrogation? Will your embassy attend court? Does the country permit proper access to an independent lawyer immediately? What happens if the local press publishes the police version of events before you've even been tried? What happens with they circulate non factual information as though it where fact?

What happens when British newspapers find that article? Will they independently verify it? Or will your name, photograph and the most sensational allegation be copied from one website to another until people in countries you've never visited believe they know exactly what the newspapers say you did? I know the answer to that last question. Because I've watched it happen. The original story about Mohamed Barakat travelled around the world astonishingly quickly.

Years later, when evidence began challenging that story, getting journalists interested was infinitely harder. That should concern you even if you've never heard my name before opening this book. Because the next name could be yours. I'm not saying you should stop travelling. I'm certainly not saying every foreign police officer is corrupt or every foreign court is unsafe. I'm saying something far simpler. Know where you're going. And understand that your passport isn't a magic shield.

--- The Ostrich Syndrome Throughout this ordeal I've met people inside Kazakhstan's legal system who knew something was wrong. I want to say that clearly. Not everybody ignored me. Not everybody was corrupt. Not everybody who wore a uniform was a bad person. I've seen officials look at documents and their faces change. I've seen people quietly say: “This isn't right.” I've seen genuine surprise. I've seen sympathy. I've even seen anger. But then I've watched something happen again and again.

Nothing. The person sees the problem. Understands the problem. Perhaps even agrees that something should be done. Then suddenly his head disappears. I started calling it Ostrich Syndrome. People commonly use the image of an ostrich burying its head in the sand when frightened. The real animal doesn't literally respond to danger that way, but the metaphor is perfect for what I'm describing. I didn't see it. It's above my level. Someone else will deal with it.

Don't involve me. Maybe it will disappear. Head into the sand. Wait. Hope the danger passes. I've watched Ostrich Syndrome inside prisons. I've watched it in government departments. I've watched it in legal proceedings. I've watched it internationally. And once you notice it, you start seeing it everywhere. The problem is that ignoring something doesn't make it disappear. It normally means somebody else pays the price. --- Are You Being an Ostrich? That's why I want to take this beyond Mohamed Barakat.

The next time you see something happening and your first reaction is: That's terrible, but it doesn't affect me— ask yourself whether that's really true. The erosion of fair trials doesn't only matter to prisoners. Press freedom doesn't only matter to journalists. Government corruption doesn't only matter to politicians. War doesn't only matter to the people whose homes are currently being bombed. Consular protection doesn't only matter to people already sitting in foreign prisons.

Rights have a strange quality. Most people don't notice how valuable they are while they're working. You notice when one disappears. You don't think much about due process until somebody accuses you. You don't think about press accuracy until your face is underneath a false headline. You don't think about consular protection until you're sitting behind foreign prison walls. You don't think about judicial independence until the judge in front of you appears to have already decided the result.

By then it's rather late to start caring. So ask yourself occasionally: Am I being an ostrich? Am I ignoring something because confronting it is uncomfortable? Am I assuming somebody else will deal with it? Am I protecting myself today by creating a worse world for my children tomorrow? Because somebody always pays eventually. In the wise words of my lawyer Din Mukhamed "People only ask for Justice,when it's happening to them! " --- The Children There is one subject I haven't been able to watch from a distance.

Children. The images coming from Gaza and Sudan and Ukraine have affected me in ways I struggle to put into words. International institutions, governments and courts continue to argue over responsibility, international law and allegations including genocide. I'm not going to pretend that a few pages in my memoir can resolve one of the most politically charged disputes on Earth. But there is something that doesn't require political expertise. A dead child is a dead child.

A frightened child is a frightened child. A baby doesn't know geopolitics. A two-year-old doesn't understand borders. A child digging through rubble doesn't know what resolution was passed at the United Nations. They know one word. Mum. I have seen images of children in Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine that have broken something inside me over and over again. A tiny child wounded in a parent's arms. Children wandering through destruction looking for their families. Little faces covered with dust.

Children crying for mothers who might never answer. I cannot look at them simply as another statistic. I lost Sophia. There are many things in this world I can

now watch with a degree of emotional distance that I didn't have before prison. But not children. Never children. When I see a father holding his dead daughter, I know something about the hole that has just opened inside that man's chest. When I see a mother screaming over her child, I don't see politics first.

I see a parent. And when I see a little child alone, frightened and searching through destruction for a mother or father, the thing I want most is to reach through the screen. Pick them up. Hold them. Tell them they're safe. Protect them. Because since losing my daughter, every frightened child has the ability to remind me of her. Every one of those children becomes Sophia for a moment. --- What Does Any of This Have to Do With You? Maybe everything. Maybe nothing.

That's partly your decision. You can read this book as one man's strange nightmare in Kazakhstan. A British pilot. A dead daughter. A disputed murder conviction. Corrupt officials. Prisons. Something distant. Something unfortunate. Something that could never happen to you. That's exactly how I used to think about other people's disasters. Then mine arrived. That's why I don't want the final lesson from my story to be: Poor Mohamed. That helps nobody. The better question is:

What does Mohamed's story teach me before I need to learn the same lesson myself? Perhaps it means checking the country you're travelling to more carefully. Perhaps it means understanding what your government will and will not do if you're arrested abroad. Perhaps it means being more sceptical when a sensational headline appears about somebody you've never met. Perhaps it means not assuming that because the police issued a statement, every word has already been proved.

Perhaps it means paying attention when governments weaken courts, intimidate journalists or make accountability harder. Perhaps it simply means speaking when everybody around you has decided silence is safer. Small things matter. Because institutions don't suddenly collapse overnight. Standards erode. One compromise. One ignored violation. One frightened official. One journalist who decides not to publish. One citizen who says: Not my problem. Again. And again.

And again. Until one day it becomes your problem. Then you look around desperately wondering why nobody is speaking. And perhaps they're all doing exactly what you once did. Looking away. So if there's one lesson I can give you after everything I've experienced, it's this: Don't wait until you're behind the wall before deciding the wall matters. Don't wait until your child is the photograph on the television before deciding other people's children matter. Don't wait until your name is underneath the headline before caring whether journalists verify what they publish.

Don't wait until you're sitting in a foreign prison before asking what your government will actually do for you. And when you see something wrong and convince yourself that keeping your head down is the safest option— remember the ostrich. Ask yourself one question: Am I putting my head into the sand and

hoping somebody else's problem disappears before it reaches me? Because sometimes it does disappear. Sometimes the headlines move on. Sometimes everybody forgets.

But somewhere, somebody is still living the consequences. I know. I've been living mine for years. And when I look at the frightened faces of children caught in wars they didn't create, when I think about Sophia and everything she should have lived to see, my politics become very simple. I don't want another father to know this feeling. I don't want another mother to know it. I don't care what passport the child holds. I don't care what language they speak.

I don't care which side of a border they were born on. I just want someone to pick that child up. Hold them. Protect them. Because to their father, to their mother— that child is the whole world. And to me, for just a moment, they are all Sophia.

Chapter 113: The KNB and Me

The KNB and Me

Before the 71st prison, everything I knew about the KNB came from stories. The Kazakhstan National Security Committee — KNB as everyone calls them. For someone outside this part of the world, think of something somewhere between an intelligence service and a powerful federal law-enforcement body. Because of Kazakhstan's Soviet history, people naturally make comparisons with the KGB. Americans might think of the FBI. Neither is exactly right, but you get the idea.

Inside prison their name carries weight. You hear stories. KNB did this. KNB took him. KNB are watching them. Don't talk about that, KNB are listening. I had no personal experience with them, so most of it went in one ear and out the other. Prison is full of stories. If I believed everything I'd heard over the years, I'd have gone completely mad. My own experience with them started with one simple sentence. Andrew had heard Madina's recordings. He had seen parts of my case. He'd picked up the phone and spoken to his KNB contacts about whether I could release those voice notes publicly.

The answer came back: “It's his right to release those voice notes.” That was it. Nothing dramatic. Nobody kicked down a door. Nobody summoned me into a dark interrogation room. Just a few words spoken to a friend. But those words made me start paying attention. Who exactly are these people? --- Who watches Anti-Corruption? One of the most important departments in any society, in my opinion, has to be anti- corruption. If the police are corrupt, who catches them?

If prosecutors are corrupt, who catches them? If judges are corrupt, who catches them? And most importantly: Who catches Anti-Corruption when Anti-Corruption becomes corrupt? My family and I had already written to Kazakhstan's Anti-Corruption Agency about concerns surrounding my own case. Nothing. Absolutely nothing meaningful came back. Then I started reading about

the people who had actually worked at senior levels inside Anti-Corruption. Maksat Kozhabayev wasn't some guy sitting at the bottom of the organisation. He had been a deputy chairman of Kazakhstan's Anti-Corruption Agency.

And who detained him? The KNB. He was detained in 2023 and later convicted in a case involving $120,000 and promises connected with resolving another person's criminal case. He received five years and six months in prison. Then you look at his brother, Daurenbek Kozhabayev, who had also held a senior position in the anti-corruption system. He was later convicted in a major bribery case and sentenced to eleven years. Go back further and you find other anti-corruption officers themselves being caught in corruption cases.

I couldn't help seeing the irony. We had written to Anti-Corruption asking them to look at corruption, while the KNB were busy arresting people from Anti-Corruption. You couldn't make it up. And the more I looked, the more I started seeing the same three letters appearing behind cases involving officials. KNB. --- Then they gave Anti-Corruption to the KNB And here's where the story becomes even more interesting. On 30 June 2025, President Tokayev reorganised Kazakhstan's Anti-Corruption Agency.

Its investigative anti-corruption functions were transferred to the National Security Committee and the KNB Anti-Corruption Service was created. So eventually Kazakhstan itself seems to have reached the conclusion that the KNB should be given a much bigger role in cleaning this mess up. By this point I wasn't surprised. I'd already started noticing who was behind many of these operations. The KNB. A corrupt official gets caught. KNB. A senior figure gets investigated.

KNB. A prison official gets taken down. Again I'm hearing about the KNB. Then the prison chief I'd written about earlier was imprisoned, and I discovered that behind that investigation there had again been security involvement. Suddenly I started understanding that these people were operating around us much more than I had realised. --- They're already inside the prisons Prison has its own government. I've explained that throughout this book. You have the official administration.

You have the Kozyols. You have the blatnois. You have the Akhi's. You have the smotryashchiy. You have money moving. Phones. Drugs. Extortion. Deals between inmates and officers. Information. Everyone is watching everyone else. And somewhere behind all of this, the KNB are watching too. I started understanding that they constantly monitor this environment. Obviously they're interested in extremism. That's no secret. The Akhi's know they're being watched. People convicted of terrorism and extremism know they're being watched.

But it went further than that from what I began seeing and learning inside. Police extorting inmates. Inmates extorting other inmates. Organised groups becoming too powerful. Serious allegations of abuse. Information about what is really happening inside the prisons. It moves. And the KNB have their people and their sources everywhere. Once I knew what I was looking at, I started noticing it.

I'd spent years thinking that half the madness happening inside these walls was invisible to the outside world.

It wasn't. Someone was watching. --- Judges, prosecutors, officials — one by one Then start looking outside the prisons. Search Kazakhstan's news. Judges. Prosecutors. Police officers. Senior officials. One after another. In June 2026, even the chairman of the criminal judicial panel of the East Kazakhstan Regional Court was detained in an operation involving the KNB and judicial internal security on suspicion of an especially large bribe connected with a favourable judicial decision.

Think about that position for a second. The chairman of a criminal judicial panel. A man sitting at an extremely high level of the very system deciding whether other people should go to prison. And someone's prepared to investigate him. Earlier that year, a prosecutor in Aktobe Region was detained in an anti-corruption operation involving the KNB Anti-Corruption Service and the General Prosecutor's internal security. These aren't people selling cigarettes without a licence.

These are people inside the legal system itself. This is exactly what Kazakhstan needs. Because what's the alternative? Allow everyone with a title to become untouchable? Let the policeman investigate the public but nobody investigate the policeman? Let prosecutors investigate everybody while nobody investigates prosecutors? Let judges send people to prison while believing nobody could ever come for them? No. Come for them. If they're breaking the law, investigate them.

If they're taking money, catch them. If they're abusing their positions, take them down. That's how you clean a system. --- Then I actually met them But newspaper articles aren't why I've become such a fan of the KNB. I've personally interacted with these men. And they weren't what I expected. Throughout this book I've described some of my experiences dealing with police and prosecutors. Sometimes I've sat there genuinely wondering how the person opposite me reached the position they were occupying.

You explain something. Nothing. You explain it again. Blank face. You point directly at the contradiction. Still nothing. Then I started interacting with KNB men. Completely different experience. Sharp. Extremely sharp. You don't need to explain something six times. They're listening. They're analysing you while you're analysing them. They notice small details. They understand how different parts connect. They ask the right questions. And there's something else I liked about them.

They don't seem interested in pretending the problems don't exist. They know what's going on. You don't need to sit there explaining: Guys, there's corruption in Kazakhstan. They know. You don't have to explain that police can take money. They know. That prison officials can make money from inmates. They know. That people in positions of authority can abuse those positions. They know. And from what I've seen, they're coming after them. That's what impressed me.

--- Results I've become tired over the years of departments telling me what they're supposed to do. I'm interested in what you actually do. I've received enough letters. Enough official responses. Enough: Your complaint has been forwarded to the competent authority. Forwarded. Forwarded again. Forwarded back to the people you're complaining about. Thank you very much. Close the file. Next. I judge by results now. And the KNB are producing results. You can see them.

Officials are being caught. Judges are being investigated. Prosecutors are being investigated. People inside Anti-Corruption itself have been caught. Prison officials have been caught. And now the investigative anti-corruption function has actually been placed under the KNB. They've got a tremendous job ahead of them. Absolutely tremendous. I've spent enough years inside Kazakhstan's legal and prison systems to know the size of what they're dealing with. But at least somebody appears willing to deal with it.

And for me, that's what matters. --- I am a fan Now here's something I never thought I'd write when I was first arrested in Kazakhstan. I, Mohamed Barakat, am a massive fan of the Kazakhstan KNB. There you go. I said it. And I know some people reading this book are going to find that strange. How can a man who's spent chapter after chapter tearing into parts of Kazakhstan's police, prosecution, courts and prison system suddenly praise one of the most powerful government institutions in the country?

Easy. Because that's what I've experienced. If somebody does wrong, I'll say they're doing wrong. If somebody does good, I'll say they're doing good. I'm not writing this book to attack Kazakhstan. I'm writing what happened to me in Kazakhstan. There's a difference. And my experience with the KNB has been positive. In my opinion, these men represent a new breed within Kazakhstan's law-enforcement environment. Educated. Intelligent. Sharp. Observant. And, most importantly for me, they appear prepared to acknowledge the ugly things happening inside the system and actually go after the people responsible.

I respect that. In fact, I wish I'd encountered more people with that mentality at the beginning of my case. Maybe my life would look very different today. --- Thank you So this part is simple. I want to express my gratitude to the Kazakhstan National Security Committee. Thank you. Thank you to the men who are genuinely going after corruption. Thank you to those investigating officials who thought their positions protected them. Thank you to those watching what happens behind prison walls.

Thank you to those prepared to investigate the people who themselves investigate everyone else. Keep going. Because Kazakhstan needs you. There's a mountain of work still ahead. But from where I'm sitting, I can see the results. And results are what count. Strangely enough, my entire relationship with the KNB started with a sentence that probably meant almost nothing to the person who originally said it: “It's his right to release those voice notes.” To me it meant a lot.

It made me start looking. The more I looked, the more I learned. The more I learned, the more my opinion changed. But those words were only the beginning of the story. Because eventually I wouldn't just be watching the KNB from a distance or hearing messages passed through Andrew. They would come directly into my life. And that's where the KNB and me really begins.

Chapter 114: The Voices of Despair

The Voices of Despair

For years I had been shouting about my own case. My mother had been shouting. My sisters had been shouting. Lawyers had written. Complaints had been filed. Embassies had been contacted. Government departments had been contacted. International organisations had been contacted. The President's Administration. The General Prosecutor's Office. The Ombudsman. The British Embassy. The Foreign Office. UN bodies. Human-rights organisations. Everyone had a letter. Everyone had a document.

Everyone knew something. And one response kept coming back in different forms: We don't intervene in individual cases. Individual cases. I started to hate those words. Because what exactly is an individual case? How many individual cases do you need before somebody finally looks up from the paperwork and says: Hold on. Maybe these aren't individual problems anymore. That question became more important the longer I stayed inside Kazakhstan's system. Because I wasn't alone anymore.

I started hearing other voices. Different people. Different cases. Different professions. Different years. But strangely similar complaints. And eventually I realised something. Maybe we'd been making a mistake. Maybe instead of each of us standing alone screaming: Look at my case! we needed to stand together and say: Look at the pattern. --- A voice from the past Before we get to Muratkhan, Gulnara, Murat Adam and me, I want to take you backwards. To another man.

Yevgeniy Zhovtis. For anyone involved in human rights in Kazakhstan, his name needs little introduction. He was the director of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and the Rule of Law. Years before anybody had heard the name Mohamed Barakat, Zhovtis's own criminal case had already travelled all the way to the United Nations Human Rights Committee. I started reading his case. And the more I read, the stranger I felt. Because I was supposed to be reading somebody else's story.

Instead, every few pages I kept finding pieces of mine. Independent experts. Defence applications. Complaints about equality between prosecution and defence. An appeal that, according to his legal submission, failed to properly deal with the substance of what the defence was saying. His lawyers complained that both the trial and appeal courts refused to properly consider independent experts who challenged the prosecution's expert evidence. They complained of bias and a

lack of equality of arms. They complained that his appeal became something closer to a formal exercise than a genuine reconsideration of the evidence.

Then I reached the part about the appeal. The submission said the appeal court failed to properly consider the independent experts, failed to deal with evidence from the victim's family, left defence applications unanswered and failed to carry out a full substantive review of the conviction. I stopped reading. Wait a minute. How many years separated his case from mine? Different crime. Different defendant. Different circumstances. And yet here I was reading complaints that sounded painfully familiar.

In my own case I had spent years asking courts to deal with evidence instead of simply acknowledging that my lawyer had filed another piece of paper. Experts. Forensics. Witnesses. Applications. Appeals. Again and again the same frustration: Will somebody actually look at the substance? My own application to the UN Human Rights Committee now raises serious allegations under Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights — the protections surrounding a fair and public hearing, an independent and impartial tribunal, the presumption of innocence, adequate facilities for the defence, the ability to examine witnesses and proper interpretation.

Then I found something even more disturbing in the Zhovtis material. Back then, international observers were already raising concerns about Kazakhstan's extremely low acquittal rate and the enormous imbalance between the power of prosecutors and defence lawyers. This wasn't written after Mohamed Barakat complained. It wasn't produced because my mother made too much noise. It was there years before I arrived. --- The machinery had already been described Then there was the academic literature.

I read a paper published in the Cornell International Law Journal by Alexei Trochev called Between Convictions and Reconciliations: Processing Criminal Cases in Kazakhstani Courts. Again, nothing to do with Mohamed Barakat. Nothing to do with Sophia. Nothing to do with Room 801. It was an academic study of how Kazakhstan's criminal justice system actually operated. And there it was again. Trochev wrote about what he described as a continuing accusatorial bias inherited from the Soviet period and about the relationships and incentives connecting investigators, prosecutors and judges. He argued that reforms designed to strengthen genuinely adversarial proceedings and judicial independence struggled because they disturbed existing power relationships inside the criminal justice system.

Later he described judges as effectively remaining junior partners to law-enforcement agencies in important parts of criminal justice. Read that phrase again. Junior partners. He wrote about the overwhelming approval of detention applications, the avoidance of acquittals and exonerations, and an appellate environment in which prosecutors enjoyed significant advantages. He also described the old Soviet attitude that an acquittal represented a failure for prosecutors and trial judges.

Suddenly I wasn't just reading theories. I was reading descriptions of machinery I felt I had been trapped inside. Years before anyone knew Mohamed Barakat, academics were already describing the gears. There was even discussion of what has historically been called “telephone law” — informal influence over judges and case outcomes — and of a culture in which judges could be reluctant to challenge prosecutors because of the professional consequences of doing so.

Then look at international reporting from the period surrounding my own trial. The US State Department's 2020 Kazakhstan human-rights report listed problems with judicial independence, torture, restrictions on the press and corruption among its serious concerns. It also reported continuing impunity involving people in positions of authority and connections to law enforcement. The same report spoke about torture and abuse inside detention facilities and prisons and said cases of prison officers being brought to justice for torture were rare.

Again: How many individual cases do you need? Because eventually the word individual starts becoming very convenient. --- Muratkhan Then I met one of those individual cases. Muratkhan Tokmadi. A man sitting in prison with a story so strange that once again your first instinct is to stop and ask whether you've understood it properly. The death at the centre of Muratkhan's case happened in 2004. Banker Yerzhan Tatishev was shot and killed during a hunting trip.

Muratkhan was prosecuted over that death. There was a conviction. Years passed. Then the same death returned. This time the case said it wasn't the earlier version of events at all. It was intentional murder. And in 2018 Muratkhan received a sentence of ten and a half years for murdering Tatishev. So when Muratkhan talks about his case, the question sounds ridiculously simple: How many times can one man be convicted over the death of the same man? The legal arguments are obviously more complicated than that.

But prison teaches you to cut through legal language sometimes. One dead man. One accused man. One first conviction concerning that death. Years later, another prosecution concerning the same death under a completely different theory. Another conviction. And Muratkhan wasn't simply saying the second version was wrong. He later said the confession supporting that case had been extracted through physical and psychological pressure. Orda.kz investigated those allegations in detail. Reporting described covert surveillance of him in detention and an investigation into allegations that he had been subjected to pressure and torture. That torture investigation was ultimately closed in December 2022 for lack of corpus delicti.

Now this creates an interesting problem for me personally. You've just read the previous chapter. You know what my experience with the KNB became. I praised them. I stand by that. Muratkhan describes a very different experience from an earlier period. I'm not going to delete his voice because it doesn't match mine. What kind of hypocrite would that make me? I've spent years asking people to listen when I say: This happened to me. So when another prisoner says:

This happened to me, and here are the circumstances, the complaints and the material surrounding it— I listen. You don't have to agree with every conclusion to hear the man. That's the whole point of this chapter. Listen to the voices. --- Then the voice came from a newsroom Eventually it wasn't only prisoners. That matters. Because it's easy to dismiss prisoners. Of course he says he's innocent. Of course he's complaining. Everyone in prison has a story. Fine.

Then let's leave the prison. Let's go into a newsroom. Orda.kz. Orda became important to me because they were prepared to publish things other people were frightened to touch. They reported corruption. They reported prison abuse. They reported judges. Prosecutors. Powerful people. They reported Muratkhan. And eventually they reported my story. Then suddenly the chief editor herself became the story. Gulnara Bazhkenova. On 1 December 2025, searches were carried out at Orda's offices in Almaty and Astana and at Gulnara's home. Staff were questioned, phones were seized, and Gulnara was placed under house arrest.

Imagine watching this from prison. One of the organisations willing to report allegations about what happens inside Kazakhstan's legal system is suddenly fighting the legal system itself. Then the case grows. Months pass. The journalist who was covering everyone else's problems is now confined to her home dealing with her own. And while I'm writing this book, the story has moved again. On 18 August 2026, Gulnara Bazhkenova was convicted. The court imposed a seven-year prison sentence with its execution postponed for two years.

This isn't ancient history. This happened four days before I'm writing these words. So when international organisations tell us they're looking at historical patterns or monitoring developments, understand something: the developments are happening while I'm typing. --- Then they came for the lawyer And this is where the story becomes almost impossible not to notice. Gulnara needed a lawyer. One of the lawyers who came to protect her interests was Murat Adam.

When the searches happened, he tried to act for her. He challenged her house arrest. He filed complaints. He publicly discussed what he believed were violations connected with the investigation. Then suddenly Murat Adam had a problem of his own. The Ministry of Justice went to court seeking to remove his licence to practise law. The case arose from a submission by the Ministry of Internal Affairs alleging that while representing Gulnara he had disseminated false information about the investigation.

During the licence proceedings, sixteen media and social-media materials were presented, and reporting from the hearing said some of them weren't even his publications. Twenty-eight lawyers came to court to support him. On 16 January 2026, the court revoked his licence. Just look at the sequence. The journalist needs a lawyer. The lawyer comes to defend the journalist. Now the lawyer needs lawyers to defend his right to remain a lawyer. What else do I need to add?

Sometimes the facts write the paragraph for you. And there's another reason Murat's case mattered to me. Buried inside the material I had accumulated about fair trials were international principles saying lawyers must be able to advise and

represent clients without improper restriction, influence, pressure or interference. That's not some revolutionary idea. If a lawyer is frightened that aggressively defending a controversial client might cost him his career, what happens to the client?

What happens to everybody watching? What message do they receive? --- Then there was me And sitting somewhere between all of these stories was Mohamed Barakat. British citizen. Airline captain. Twenty years. A dead daughter. A case file I'd read so many times I could practically see pages when I closed my eyes. Fingerprints. DNA. CCTV. Deleted footage. Witnesses. Forensics. Opinion No. 28. The recordings. The complaints. The experts. The appeals. The years.

And now my case had reached another level. Because by this stage it wasn't only Mohamed and his mother saying something was seriously wrong. A highly regarded British barrister specialising in criminal justice, public law and international matters had examined the case. I'm deliberately not going to reproduce her confidential legal advice in this book. I'm not going to tell you every argument she's made. I'm not going to give away the strategy surrounding my international case.

But I can tell you this. After examining the material, she considered the fair-trial concerns serious enough for a formal complaint alleging violations of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to be prepared for the United Nations Human Rights Committee. My UN bundle begins with exactly that: a legal submission alleging breaches of Article 14 in the trial of Mohamed Barakat. That matters enormously to me. Because for years the easiest response to my mother was:

She's his mother. Of course she believes him. The easiest response to me was: He's the prisoner. Of course he says he's innocent. Fine. Then remove me. Remove my mother. Remove my sisters. Put the case files in front of someone whose professional life is spent dealing with serious criminal justice and human- rights issues. And ask them: Do you see a problem? I know the answer we received. I don't need to reveal every word of it here. --- How many voices? Then I began thinking about Zhovtis again.

And Muratkhan. And Gulnara. And Murat. And me. Different people. Different decades. Different accusations. Different legal problems. One is one of Kazakhstan's best-known human-rights defenders. One is a prisoner who says he was prosecuted twice over the same death and that his later confession was coerced. One is the head of an independent news organisation. One is a lawyer who went to defend her and lost his licence. One is a British airline pilot serving twenty years for the murder of his daughter.

On the surface, what connects us? Almost nothing. But listen carefully. Independent experts ignored or disputed. Questions about meaningful appeal. Allegations of coercion and abuse. Pressure surrounding journalism. Pressure surrounding lawyers. Complaints about prosecutorial power. Questions about

judicial independence. Domestic mechanisms that people say failed to properly correct what happened. And eventually: appeals to the outside world. The literature sitting in front of me was saying similar things.

The Zhovtis submission contained similar warnings years earlier. Academic researchers had described structural incentives favouring prosecution and discouraging acquittals. International reports had repeatedly raised judicial independence, torture, corruption and press freedom. And yet every time another human being arrives carrying another folder full of documents, everybody starts again: Individual case. At some point I had enough. --- Fine. Then we won't stand alone.

International organisations have their limitations. I understand that better now. The UN isn't a world police force. The OSCE cannot simply knock on a prison gate and order somebody released. Human-rights organisations have thousands of cases competing for attention. Everybody has a mandate. A jurisdiction. A threshold. A procedure. A form. A department. An email address. God knows I've learned them all. But one response frustrated me more than most: We don't investigate individual cases.

Fine. Then maybe we'd been presenting the problem incorrectly. Because what happens when the individual cases stand next to each other? What happens when the prisoner stands beside the journalist? What happens when the journalist stands beside the lawyer? What happens when the British citizen stands beside the Kazakh prisoner? What happens when a case from 2009 starts sounding strangely familiar to a man convicted in 2020? What happens when academic literature published years beforehand describes features of the same machinery?

At what number does individual become systemic? Two? Five? Twenty? A hundred? Tell me the number and we'll keep collecting names. --- The joint statement That's when the idea started forming. Stop shouting separately. Join the voices. Muratkhan Tokmadi. Gulnara Bazhkenova. Murat Adam. Mohamed Barakat. Different cases. Different people. Different places within the system. But together we could say something much harder to dismiss: Don't look at one conviction. Look at what these cases collectively tell you about the institutions producing them.

Muratkhan brought the questions surrounding criminal proceedings, confession evidence, alleged torture and what he considers double jeopardy. Gulnara brought press freedom and the consequences faced by a media organisation willing to investigate powerful institutions. Murat brought the independence of the legal profession and the question of what happens when a lawyer aggressively defends someone the state is pursuing. I brought my own case. The forensics.

The evidence. The fair-trial complaints. The prison experience. And the perspective of a foreign national discovering what happens when he falls into this system. We weren't asking the UN to simply take four files and announce: These four people are right. We were asking something bigger. Look at the pattern. Look

at the recurring problems. Look at the mechanisms. Look at what happens to defendants. Look at what happens to journalists. Look at what happens to lawyers.

Look at what happens when allegations concern the very institutions responsible for investigating themselves. And then tell us these are all completely unrelated individual cases. --- Voices of despair Why call this chapter The Voices of Despair? Because that's what happens before people join together. They shout alone. A mother writes another complaint. A prisoner files another motion. A journalist publishes another investigation. A lawyer files another appeal.

Another envelope arrives. Another rejection. Another door closes. And slowly the voice changes. It becomes desperate. Not because the person has nothing to say. Because they have said it so many times. That's a very particular type of despair. When you know the words. You know the evidence. You know the dates. You know the article of law. You've written it twenty times. You've attached the document. You've highlighted the sentence. You've sent it to the next level.

And you already know what's coming back. That's despair. I've heard that voice in my mother. I've heard it in prisoners. I've heard it from lawyers. I've heard it from people outside the prison trying to understand how another door has closed. And I'm sure people have heard it in mine. But something changes when those voices find each other. One desperate voice is easy to ignore. Four become louder. Forty louder still. Eventually somebody has to ask why so many unrelated people are shouting.

And this is what I want international organisations to understand. Don't wait for the perfect victim. Don't wait for one case containing every possible violation. Don't keep putting each file into a different drawer because the names at the top are different. Step backwards. Look at all the drawers. Look at the years. Read Zhovtis. Read the academic studies. Read the international reports. Read Tokmadi. Read what happened to Orda. Read what happened to Murat Adam.

Read my case. Then answer one question: How many individual cases does it take before you're prepared to call it a pattern? --- Zhovtis took his complaints to the United Nations more than fifteen years ago. Now I'm preparing to do the same. That alone should make somebody uncomfortable. His submission complained that his appeal had not properly considered independent expert evidence and substantive defence arguments. Years later I'm sitting in a Kazakhstan prison reading those words while my own lawyers prepare another complaint under the same Article 14.

You can call that coincidence. Maybe it is. Then add Muratkhan. Add Gulnara. Add Murat. Add the literature. Add the human-rights reports. Keep adding. Eventually coincidence starts getting very crowded. And so we signed together. Not because our cases are identical. They're not. We signed because separately our voices had been disappearing into bureaucracy. Together they said something else. We are still here. The prisoner. The journalist. The lawyer. The foreign national.

Different voices. Same country. And one question sent beyond its borders: Will somebody finally listen?

Chapter 115: Does President Tokayev Know?

Does President Tokayev Know?

Is President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev aware of Mohamed and Sophia Barakat's case? I honestly don't know. I'm not going to inflate my importance or the importance of my case by pretending that somewhere on the President's desk sits a folder marked MOHAMED BARAKAT. Maybe he has heard my name. Maybe he hasn't. Maybe something from the complaints sent to the President's Administration has eventually been brought to his attention personally. I simply don't know. I would like to think it matters to the President how foreigners are treated within the borders of Kazakhstan. I would like to think that when a foreign citizen is sentenced to twenty years for the death of his child, and years later serious questions remain about the investigation, forensic evidence and trial, somebody at the highest levels of the state would want to know whether Kazakhstan got it right.

But I cannot tell you that President Tokayev personally knows about Mohamed and Sophia Barakat. So let me ask a different question. Does President Tokayev know what is happening within Kazakhstan's legal system? Bluntly: YES. I don't need to accuse him of knowing. I don't need to speculate. I can use his own words. "Police brutality, incompetent prosecutors and biased judges" On 6 June 2022, President Tokayev addressed the people of Kazakhstan while speaking about the construction of a New and Fair Kazakhstan.

His words were remarkable: > "In the New and Fair Kazakhstan, there is no place for police brutality, incompetent prosecutors and biased judges." Read those words again. Police brutality. Incompetent prosecutors. Biased judges. These aren't the words of Mohamed Barakat sitting in a prison cell complaining about Kazakhstan. These are the words of the President of Kazakhstan. And for me, that statement cuts straight to the heart of the problem. The President knows these problems exist because he publicly identified them himself.

And this wasn't something he mentioned once and forgot about. In his 1 September 2022 State-of-the- Nation Address, Tokayev returned to judicial reform. He said that the rule of law had to become firmly established and spoke about the need for judges who were highly qualified, honest and free from corruption. Again, remarkable words. And exactly the right words. I don't disagree with President Tokayev here. I agree with him completely. But several years have now passed, and the question that matters is:

Has the reality caught up with the speech? Because identifying the disease is one thing. Removing it from the system is something else entirely. When does an individual case become a systemic problem? There is one phrase I've become tired of hearing over the years. Individual case. My case is an individual case. Muratkhan Tokmadi is an individual case. Lisa Pylaeva is an individual case. A tortured prisoner is an individual case. A journalist under pressure is an individual case.

A lawyer fighting to keep his licence is an individual case. Fine. But eventually individual cases become something else. Evidence. If one police officer brutalises somebody, you can call it an individual case. If another does it, that's another individual case. If prosecutors fail in one case, that's an individual case. If a judge behaves improperly in another, that's another individual case. But when the President himself publicly identifies police brutality, incompetent prosecutors and biased judges, surely we have already moved beyond pretending that these problems exist only in the imaginations of individual complainants.

The President identified the categories himself. The individual cases tell us whether those categories still exist. New Kazakhstan I genuinely want Tokayev's New Kazakhstan to succeed. Why wouldn't I? I have now been trapped inside this country's criminal justice system for years. Almost everything I know about Kazakhstan from prolonged personal experience has been learned through police stations, detention centres, courtrooms and prisons. And even from there, I have met extraordinary people.

I have met intelligent and decent people working inside state institutions. I have written elsewhere in this book about my later experiences with the KNB and why those experiences changed many of my original views about them. Kazakhstan has enormous potential. But you cannot build a New Kazakhstan by painting over the Old Kazakhstan. You have to remove what is rotten underneath. You can change legislation overnight. Changing institutional culture is much harder.

And nowhere is that more important than inside the criminal justice system. What good is the finest law in the world if the investigator doesn't follow it? What good is judicial independence written into the Constitution if the defendant doesn't experience an independent judge? What good are protections against torture if somebody can still be beaten behind a closed door? What good is the right to a lawyer if that lawyer is frightened that defending you too aggressively might cost him his career?

And that brings me to something I've witnessed throughout my case. Why are the lawyers frightened? Throughout my trial and the years that followed, lawyers expressed concerns about their licences. Think about how disturbing that is. A defence lawyer is supposed to fight. Challenge the investigator. Challenge the prosecutor. Challenge the expertise. Challenge the evidence. Challenge the judge when necessary. That isn't misconduct. That's the job. But once lawyers start asking themselves:

How far can I push this before somebody comes after my licence? the balance of the entire criminal justice system changes. The prosecution doesn't even need to become stronger. The defence becomes weaker by itself. And you don't need to frighten every lawyer. That isn't how fear works. Make examples of enough people and everybody else watches. The message travels by itself. Be careful. Don't go too far. Don't take the wrong case. Don't embarrass the wrong institution.

Don’t make yourself a problem. If lawyers begin thinking like that, the defendant is no longer receiving the fearless defence that the law supposedly guarantees him. Why are the human-rights defenders frightened? For years I’ve also struggled to understand some of my experiences with human-rights organisations in Kazakhstan. You approach them thinking: Surely these are the people who will shout. Surely if there are allegations of torture, forensic irregularities, missing evidence, unfair proceedings and abuse of power, a human-rights organisation will want to know.

Yet sometimes the responses I’ve experienced have been cautious. Defensive. Occasionally almost aggressive. For a long time I found that incredibly frustrating. Then I started asking myself whether I had been asking the wrong question. Instead of: Why won’t they help? Perhaps the question should be: What have they seen happen to people who did? And Kazakhstan’s own history gives them plenty to remember. Yevgeniy Zhovtis Look at Yevgeniy Zhovtis. One of Kazakhstan’s most prominent human-rights defenders.

In 2009 he was involved in a tragic road accident in which a man died. Zhovtis was prosecuted and sentenced to four years’ imprisonment. The controversy wasn’t simply about whether the accident happened. It did. The controversy concerned what happened once one of Kazakhstan’s best-known human-rights defenders entered the criminal justice system himself. International human-rights and legal organisations raised serious concerns about the fairness of the proceedings, including the way his procedural status changed from witness to suspect and his ability to challenge important aspects of the investigation.

Everyone working in Kazakhstan’s human-rights community saw what happened. You don’t think they remembered? Natalya Sokolova Then look at Natalya Sokolova. A lawyer and trade-union activist working with oil workers in western Kazakhstan during the KarazhanbasMunai labour dispute. She was helping defend workers’ interests. Then she herself ended up arrested, prosecuted and imprisoned. UN human-rights experts raised concerns that the action against her might have been connected to her legitimate work defending those employees.

Again, forget Mohamed Barakat for a moment. Imagine you’re a young lawyer. Or an activist. Or you run a human-rights organisation. You know the history. You know what happened to Zhovtis. You know what happened to Sokolova. You know what happened around the oil-worker disputes and Zhanaozen. You’ve watched journalists get into trouble. You’ve watched lawyers get into trouble. You’ve watched activists get into trouble. And then Mohamed Barakat writes to you from prison.

What am I effectively asking them to do? Take on the police. Take on the Prosecutor’s Office. Take on the forensic institutions. Challenge the judge. Investigate allegations of torture. Put your organisation’s name publicly behind this case. Perhaps what I interpreted as unwillingness wasn’t always unwillingness at all. Perhaps some of it was fear. I cannot look inside somebody else’s head and

tell you why a particular organisation refused to help me. But I can look at the environment these people work in and ask a legitimate question:

Has Kazakhstan created an environment where human-rights defenders genuinely believe they can challenge powerful state institutions without worrying about what might happen to them afterwards? Because fear doesn't always require somebody to telephone you and say: Shut up or we'll arrest you. Sometimes history does the job. You watch what happens to one person. Then another. Then another. Eventually nobody needs to tell you where the invisible lines are. You already know.

And perhaps that is the most effective form of fear of all. People begin censoring themselves. What reform actually looks like This brings me straight back to Tokayev. Real reform isn't simply another law. It isn't another department. It isn't another speech. It isn't another conference. Real reform is when a lawyer can aggressively defend his client without wondering whether his licence will disappear. It's when a journalist can investigate powerful people without first calculating what publishing the story might cost her.

It's when a human-rights organisation receives a complaint about the police or Prosecutor's Office and thinks first: Is this person being mistreated? Not: What happens to us if we take this case? That's when you know the country has changed. The Human Rights Commissioner And then look at the institution that is supposed to protect people when other parts of the state fail them. Kazakhstan's Commissioner for Human Rights. The current Commissioner, Artur Lastaev, spent many years working within the Prosecutor General's Office before becoming Human Rights Commissioner.

That raises an obvious structural question for me. If complaints repeatedly concern prosecutors and law- enforcement institutions, what does it do to public confidence when the institution expected to provide independent human-rights oversight is led by somebody whose professional career was deeply rooted in the prosecutorial system? And when others surrounding that institution also come from similar professional backgrounds, the question becomes even more important.

Who protects the citizen from the prosecution when the people expected to provide oversight come from the prosecution itself? My own experiences with the Ombudsman's structures have been mixed. There have been individuals who engaged. There have been people who tried. But the structural question remains. You can put HUMAN RIGHTS above the door. What matters is whether the person walking through that door genuinely believes the institution will stand against another powerful state body when necessary.

Is Kazakhstan actually changing? Tokayev has introduced reforms. The Constitutional Court was restored. Judicial reforms have been announced. Anti-corruption structures have changed. Measures concerning torture prevention and video surveillance have expanded. Institutions have been reorganised. Laws have changed. But now look at what we have discussed throughout this book.

Look at prison chiefs being prosecuted. Look at judges being investigated. Look at prosecutors being caught.

Look at allegations of torture. Look at lawyers fighting for their professional licences. Look at journalists under pressure. Look at the extraordinary cases I have described. Then ask: Is the system actually becoming healthier? Or are we simply seeing more clearly how deep the disease already was? Maybe both things are happening simultaneously. But laws can change far faster than institutional culture. And institutional culture is what a prisoner encounters at two o'clock in the morning when nobody else is watching.

Kazakhstan from the outside Kazakhstan cares enormously about how it looks internationally. And understandably so. It wants foreign investment. International companies. Tourists. Universities. Global conferences. Modern infrastructure. Partnerships with Britain, America, Europe, China and the rest of the world. Astana looks spectacular. Almaty can be breathtaking. New buildings. Luxury hotels. Shopping centres. Restaurants. International schools. Foreign universities.

The image is modern, stable and increasingly connected with the world. And before my arrest, that outside image was basically all I knew. I never lived in Kazakhstan before I was arrested. I had travelled here as a visitor. I stayed in the Intercontinental. I saw Almaty. I saw the mountains. I saw the restaurants, the expensive cars and the modern developments. Like any foreign visitor, I saw the Kazakhstan presented to the world. Then, on 24 October 2019, everything changed.

The first time Kazakhstan became anything resembling a permanent home to me was when the state arrested me. Police station. Detention centre. Courtroom. SIZO. Prison. For years, that has been my Kazakhstan. There was no ordinary life here before prison. No years of living comfortably in Almaty followed by some sudden discovery of another side of the country. I effectively went from foreign visitor to prisoner. And perhaps that gives me a strange perspective.

I arrived looking at Kazakhstan through the eyes of somebody passing through. Then I came to know the country from inside the part of the state most foreign visitors will hopefully never see. That is why I worry when I see enormous energy being spent improving Kazakhstan's image abroad while the cancer within its justice system remains. You can spend billions polishing the outside of a building. But I didn't spend these years looking at the outside. I've been locked inside it.

The cancer within It doesn't matter how beautiful your airports are if a foreign citizen doesn't believe he can receive a fair trial. It doesn't matter how many international businesses you invite if investors don't trust the courts. It doesn't matter how many human-rights conferences you hold if lawyers are frightened to defend difficult clients. It doesn't matter how many human-rights institutions exist if people don't believe those institutions can challenge prosecutors.

It doesn't matter how many times you announce reform if the same problems continue appearing underneath different names. Police brutality. Incompetent

prosecutors. Biased judges. Those aren't my words. They're Tokayev's. The President diagnosed the disease himself. The question is whether Kazakhstan is treating it aggressively enough. Because cancer doesn't disappear because you stop talking about it. You don't cure cancer by hiding the scan. And you certainly don't cure it by spending billions convincing everybody outside the hospital that the patient looks fantastic.

You treat the disease. Does he know about Mohamed and Sophia? So let me return to the question with which I started. Does President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev know about Mohamed and Sophia Barakat? I don't know. Perhaps one day I'll find out. But I don't think that is even the most important question anymore. Does Tokayev know there are problems involving police brutality? Yes. Does he know there are problems involving prosecutors? Yes. Does he know there are problems involving judges?

Yes. He told the country himself. So if my case ever lands directly in front of him, I don't want special treatment. I don't want President Tokayev to telephone a judge and say: Release Mohamed. That would simply replace one abuse of the system with another. I would want something much simpler. Investigate it properly. Take the first autopsy. Take Opinion No. 28. Take the Ministry of Justice's written confirmation. Take the conflicting expert opinions. Take the fingerprints.

Take the DNA. Take the CCTV evidence. Take the testimony concerning the deleted footage. Take Madina's recordings. Take her police statements. Take the witness statements. Take the allegations of torture. Take everything. Give it to people who have absolutely no institutional interest in protecting what happened before. Then follow the evidence. Wherever it goes. That's all. But something else has already happened And this is perhaps one of the most important points in this entire chapter.

Throughout our complaints process, the President's Administration has shown interest in issues we submitted. That matters. Our complaints did not always simply disappear when they reached the top. Instructions were sent down. And whenever that happened, for a moment we thought: Finally. Somebody above has read this. Somebody has seen the problem. Somebody wants answers. Then I watched what happened. The instructions travelled down through Kazakhstan's system.

Down. And down. Until eventually, somehow, they arrived back at the institutions sitting at the heart of the very complaints we were making. Bostandyk. Back to the police. Back to the prosecutors. Back to the same institutional environment whose conduct we were asking the state to examine. And there they wasted no time. The complaints were dealt with. Closed. Tucked away. And we started again. Another complaint. Another document. Another contradiction. Another journey upwards.

Sometimes another instruction came down. And eventually: Bostandyk. Again. Who follows the order? This is where I believe Tokayev's reforms face

their real test. Perhaps issuing an instruction from the top isn't enough. Someone has to follow that instruction all the way to the bottom. If the President's Administration considers an issue serious enough to send instructions concerning it, what happens when those instructions reach the local police and prosecutors?

Who checks what they actually did? Who reads the eventual response? Who checks whether they examined the evidence? Who asks whether they answered the actual complaint? Who establishes whether they simply found another procedural mechanism to close it? And most importantly: What happens when the purpose of the instruction is disregarded? Because if an instruction can travel from the highest levels of Kazakhstan's state machinery all the way down to a local institution only to be diluted, disregarded or quietly closed, another uncomfortable question appears:

Who is actually in control? You cannot reform a system without looking at cases This is why I reject the idea that systemic reform can somehow exist separately from individual cases. How? A justice system doesn't exist floating somewhere above Kazakhstan in theory. It exists in police stations. It exists in interrogation rooms. It exists in forensic laboratories. It exists in prosecutors' offices. It exists in courtrooms. It exists in prisons. And every violation happening inside those places happens to an individual human being.

If you want to know whether reform is working, pick up the case file. Follow it. Beginning to end. Who investigated it? What did they do? What evidence did they collect? What did they ignore? Did they follow the law? Did they follow the regulations? Did they comply with instructions from above? Were complaints independently examined? Were officials effectively asked to investigate themselves? Was the eventual decision supported by the evidence? And when something went wrong:

What happened next? That is how you measure reform. Not by counting speeches. Not by counting new laws. Not by counting conferences. By looking at what actually happened to people. Mistakes and misconduct Not every violation necessarily begins as some enormous conspiracy. People make mistakes. Investigators make mistakes. Prosecutors make mistakes. Experts make mistakes. Judges make mistakes. Some violations will be unintentional. Others won't be. What defines a functioning justice system is what happens after the mistake or violation is discovered.

Correct it. If an investigator made an honest mistake, correct it. If a prosecutor misunderstood or misapplied the law, correct it. If an expertise was conducted contrary to the applicable regulations, correct it. If a court applied the law incorrectly, correct it. That is the system doing what it is supposed to do. But intentional violations are different. If somebody deliberately destroys evidence, conceals evidence, fabricates evidence, tortures somebody, abuses their authority, knowingly disregards the law or deliberately ignores lawful instructions, then changing a piece of paperwork isn't enough.

Remove them. Otherwise you leave the same person in the same position, with the same power to do exactly the same thing to somebody else. And what exactly have you reformed then? You can write the finest laws in the world. But laws don't investigate cases. People do. Laws don't prosecute people. People do. Laws don't conduct forensic examinations. People do. Laws don't pass judgments. People do. And if the people entrusted with enforcing the law can intentionally violate it without consequences, eventually the words written in the law become meaningless.

From Akorda to Bostandyk Maybe that is the lesson I've learned from all of this. President Tokayev can stand at the top and say: No police brutality. No incompetent prosecutors. No biased judges. And I agree with him completely. But those words have an enormous distance to travel. From Akorda. Through the ministries. Through the Prosecutor General's Office. Through regional departments. Through district prosecutors. Through police departments. All the way down to the investigator sitting behind a desk with somebody's life in his hands.

That is where New Kazakhstan either exists or it doesn't. Because an instruction from above is meaningless if nobody checks what happened when it arrived below. If there is going to be real change, particular cases have to be checked and followed. Intentional and unintentional violations of the law have to be identified. Mistakes have to be corrected. Deliberate abuses have to have consequences. And officials who intentionally violate the law have to be removed from positions that allow them to continue doing it.

Otherwise the same complaints will keep travelling upwards. The same instructions will keep travelling downwards. And somewhere at the bottom somebody will keep closing the file. Up. Down. Closed. Up. Down. Closed. That isn't reform. That's a circle. President Tokayev has already described the Kazakhstan he wants to build. The challenge now isn't another promise. It is making sure that promise reaches the people who actually experience the justice system. Because New Kazakhstan cannot exist only in Akorda.

It has to exist in the police station. It has to exist in the prosecutor's office. It has to exist in the courtroom. It has to exist in the prison. And yes— it has to reach Bostandyk too. Kazakhstan looks remarkable from the outside. I know because that is how I first saw it. But I never lived here before my arrest. There was the Kazakhstan I briefly knew as a foreign visitor. And then there was the Kazakhstan I discovered after I was arrested. For years, I haven't been looking at Kazakhstan from the outside.

I've been locked inside its system. You can build towers. You can attract billions. You can host the world. You can announce reforms. You can call it New Kazakhstan. But eventually a country isn't judged by how beautifully it treats its guests when everything is going right. It's judged by what happens to them when everything goes wrong.

Chapter 116: 24 October 2019

24 October 2019

When a friend of mine suggested that I should leave this chapter until the end of the book, his reason was simple. Suspense. He thought that after everything the reader had learned—the investigation, the trial, the experts, the prisons, the prosecutors, the recordings, the missing evidence and everything that followed—I should make them wait until the end before taking them back to the morning when all of this began. It was instantly easy for me to agree. But my reason was different.

I didn't want to go back there. Writing about investigators is one thing. Writing about prosecutors and judges is one thing. Writing about being imprisoned, humiliated and watching years of my life disappear is one thing. But going back to the days before Sophia died means going back to a world in which she was still alive. It means remembering her as a living child rather than a name written thousands of times across a criminal case. It means going back to the last hours before my entire life divided into a before and an after.

And there is one time that has remained fixed in my mind. 07:10 a.m., 24 October 2019. Sophia was alive. She was lying on the far-right corner of the bed. She woke up and started crying at the disturbance in the room. Alive. Crying. My daughter. Before we reach 07:10, however, I need to go backwards. Because you cannot understand that morning without understanding the life we were living before it. --- Can Hell Be Another Reality? Madina once told me that I'm lucky I never saw Sophia dead.

She says those moments live in her head. She sees them every day before she sleeps. I've thought about those words many times. Have you ever considered the possibility that hell might be some kind of alternate reality? That somewhere there is another Mohamed, another Madina and another Sophia living on another timeline? That somewhere the happy family I remember continued living its ordinary life, while somehow this reality split away from it and became the nightmare I'm living now?

I know how that sounds. But that's what happens to a person's mind when the shock of what's happening around them becomes too much. Your brain keeps telling you: This can't be real. There must be another explanation. There must be another version. There must be somewhere where none of this happened. Somewhere Sophia grew up. Somewhere I'm not writing this from prison. Somewhere 24 October was just another Thursday. But this is the reality I have. So let's go back.

--- Exhausted and Extremely Happy The previous year had been one of the busiest of my life. I had been adjusting to family life. A new wife. A pregnancy that at one stage came frighteningly close to ending in a premature birth. I remember being beside Madina every second I could be. We moved homes twice. I handled the moves myself. I'd get everything done and then call Madina once the

new place was ready. We travelled constantly. I couldn't expect my wife to sit at home while I travelled around the world for work. But travelling with a Kazakhstan passport complicated almost everything.

Hong Kong initially didn't want to issue Madina a dependant pass. That meant bringing her out of Hong Kong and back in approximately every three weeks. Whether I was tired or not, it had to be done. Then, Alhamdulillah, Sophia was born. And as every parent knows, a baby changes everything. Even the little things. No more air conditioning, for example. It sounds like nothing, but everything adds up when you're already sleep deprived. Then there was the way Sophia slept.

Sometimes she would lie beside Madina, still latched onto her while feeding. Madina was a heavy sleeper. I'd worry. What if she rolls over? So I'd wake up periodically to check. I'd look at Sophia. Then I'd check whether she was breathing. Parents will understand. You know your child is fine. You know she's sleeping. But you still check. Just to make sure. I was exhausted. But I was extremely happy. And yes, you can be both at the same time. --- The People Behind Mohamed

When you take on the responsibility of a foreign wife, you should expect to own that responsibility. That's how I saw marriage. Financially we were fine. Madina's family regularly needed money, and I understood how important supporting them was to her, so we helped them. I understood it because I felt exactly the same way about my own parents. I had been supporting them for years. My parents needed nothing. Effectively all their wants were provided by me, and I was proud of that.

Family came first. This is something I don't think the authorities here ever stopped to think about when they attacked me the way they did. They never thought about the people behind Mohamed. A man doesn't disappear from the world when you put handcuffs on him. There are people behind him. People who depend on him. A wife. A child. Parents. A family. Ironically, there was one moment when what my family owned suddenly seemed to matter very much. When they were being asked to sell everything they had to save me.

Then the people behind Mohamed mattered. --- A350 or Almaty? At the same time, things were changing at work. Hong Kong Airlines and Hong Kong Air Cargo were splitting operations. No more moving between passenger flights and cargo. I had a decision to make. Passenger or cargo. If I stayed with passenger operations, I could potentially move onto the Airbus A350. That was a serious career opportunity. But cargo offered something else. Almaty. Only Hong Kong Air Cargo flew there.

There was also a three-week rotation. That meant Sophia could spend more time with her grandparents and aunties. Madina could get more help from her sister Alina. Sophia loved Alina. They had their own special bond. I had even sent a request to Hong Kong Cargo asking whether I could be permanently based in

Almaty. I was also considering the possibility of taking a contract with Air Astana while Sophia was young. I wanted Sophia to know her mother's family.

I didn't want her growing up in the kind of semi-isolation I remembered, where you technically had aunties and uncles but barely knew them. I wanted something different for her. So the decision wasn't simply about whether I wanted to fly an A350. It was about the kind of childhood I wanted my daughter to have. --- Documents, Documents and More Documents Meanwhile, I was drowning in paperwork. Madina's UK visa was rejected twice. The costs were substantial.

But I wasn't giving up. Sophia needed registering in Hong Kong, with the British authorities and with the Kazakhstan authorities. There was our marriage certificate. Sophia's IIN. Her passport. One document needed another document. Then something notarised. Then court stamps. Then something else. Months passed. Thousands of dollars disappeared. I'd land after a duty that could last around twenty hours and head straight into town to deal with paperwork. I was always tired.

But honestly, I was happy. I was building a life. --- Our Home in Almaty For some time I had been seriously thinking about buying an apartment in Almaty. A place we could call our own. Somewhere we could leave our belongings instead of constantly living out of hotels and temporary accommodation. And it wasn't only for us. Madina's family lived in Shelek. Work there was limited. If they ever needed to move into Almaty, our home would be available to them. Madina and I viewed properties several times.

Eventually I thought I'd found the perfect one. The penthouse at Almaty Towers, opposite Dostyk Plaza. Three floors overlooking Almaty and the mountains. There was a balcony running almost all the way around the tower. The owner told us it belonged to the penthouse. Two doors inside the apartment opened onto it. He also said two parking spaces underneath the tower came with the sale. Then, during one visit, an elderly neighbour came out complaining. I couldn't understand her.

Madina translated. She was complaining about access to the roof. Something didn't feel right. I hired a lawyer to conduct proper due diligence. He was expensive, but it was worth it. The legal documents told a different story. The balcony wasn't exclusively part of the penthouse as we'd been told. It was common space and other residents had access rights. Nor could my lawyer find the promised two parking spaces specifically allocated to that penthouse. I confronted the owner.

He tried to brush it off. That was enough for me. I walked away. It had been our dream home, but I could already see the problems coming. Across the road from the Intercontinental, however, another development was rising. Orion. Mirrored glass. Peaks shaped almost like the mountains behind Almaty. Stunning buildings. I started wondering how much the apartments cost. --- Sophia's Apartment One day Madina and I were discussing the possibility of buying an apartment in Orion.

She was talking about how wonderful it would be for her and her family to live in her apartment. I corrected her. “You mean Sophia's apartment.” She looked at me. I explained that I wanted the apartment in Sophia's name. After all, everything we were doing was for her. I expected Madina to smile and agree. Instead, I saw a look in her eyes I hadn't witnessed before. “What do you mean, Sophia? Sophia is a baby, Mohamed. How can you give her an apartment?” I explained that this was part of the reason I was doing all Sophia's documents in Kazakhstan.

Part of me understood Madina's concern. So I sat her down and explained something else. Our insurance. I took out the documents. Between our private and company coverage, if something happened to either one of us, the remaining person would receive approximately $2.5 million. I explained the medical insurance as well. She and Sophia could receive treatment internationally at hospitals accepting the medical cards without having to pay the medical costs themselves.

I wanted her to understand that my family was protected. Madina laughed. “You mean if you have a heart attack, we will be rich?” Then she laughed again. “There is medicine to do this.” I looked at her. “Not funny.” At the time, perhaps it was just a strange joke between husband and wife. Little did I know how much those words would mean later in my life. --- Three Weeks Then suddenly all the good news seemed to arrive at once. An email from my company. Annual leave approved. 11 November. Three weeks.

Three whole weeks. Shortly afterwards, the concierge buzzed the apartment. “Mr Barakat, recorded delivery. Would you like me to sign or should I let them up?” “Send them up, please.” An envelope arrived. I recognised it. Madina's passport. Twice before, that passport had returned with a rejection letter from the UK visa office. I opened it. No rejection letter. Instead there was a white sticker inside. I opened the passport properly. The visa. I think I was more excited than anyone.

Big hugs and kisses for Madina. Sophia was in my arms receiving endless cheeky-cheeky kisses, smiling at her nutcase dad and probably wondering: What is up with this fool? I photographed the visa and immediately sent it to our family WhatsApp group. Sophia was coming home. She was finally going to see Giddu and Teta's home for the first time. Giddu and Teta are the Arabic words we use for Grandpa and Grandma—my father and mother. After two rejected applications, months of paperwork, embassy visits, thousands of dollars and endless running around, my daughter was finally coming home to meet my family.

I immediately started checking flights. Lufthansa had business-class availability. Perfect. Great airline. Everything was set. Just get through the remaining work. Then three weeks off. --- Three Birthdays There was one complication. On 6 October 2019, Sophia's first birthday, I would be in Turkey. So I had a plan. Actually, I had three. We'd celebrate early in Hong Kong—me, Madina and Sophia. Then she'd celebrate with her mother's family in Kazakhstan. Then, even if it was already November, I'd give her another birthday in Britain.

Three birthdays for my little girl. Why not? For Hong Kong I'd ordered a princess cake. The shop let me down and I had to take a ready-made cake from the fridge instead. Even now that memory breaks my heart. Her little hat. Sitting in her chair. Reaching towards the candles. It wasn't much. But we were together. Me. Madina. Sophia. Together. --- Back to Almaty Madina flew to Almaty with Sophia. I'd booked them an Airbnb apartment near the Intercontinental.

Meanwhile I was rushing to finish everything. Blood tests. Medical checks, including the required leprosy checks. Documents. Collecting Sophia's Kazakhstan ID from the embassy. In the rush to the airport, I forgot my medication. I needed Celebrex for my back. Sitting upright in an aircraft for hour after hour had left me with endless problems with my back muscles. I also needed antihistamines, both drowsy and non-drowsy. There was a reason for that. Aircraft cockpits could be incredibly dusty. They were rarely properly vacuumed or thoroughly cleaned. Most of the time we pilots would simply wipe everything down ourselves with wet wipes.

That accumulated dust had always caused me serious allergies, so antihistamines were something I regularly needed. Then there was allopurinol to reduce my uric acid because I was almost constantly following a high-protein diet to avoid gaining weight. I called Madina and gave her the list. Then I asked: “Do you know which ones?” I could hear the indignation immediately. “Hayatim, I studied for being pharmacist.” That Russian accent. That how could you possibly question my ability? tone.

“Okay, babes. I'll see you in a couple of days. Love you.” “I love you too, my hayatun-tun.” Hayatim had somehow become more baby-like since Sophitushki entered our lives. Even the language between us had changed around our daughter. --- Almaty Bureaucracy I met Madina at the apartment and brought her and Sophia to the Intercontinental. There wasn't much time to relax. We immediately got to work finishing the documents for the spouse visa. The government offices in Almaty were old, disorganised and reluctant to work.

I watched Madina putting cash notes between the documents she submitted. Corruption. We submitted what we could. Then the office closed for lunch. We waited nearby in a cafeteria. Sophia breastfed. Looked around. Slept. Woke up. She was tired, but she never complained. Sophia was bossy even at that age. She was a little madam. If she wanted something, that tiny finger would come out with absolute determination. She'd point. Then she'd look at her own finger...

and decide to chew on it. That was Sophia. We continued being sent from department to department. Our documents weren't being rejected because they were incomplete. I had the complete list of requirements published on the government's own website. The problem was that the person sitting behind one desk didn't know what to do with them. So instead of dealing with them, they sent us somewhere else. Then somewhere else. And somewhere else. Eventually we reached somebody more senior.

By this point Sophia was exhausted. “Please,” I said. “Our daughter is tired.” He looked through everything. “These documents will be submitted, but you have to go to Taldykorgan to receive the official visa.” Fine. At least we finally had an answer. We thanked him and left. --- Ilyas I thought of Ilyas. He was married to Madina's cousin. I'd met him at our wedding and remembered how helpful he'd been. When my family were leaving Kazakhstan, he helped send them to the airport one by one.

He'd also mentioned that he worked for the government. Maybe he could help. We met him for dinner and I explained everything. “Brother, no problem. I will help.” Then he added: “You must come and visit me at my house in Zharkent.” Ilyas turned out to be a tremendous help. He arranged the appointment in Taldykorgan. One more problem solved. Or so I thought. --- Fat Chance Then I had to go back to work. I flew to Istanbul on duty. I hadn't had much rest in Almaty, but that was okay.

I'll sleep in Istanbul. We were staying at the Radisson Blu. Perfect. Hotel room. Bed. Do Not Disturb sign. Sleep. At least that was the plan. Fat chance. My room seemed to be directly beside a primary school. Children outside. Noise. Constant noise. Eventually I managed to fall asleep. Then apparently the DO NOT DISTURB sign became merely a decorative suggestion. The door flew open. Housekeeping. They came into the room and started cleaning. While I was still in bed.

I was livid. More than anything, my brain physically hurt from lack of sleep. That horrible feeling where you're beyond normal tiredness. But there was nothing I could do. I was flying back to Almaty that evening. --- The Blue Buildings We arrived in Almaty at around 4 a.m. I travelled back to the hotel. There wasn't time to collapse into bed. Now I had to get Madina and Sophia ready for Taldykorgan. Ilyas had arranged a driver for 6 a.m. So off we went. Again.

Documents. Road. Family. Responsibility. Keep moving. And then I realised Ilyas was coming with us. He was there in the car. I hadn't expected that at all. He'd actually taken the day off work to help us. I appreciated that enormously. As we passed Kapshagay, I started noticing casinos beside the highway. One. Then another. Then another. This must be Kazakhstan's Vegas, I thought. I'd flown into Las Vegas many times when I was a student pilot in Los Angeles, so the comparison immediately entered my head.

Behind the casinos was a huge lake. We kept driving. A few miles further on, something else caught my attention. Some blue buildings. They seemed to be sitting in the middle of nowhere. Out in the steppe. Four blocks, from what I remember, roughly four storeys high. I stared at them through the window. Who would build apartments out here? Maybe they were residential accommodation for people working at the casinos or hotels. Then another possibility entered my head.

Maybe it's some kind of police academy. In Egypt they have facilities outside the cities, so perhaps Kazakhstan did something similar. I looked at the buildings for another few seconds. Then we drove on. I didn't give those blue buildings

another thought. --- Zharkent We reached Taldykorgan at around 10 a.m. Ilyas picked up a tort—a cake—for the officer who received our documents. Then we continued to Zharkent. There I met Ilyas's beautiful family. And Sophia found a new friend.

Ilyas's daughter was only a few months older than Sophia. I watched my daughter taking her new friend's toys and keeping them away from her. “Madina! Look at what Sophia is doing!” We laughed. Then we spent time trying to teach her about sharing. It was probably Sophia's first experience of discovering that she couldn't have absolutely everything for herself. At home, she grabbed something from Muma or Papa and neither of us had the heart to ask for it back.

Now another little person wanted her toys back. Sophia wasn't impressed. Ilyas took me hunting. We shot pheasants and ducks and cooked them for dinner. Later he invited me to his friend's home, where we enjoyed some drinks for his wife's birthday. By the time I got back, Madina was angry. One of the women had apparently made a comment about me. “What a man. Look at how much his daughter loves him.” While I'd been hunting with Ilyas, Sophia had started crying.

As soon as I returned, she was in my arms making her little complaining noises and settling her head into my shoulder. Madina had noticed the woman's comment. And Madina was jealous. “We are not going back there ever. Stupid people. Look how they live. This woman is nothing!” “Madina, they invited us into their home. I'm sure you misunderstood.” “Ahaa! You don't know Kazakhstan woman, Mohamed. I understand what she is meaning.” What a headache. Out of nowhere.

23 October 2019 I was exhausted. I caught around two hours of sleep before my overtired body woke me again. And immediately my brain started. The to-do list. There was still too much to finish. I started browsing Krisha.com—krisha translating roughly as roof—Kazakhstan's platform for buying and renting property. I found an apartment in Orion. There was something else I needed to deal with. My passport was still in Taldykorgan. I had work the following morning.

I was supposed to fly to Istanbul. Without my passport, that would be a disaster. And there was another reason I was looking forward to the trip. My eldest sister was also going to be in Istanbul for work. I hadn't seen her for a while. It would be great to catch up. It was now: 23 October 2019. 6 A.M. I waited downstairs for Ilyas's driver at around six in the morning. Madina and Sophia were sleeping. I'd go and come back alone. There was no point waking them and dragging Sophia through another long journey.

The men didn't speak English, but they knew what to do. Ilyas had already briefed them. We started driving towards Taldykorgan. At around 7:30 a.m., roughly halfway there, the driver's telephone rang. The passport wouldn't be ready until the afternoon. I was stressed. We turned around. They drove me back to Almaty and dropped me off. I went upstairs and told Madina. Then I messaged Ilyas. “Bro, I'm worried about the passport. I need to fly to Istanbul tomorrow!”

His response contained his favourite words. “Don't worry, brother.” Then he told me there was something small he needed to mention. The man helping us had asked for 200,000 tenge. “Don't worry,” Ilyas told me. “I will pay for this.” Absolutely not. He'd already helped us far too much. I told him: “Absolutely not, man. You've helped me so much. I'll pass the money to your driver when he comes. I really can't thank you enough for all your help.” The Apartment

I showed Madina the Orion apartment I'd found. She loved it. She looked through the window. The building was right there in front of us. “It's the best place in Almaty to live, Mohamed!” “Call the agent.” The appointment was arranged for around 10 a.m. We walked through the park and down the road. It was a cool October morning in Almaty. When we reached the building, there was an Irish pub downstairs. Madina couldn't find the agent. “Take Sophia inside. It's cold,” she said.

So I went inside with Sophia. I ordered a Guinness. You can only judge an Irish pub by the quality of its Guinness. I took a sip. This will be my local pub, I thought. Madina returned. I'd only managed a couple of sips. “Let's go.” We followed the agent into the lift. The building still wasn't completely finished. She showed us a spacious apartment. The way apartments were described in Kazakhstan was also different from what I was used to in Britain. In the UK, a one-bedroom apartment means one actual bedroom plus a living room. In Kazakhstan, what was described as a two-room apartment could mean one actual bedroom with the living room counted as the second room.

It wasn't the three-floor penthouse of our dreams. But we loved it. We'll take it. I arranged to meet the agent again that evening to pay a cash deposit. There was $10,000 sitting in the safety deposit box at the hotel down the road. Wasn't Meant to Be I dropped Madina and Sophia back at the hotel. I wanted to buy gifts for Ilyas and his wife to thank them for their hospitality and everything they'd done for us. Dostyk Plaza was about a ten-minute walk away.

As I approached it, I looked at Almaty Towers. The penthouse we'd nearly bought. Wasn't meant to be, I thought. I walked into Mon Amie. I already knew what I wanted for Ilyas. He'd commented several times on how good my Armani Mania perfume smelled. So Armani Mania it was. For his wife, I needed some help. I called one of the shop assistants over and typed into Google Translate: I need a girl's set. She smiled. “I speak little English,” she said. I smelled a few perfumes before finding a J'adore set.

Perfume and makeup. A little expensive. But perfect. I bought it. Then I went into the liquor shop. Special-edition Beluga vodka for the drivers and friends who had helped. Perfect. Then I went into the IQOS shop. I wanted an IQOS electronic cigarette and sticks. The two women behind the counter noticed my shopping bags. Then they noticed my clothes. All designer. They commented on how good I smelled. There was some serious flirting going on. Both of them wrote their telephone numbers on the backs of IQOS store cards and told me I could call them anytime if I needed any help in Almaty.

One of them noticed my wedding ring. “Are you married?” “Yes. And I have a daughter.” She looked at me. “Arabic man can have four wives.” And winked. I remember wondering: How did she even know I was Arab? I smiled. Walked outside. And flicked the IQOS cards straight into the bin. Madina would have blown an absolute fit if she'd witnessed that. The Passport I returned to the hotel. We had lunch. And then I waited anxiously. My passport. Without it, tomorrow's flight would be a disaster.

Sometime after lunch, the call finally came. I went downstairs. The driver was there with his friend—the man who I now understood was a retired police officer. Of course. They handed me my passport. Everything was complete. The relief was enormous. I thanked them. I hugged them. I gave them the gifts. And inside the makeup box for Ilyas's wife was 200,000 tenge. I wasn't letting Ilyas pay it. He'd already done enough for us. My passport was back. The documents were done.

The apartment was waiting. I had work the next morning. My sister was waiting in Istanbul. And later that evening I was supposed to meet the Orion agent and pay the deposit on what I thought might become our new family home. That Evening Madina had been in the hotel for most of the day. She wanted to get out. She wanted to walk around the city. So at around 5 p.m., the three of us left. Me. Madina. Sophia. We walked around Almaty from place to place. Eventually we reached a restaurant near the Rixos Hotel.

Dickens Pub. “Let's eat here.” It wouldn't be long before the agent called. There was still plenty to do that evening. And I had a flight to Istanbul the following morning. So we went inside. It was the evening of 23 October 2019.

Chapter 117: Dickens Pub

Dickens Pub

As we entered Dickens, we were met by a tall man who seemed to be waiting for us. He guided us past the bar and towards the far-right corner of the restaurant. We sat down and he brought over a baby chair for Sophia. Sophia was happy. Completely absorbed in her favourite YouTube channel, Dave and Ava. A is for apple, la la la la... To be honest, I loved it too. By now I already knew what I wanted. As usual: Meat. Ribeye steak. Medium well. Salad on the side.

And a cold beer. If my memory is correct, Madina ordered salmon. We sat there waiting for the food when Madina's telephone rang. It was the property agent. The deal had fallen through. The owner had apparently seen how much interest there was in the apartment and decided to keep it on the market and increase the price. Apparently, he'd realised he'd priced it too low. And just like that, our mood changed. All that excitement from earlier disappeared. We both sat there with long faces.

Tired. Disappointed. Only a few hours earlier we had been discussing the apartment as though it was going to become our family home. Now it was gone. The food arrived, but by then our appetites had been spoiled. Sophia, as always,

shared mine. A little piece of salad. A tiny slice of steak for her to chew. She'd been a little sniffly. The October air in Almaty was making her nose run. Then I noticed a slice of lemon on my plate. Great, I thought. A little vitamin C.

And something else. I wanted to see Sophia's face the first time she tasted lemon. The internet is full of those cute videos. Babies trying lemon for the first time. The eyes. The expression. That moment when they don't quite understand what you've just put in their mouth. I wanted one of those moments with Sophia. I loved being there for her firsts. I had changed Sophia's first diaper in the hospital. That strange little jelly-like newborn poo. I gave her her first bath while Madina stood in the corner of the bathroom practically freaking out as she watched me holding this tiny slippery baby.

I introduced Sophia to her first solid foods. And Sophia had quickly decided that whatever was on Baba's plate was automatically more interesting than whatever had been prepared especially for her. She rewarded me for all of this by making her first word: Baba. That's how we referred to our dad. There is no letter P in the Arabic alphabet, so Papa becomes Baba. And once Sophia learned it, Madina had to listen to: BA BA BA BA BA BA all day. Sophia certainly knew how to call for her mother too.

When she wanted milk, I'd hear her: “Maaa... maaum.” So there I was in Dickens with a slice of lemon. Another first. I gave Sophia a little taste. Her eyes widened. Her tiny head shook for a second as she turned towards her mum. And Madina went absolutely ballistic. Not mildly irritated. She exploded. All the frustration from the apartment seemed to come pouring out at once. The restaurant was relatively empty, but the tall waiter turned from the bar to see what was happening.

An older man sitting at the bar enjoying his beer also took a moment's interest in the man being told off by his wife. And there I was. Sophia staring between us. Madina furious. “The milk will split in her stomach, Mohamed!” I stared at her with disapproval. She looked down. Then came the real problem. “This stupid apartment. And why should it be in Sophia's name?” She gestured towards Sophia. For a moment, a thought entered my head. Is she jealous of our daughter?

I looked at her. “Madina...” --- Sophia's Future “Madina, you and Sophia are equally important to me. But if something were to happen to me, all of the insurance money will be in your name. “Sophia would have the apartment in her name so that if and when she ever goes to university, if she needed money and for any reason there's nothing left, she can sell the apartment and pay for her education. “Who knows what will happen in the future?” She wasn't impressed.

She looked at Sophia. And again, I caught what I interpreted as a glimpse of resentment. There it is again. It reminded me of something Madina herself had often spoken about. She had told me that she felt her own mother, Taxmina, resented her for the life she was now living. And for a moment I wondered: Is this something she inherited? I didn't know. But I'd noticed it. --- Another Mohamed During my time in Almaty, I had become acquainted with another Mohamed.

He was Egyptian. He'd been living in Almaty for many years and worked for a Qatari business there. We had originally met at the Intercontinental. It wasn't difficult for two Arabs to recognise one another. He was already married to a Kazakh woman, knew his way around the country and spoke fluent Russian. At the time, I was also working on a business idea of my own. Kazakhstan produces very good-quality lamb, and I was exploring the possibility of supplying Kazakh lamb to Arab markets such as Saudi Arabia and Dubai.

I'd previously mentioned our apartment search to Mohamed. He thought the properties we were looking at were overpriced. He'd found some alternatives: newly built apartments further away from central Almaty that he believed offered much better value. We arranged to meet at Beirut restaurant. When we arrived, I took Sophia onto my lap. After what had happened at Dickens, I left Madina nearby to smoke her shisha—an Arabic tobacco pipe—and calm down. Mohamed showed her brochures for some of the apartments he'd found.

Madina wasn't impressed. We talked about the lamb business as well. Mohamed also wanted me to meet a Saudi businessman who had some other ideas for business. Eventually it was time to leave. At approximately 10 p.m., I dropped Madina and Sophia back at the hotel. Then I went to another restaurant near Mega Park, the well-known shopping centre in central Almaty. --- The Business Meeting We met, introduced ourselves and started discussing our ideas. We talked about possible business opportunities.

During the meeting, I drank two glasses of whisky. When we'd finished, I left the restaurant and stood outside waiting for a taxi. Then two young women wearing hijabs approached me. They were carrying balloons. But these weren't ordinary balloons. There were smaller balloons inside the larger ones, with little lights glowing in the middle, and they were attached to plastic sticks. The moment I saw them, I thought of Sophia. She would love them. So I bought them.

All of them. I got into the taxi carrying this collection of glowing balloons and headed back to the hotel. For Sophia. --- The Envelope I returned to the hotel and went upstairs. Madina greeted me at the door. She asked how much money I had left. I gave her the envelope containing the remaining tenge. I wouldn't need it in Istanbul. I was only going to be away for two days, and there was enough there for her while I was gone. Besides, Madina now had her own Sberbank account.

That was another thing we'd managed to get done during those previous couple of days. We'd opened the account in her name, deposited dollars and converted some of the money into tenge. There was money available. I was going to Istanbul. Madina and Sophia would remain at the hotel. Then I'd be back. --- One More Thing I lay down on the bed. I was overtired. That horrible state where your body desperately needs sleep but your mind refuses to switch off. Then I remembered something.

The hotel room. It hadn't been paid for during the two days I was going to be away. Madina and Sophia needed that room. I got back out of bed. I went downstairs to the main reception and spoke to the woman and man working there.

Could they extend the same room while I was away? They checked. It was available. Good. I paid for the additional stay with my card. Now I could stop thinking about it. I went back upstairs. Got into bed. And almost immediately fell asleep.

--- 1:30 A.M. My eyes opened again. I checked the time. Approximately 1:30 a.m. I went to the bathroom and returned to bed. Then the tossing and turning started. The room was hot. Madina's body heat beside me was making it even more uncomfortable. I couldn't settle. I was tired enough to collapse, but sleep wouldn't come. Eventually, at around 2:30 a.m., I fell asleep again. --- 6 A.M. My alarm went off at around 6 a.m. I silenced my phone immediately. I didn't want to wake everyone.

I went into the bathroom. I was beyond exhausted. There were messages from Ilyas. He had an early start too. I replied to him and thanked him again for everything he'd done for us. Those messages survived. Later, they would be preserved and handed to the courts. I also messaged my sister. “I can't wait to see you.” I was supposed to see her in Istanbul. When I came out of the bathroom, Madina was awake. “How are you?” she asked. “I'm okay.” Then I told her my back had been hurting during the night.

I hadn't slept properly. Again. Madina put the kettle on and made me tea. Then she reached for the small bag she'd brought back from the pharmacy in Almaty. “Drink your medicine,” she said. I took it. Then I drank the tea she'd made for me. It was already around 6:30 a.m. 24 October 2019. --- Something Is Wrong Shortly after taking the medicine, I started feeling uncomfortable. Something wasn't right. “I don't feel well.” Madina looked at me. Silent. She was still in her knickers and bra.

I was still in my boxer shorts. Sophia was asleep in her sleeping blanket, the type that fastened around her shoulders. “Maybe you shouldn't go to work,” Madina said. “I can't. They don't have anyone else to operate the flight. We're not in Hong Kong. They don't have standby crew.” I was starting to sweat. Then my chest started feeling tight. I got up and tried walking around. “I don't feel well at all.” But Madina started talking about the apartment again.

I didn't like her tone. Not after what had happened in the restaurant the previous evening. “You embarrassed me in the restaurant yesterday,” I said. I really didn't like the way she was talking to me. But the argument was becoming secondary. Because whatever was happening to my body was getting worse. I grabbed a bottle of water. “I'm not feeling well, Madina.” I repeated it. Madina had my company telephone number. She called them. “Mohamed isn't going to work. He's sick!”

My immediate reaction was panic for a completely different reason. “This isn't good. They're going to fire me for this.” Her voice rose. “Well, what do you want to do? You think you can go to work?” Now she looked as though she was starting to panic too. She pulled her hair backwards across her head. The minutes kept moving. --- 07:10 A.M. Then the telephone rang. 07:10 a.m. The concierge. It was

standard procedure. I'd heard essentially the same wake-up and transport call many times before.

“Good morning, Captain Barakat. It's 07:10 a.m. local time Almaty. Your pick-up to the airport will arrive in one hour. Your documents are ready at reception.” Except this time, I wasn't the person who answered. Madina did. “Mohamed is sick. He's not going to work.” I sat on the edge of the bed. By now I knew I was in trouble. This wasn't tiredness. This wasn't simply my back. I needed medical attention. Sophia was behind me on the bed. Madina was kneeling on the bed in front of me, still in her knickers and bra.

And then whatever was happening inside my body seemed to overwhelm everything else. “Madina! Madina! My heart!” I shouted. Sophia woke up. And started crying. It was one of the only times I can remember hearing her really cry. Madina reached towards her. “She's scared, Mohamed.” I was scared too. “I'm scared too.” And then everything went black.

Chapter 118: You Cannot Rationalise Dreams

You Cannot Rationalise Dreams

You cannot rationalise dreams. There are those of you who will read this chapter and have your own thoughts. A psychologist might find what happened inside my mind during those moments interesting. But when I started writing this book, I gave myself one principle: Keep it as honest and accurate as possible. That means telling you what I remember even when what I remember doesn't make sense. The judge was smart enough to try and use it against me. Reporters were blocked from entering most of the hearings. He understood global politics, and he knew that, unfortunately, the world is becoming increasingly Islamophobic.

But I'm not going to change what I remember because of how somebody might choose to interpret it. During my blackout, I dreamt. In all honesty, many people describe their near-death experiences and what they saw or felt. I don't know what was happening to me medically during this period. What I do remember is what I thought. This is it. I thought I was dying. People say that when you are dying, your life flashes before your eyes. It really did feel as though my life was flashing past me, only I didn't exactly see my life.

I passed my father. He was praying. I passed my mother. She was also praying intensely, on her knees in a white galabaya and hijab—Muslim women's dress. And then, in between these intense images, something completely ridiculous kept flashing through my mind. A stupid video Ilyas had forwarded to me. --- The Fisherman The video was of a Russian man fully dressed in camouflage gear. He was preparing to go fishing. At least that was the plan. As the day went on, he stopped at several little Russian village shops and bought alcohol.

Then more alcohol. We watched his progress as he became more and more drunk. And he kept repeating: “Now we're heading out for fishing.” He stopped again. Bought more alcohol. Bought ice cream for random children in the streets.

Handed out money. Danced. Got completely wasted. And still he repeated: “Now we're going fishing.” Needless to say, he never arrived at the lake. The clip ended with him waking up in a tent with a terrible hangover. I'd sent the video to my younger sister as a joke and written:

“Look at this legend we found in Kazakhstan.” Why this stupid video kept appearing during such an intense dream, I have absolutely no idea. You cannot rationalise dreams. But the man kept flashing back into my mind. And I remember thinking: Is this how you wasted your life, Mohamed? --- Allah Then I passed my mum. There was a tower. At the top of it was a huge word written in gold Arabic lettering, rotating in circles. Beneath the tower were people. So many people.

Huddled side by side, on their hands and knees in sujud—the position in Muslim prayer where you lower your forehead to the ground. They were praying. Praying for forgiveness. So many of them. And I could feel their energy. I had felt that energy before. Makkah. During Umrah. The energy of people begging for forgiveness. It's intense. And I could feel it there. All those people beneath the tower, praying. And above them, that enormous golden Arabic word continued rotating in circles.

The word was Allah. --- Coming Backwards Then the journey seemed to run backwards. I was coming out of the dream. Madina's face appeared. It was almost as though she was pulling me to the side. Her eyes were wide open. Her eyes frightened me. I was back in the hotel room. And then, in the corner of the room near the standing lamp, I saw Sophia. She floated down towards the ground like a leaf. She was dressed in a white doll's dress. Down towards that old beige carpet with its old-fashioned diamond pattern.

Then the curtain drew up. --- “Hayatım, Sophia Is Dead” I fall to the floor. I'm handcuffed. Police are all around me. Madina is in the corner of the room, with only her head sticking out. Then I hear her. “Hayatım... Sophia is dead.” This is a dream. This is a dream. Everything fades back into darkness. I lose consciousness once more.

Chapter 119: 25 Minutes of Silence, 25 Minutes of lies

25 Minutes of Silence, 25 Minutes of Lies

There are twenty-five minutes of my life that I cannot give you from my own memory. From approximately 07:10 until 07:36 on 24 October 2019, I cannot tell you what happened inside Room 801 because I don't remember it. The last thing I remember is sitting on the edge of the bed. My chest was tight. I was sweating. I knew something was seriously wrong with me. Madina was kneeling on the bed in front of me in her knickers and bra. Sophia was behind me, wearing her sleeping blanket.

At 07:10, the telephone rang. The concierge was calling about my airport pick-up. Madina answered and told them I was sick and wasn't going to work. Then: “Madina! Madina! My heart!” Sophia woke and started crying. “She's

scared, Mohamed," Madina said. "I'm scared too." And then everything went black. So what happened during the next twenty-five minutes? I've spent years asking that question. --- What Madina Told Me I later found out from Madina that the police had beaten me heavily.

She says she witnessed it. According to her, at one point Nurlan Bolatov was shouting at me: "Why did you kill Sophia? Tell us!" Madina told me that my eyes were open and that I pointed at her. I don't remember any of this. Nothing. My own conscious memory ends at 07:10. There is the dream I have already described, the flashes of consciousness afterwards, and then darkness. But those twenty-five minutes inside Room 801 are missing from my memory. Fortunately, not everything that happened outside that room disappeared with them.

Some of the hotel CCTV survived. --- 07:36 As I have explained elsewhere in this book, much of the relevant hotel footage was deleted. The hotel security manager testified in court about the deletion of the footage involving investigator Nurlan Bolatov. But part of the corridor footage survived. And at 07:36, Madina appears. Before we go any further, remember the last time I consciously saw her. She was in her knickers and bra. At 07:36, Madina appears at the door of Room 801 fully dressed, apart from her shoes.

So my first question is obvious. Why is Madina fully dressed? When did she get dressed? And where was she planning to go? She didn't have a job to go to. I was the one supposed to be leaving the hotel that morning. My airport transport was coming. I had a flight to operate. According to the allegation later made against me, I had started beating Madina. So how was she physically getting dressed while I was supposedly beating her? The last time I saw her she was in her underwear.

Twenty-six minutes later she was fully dressed. Why? --- The Doorway Madina doesn't immediately leave Room 801. She stands at the doorway looking back inside. Several rooms down the corridor is a hotel chambermaid. Her attention had already been drawn towards our room because, according to her evidence, she had heard a woman screaming. Madina runs towards her. And then she screams: "Help me! He's beating me! He will kill her! He will kill my daughter! Give me the key to the room!"

Those words have stayed with me for years. Not because of what Madina said afterwards. Because of what she apparently knew beforehand. "He will kill my daughter." How could she possibly predict that? --- How Could She Predict the Future? According to Madina's allegation, I had been beating her. So why would she suddenly expect me to turn on Sophia? What did Sophia have to do with an argument between me and Madina? Sophia was one year old. A baby. My daughter.

The person I loved most in the world. Where is the motive to attack her? Why would anybody automatically conclude that a husband who was supposedly attacking his wife was now going to kill his baby daughter? If someone was holding a knife against a child, pointing a gun at her, explicitly threatening her or

doing something that clearly placed the child in immediate danger, then of course someone might scream: “He's going to kill my daughter!” But that isn't the allegation.

Madina's allegation was that I beat her and she left. So why Sophia? What possible reason would I have to suddenly turn on my daughter? And, more importantly: How could Madina possibly know that was going to happen? Before she comes out carrying Sophia, she has already screamed: “He will kill my daughter.” I've played those words over and over in my head. And I keep returning to the same question. How could she have predicted the future? --- Where Was I? Madina gets the key from the chambermaid.

She runs back towards Room 801. She opens the door. She goes inside. She comes back out. Then she goes back again. Eventually she emerges carrying Sophia. Now ask another very simple question. Where am I? If I am inside that room in this uncontrollable fit of rage described by the prosecution, where am I while Madina is running backwards and forwards? Why don't I chase her into the corridor? Why don't I stop her from getting the key? Why don't I grab her when she comes back inside?

Why can she apparently enter and leave the room? Where is this raging Mohamed? The corridor camera doesn't show him. It shows Madina. --- Where Is the Initial Reaction? Then comes another part of this footage that I have never been able to understand. According to the prosecution's version, Madina has now gone back into Room 801 and discovered that her one-year-old daughter is dead. Think about that moment. A mother walks into a room and apparently discovers that her baby daughter has just been killed.

Where is the initial reaction? Madina doesn't come running out of Room 801 screaming that Sophia is dead. She doesn't collapse at the doorway. She doesn't fall to the floor. She doesn't immediately start screaming for an ambulance. She doesn't run towards the nearest person begging them to help her daughter. Instead, she picks Sophia up. And walks. She walks briskly down a corridor approximately thirty metres long. That has troubled me for years. Because where is that first moment?

That instant when she apparently discovers the unimaginable? Where is the immediate shock? --- The Man in the Corridor And she isn't alone in that corridor. A man is returning to his room. Madina walks past him carrying Sophia. Here is another human being. Someone who could help. If you had just discovered that your baby daughter had been attacked, wouldn't you stop him? Wouldn't you scream: “Help my daughter!” Wouldn't you ask him to call an ambulance? Call security?

Call the police? Wouldn't you hand him the child if necessary and beg him to do something? Madina walks past him. She doesn't ask him for help. She doesn't stop. And she doesn't look back. That last part has always struck me. According to the allegation, there is a raging man behind her who has just beaten her and

attacked her daughter. Yet Madina doesn't look back once. She appears to know that nobody is coming after her. And nobody does. --- “He Killed Her”

Madina continues along the corridor. Only when she reaches the elevator does she start screaming: “He killed her! He killed her!” And again, my question isn't why those words are different from the words she used earlier. My question is: Where was that reaction when she apparently first discovered Sophia? Why does it come after she has left Room 801? After she has carried Sophia approximately thirty metres down the corridor? After she has passed a man who could have helped her?

Why only at the lift? I'm not pretending there is some textbook describing precisely how every mother must behave after discovering the death of her child. I'm asking the reader to watch the sequence. Room 801. Madina enters. Madina comes out carrying Sophia. No immediate screaming that Sophia is dead. She walks down the corridor. Passes a man. Doesn't ask him for help. Doesn't look behind her. Reaches the elevator. And only then: “He killed her! He killed her!”

Where was her initial reaction? --- Where They Found Me And while all of this was happening, where was Mohamed? Fourteen minutes later, hotel staff found me. I wasn't running through the corridor. I wasn't chasing Madina. I wasn't trying to leave the hotel. I wasn't attacking anybody else. I was found unconscious in the bathroom, slumped over the bathtub with the water running. And beside me was Sophia's sleeping blanket. The same type of blanket that fastened around her shoulders.

Remember the last time I consciously saw Sophia. She was wearing it. Now it was beside my unconscious body. Crime-scene photographs recorded where it was found. And later the forensic examination produced another problem. My DNA wasn't on that blanket. So how did Sophia's blanket get from her body to beside me in the bathroom without my DNA being found on it? We will return to that evidence in detail later in this book. For now, just remember it. --- The 07:30 Call

Then there is something else. The telephone. In court, the hotel concierge testified about a separate call at approximately 07:30. This was not the 07:10 call. At approximately 07:30, according to the concierge's testimony, Madina said: Mohamed isn't going to work. He's sick. The concierge was questioned. Was there any disturbance in the background? Did you hear Mohamed? Did you hear Sophia? No. According to the testimony, there was only Madina's voice. Mohamed is sick.

Now look at the timing. Approximately 07:30: Mohamed is sick. Approximately 07:36: Madina appears in the corridor fully dressed. Then: “He's beating me!” Then: “He will kill her! He will kill my daughter!” Those six minutes matter. Because Mohamed is sick is exactly what I remember. I had repeatedly told Madina: “I don't feel well.” I was sweating. My chest was tightening. I was trying to walk because something was happening to my body. Madina had already called my company and told them I was sick.

At approximately 07:30, according to the concierge's court testimony, she was still saying I was sick. And then six minutes later she appears in that corridor. --- Twenty-Five Minutes So let's put those twenty-five minutes together. At 07:10, I'm seriously unwell. Madina is in her knickers and bra. Sophia is alive behind me on the bed in her sleeping blanket. The concierge calls. Madina says I'm sick. I shout: “Madina! Madina! My heart!” Sophia wakes and cries.

Madina says: “She's scared, Mohamed.” I answer: “I'm scared too.” And I black out. At approximately 07:30, according to the concierge's testimony, Madina again says that Mohamed is sick. At 07:36, Madina appears at the doorway fully dressed. Why is she dressed? When did she get dressed? Where was she going? She runs to the chambermaid. “He's beating me!” Where am I? “He will kill my daughter!” How could she possibly predict that? Why would I turn on Sophia?

What did my one-year-old daughter have to do with an alleged argument between me and my wife? Where was the motive? Madina gets the key. She goes back inside. Comes out. Goes back again. Where am I? Then she emerges carrying Sophia. Where is the immediate reaction to apparently discovering her daughter dead? She walks approximately thirty metres down the corridor. She passes a man who could help. Why doesn't she ask him for help? Why doesn't she look behind her?

She reaches the elevator. Only then: “He killed her! He killed her!” Fourteen minutes later, hotel staff find me unconscious in the bathroom, slumped over the bathtub with the water running. Sophia's sleeping blanket is beside me. My DNA isn't on it. These are the questions I've spent years asking. Not questions invented for this book. Questions created by the evidence itself. What happened inside Room 801 between the moment I lost consciousness and the moment Madina appeared on that corridor camera?

Why was she fully dressed? What happened during the approximately six minutes between the 07:30 telephone call and 07:36? Where was I while she repeatedly entered and exited the room? How could she predict that I would suddenly turn on Sophia? Why would I turn on Sophia? Where was her immediate reaction when she apparently discovered her daughter dead? Why did she walk past someone who could help? And how did Sophia's sleeping blanket end up beside my unconscious body without my DNA on it?

I cannot give you my memories of those twenty-five minutes. I don't have them. What I can give you is what survived. The telephone calls. The witnesses. The CCTV. The crime-scene photographs. The forensic evidence. And the questions. Twenty-five minutes of silence. Twenty-five minutes of lies.

Chapter 120: 10:24

10:24

10:24. The number that haunts me. On 24 October 2019, Sophia died. And at 10:24 that same morning, according to the police protocol, Madina's first formal

testimony began. Before that statement was taken, she had already been transported with some of the main witnesses. They were not properly separated from one another. At the police station they were also kept together, and later, in court, witnesses testified that they had even given testimony in front of one another.

Think about the danger of that. A mother has just lost her daughter. She is sitting amongst the principal witnesses, describing horrific events that she says have just taken place. Before those witnesses have independently committed their own memories to paper, they are hearing somebody else's account. The images have already been planted in their minds. At 10:24, Madina begins giving the version of events that would help shape the entire case against me. And she begins constructing a Mohamed I don't recognise.

A drunk Mohamed. An angry Mohamed. A violent husband. An abusive father. A man eventually capable of murdering the person he loved most in the world. For years I have gone backwards and forwards through these statements, comparing what Madina said with what can actually be tested. So let's do that together. One statement at a time. One detail at a time. --- The Completely Drunk Mohamed One of the first things Madina does is place alcohol at the centre of the story.

And before we go any further, I want to make something absolutely clear. I drank alcohol that evening. I've already told you that. I had a beer with dinner at Dickens. Later, during the business meeting, I drank two glasses of whisky. I'm not hiding the beer. I'm not hiding the whisky. This book has one rule: tell it as accurately as I can, even when something doesn't necessarily make me look good. So the question isn't whether alcohol passed my lips. The question is something entirely different:

Was Mohamed heavily intoxicated and out of control in the way Madina was trying to portray him? According to Madina, I returned to the hotel at approximately 01:30 a.m., drunk. But the surviving hotel footage shows me entering the lobby shortly after midnight. And I'm very easy to identify. I'm carrying the illuminated balloons I had just bought for Sophia. Remember those balloons. After leaving the business meeting, I was waiting for a taxi when two young women approached selling balloons with smaller balloons inside them and little lights glowing in the middle.

I saw them and immediately thought of Sophia. So I bought them all. That is the Mohamed who walks back into the Intercontinental on camera. Later, experts examining the footage reported no observable signs of intoxication. And I didn't simply stumble through the lobby and disappear upstairs. After getting into bed, I remembered that I hadn't paid for the hotel room for the two days I was supposed to be away working in Istanbul. Madina and Sophia needed the room.

So I got back up. I went downstairs. I spoke to reception. I asked them to extend the same room. They checked its availability. I paid with my card. Then I returned upstairs. The receptionist later testified that I had appeared perfectly

normal. Witnesses questioned in court would also say they did not smell alcohol coming from Mohamed. Again, none of this means Mohamed had consumed no alcohol. Mohamed is telling you himself that he had. What it challenges is something very different:

the image of a heavily intoxicated Mohamed who was completely drunk and losing control of himself. And there is another piece of footage. Go backwards several hours. At approximately 10:00 p.m., I had taken Madina and Sophia back to the Intercontinental before leaving for the business meeting. The hotel video records us entering. Who is carrying our one-year-old daughter? I am. Sophia is in my arms. Watch her. She's perfectly happy and normal. Madina is right there beside us.

If I was already so intoxicated that I represented some kind of danger to my daughter, why was I the person carrying Sophia? Why wasn't Madina taking her from me? Why was our daughter perfectly comfortable in my arms? That footage has been made public through the #FreeBarakat campaign. Readers don't have to rely upon my description of it. They can watch it themselves. Now compare those images with the language Madina begins using in her testimony. Because alcohol doesn't simply appear once.

It becomes part of the character she is constructing. And that brings us to something as insignificant as a slice of lemon. --- The Lemon Remember Dickens Pub. Our last dinner together. Sophia had been sniffly. The cold October air had made her nose runny. There was a slice of lemon on my plate. I thought about the vitamin C, but if I'm completely truthful, I also wanted to see Sophia's face when she tasted lemon for the first time. The internet is full of those funny videos of babies experiencing that sour taste.

I had been there for so many of Sophia's firsts. I changed her first diaper. I gave her her first bath while Madina panicked beside me. I introduced her to solid food. Her first word was Baba. Now Baba wanted to see what face she would make when she tasted a lemon. Madina became furious with me. We argued. At the time, it was nothing more than another stupid domestic disagreement at the end of an exhausting day. But look at what that little moment became in her statement:

> “While intoxicated, Mohamed began to bring a slice of lemon to Sofia's face, from which she began to turn away, i.e. she didn’t like it. Then he still put this slice of lemon in Sofia's mouth, from which she began to cry. To my objections, Mohamed did not give Sofia a lemon, since she did not like it, and from which she began to cry. To which Mohamed threw the same slice of lemon in my direction. I saw that Mohamed became angry, and knowing that in this state he better not argue, I just sat and was silent. Mohamed began to tell me not to talk to him like anymore, and he himself knows how to behave with his daughter.”

That's the wording in the translated statement. Read it carefully. Again: “While intoxicated...” Then Sophia turns away. I supposedly put the lemon into her mouth anyway. She begins to cry. Madina objects. Again she says Sophia doesn't like it. Again: She begins to cry. Then I supposedly throw the lemon at

Madina. I become angry. And Madina supposedly knows that when Mohamed is “in this state” it is better not to argue. Look at what has happened to an insignificant family moment.

The intoxicated Mohamed. The angry Mohamed. The intimidating husband. And now the father who forces something into his baby's mouth until she cries. It was this tiny detail that would eventually give me my first opportunity to test her story. --- Information Begins to Leak At first I didn't know what Madina had written about me. I had no idea how awful some of her allegations were. My lawyer at the time, Hizbullam, refused to bring me her statements. I was sitting inside C18 detention while information slowly began leaking through about what my wife had told the police.

I knew I needed to speak to her. But I also knew I had to be extremely careful. If I immediately started questioning her about everything— Why did you say this? Why did you lie about that? What happened to Sophia? —I believed she would panic. And if Madina panicked, she might stop speaking to me completely. So I decided not to start with the biggest allegation. I would start with the smallest. Something apparently meaningless. Something both of us remembered.

The lemon. --- The First Contradiction At that time in C18 detention I had, for a period, been placed in what was referred to as a VIP room. The oper had provided a smartphone. That gave me something incredibly important. I could speak to Madina. And I could record the conversation. That recording was later published through the #FreeBarakat campaign. Other evidence would also be published: video showing Madina from multiple angles without, in my view, a single visible mark consistent with the violent attack she described; photographs of the crime scene showing where Sophia's sleeping blanket was found; and the forensic evidence showing that my DNA was not detected on that blanket.

But back then I wasn't thinking about social media. I wasn't thinking about journalists. I was sitting inside C18 facing a murder charge and trying to understand why my wife had written these things about me. During one of those conversations, I asked Madina whether she was prepared to tell the truth in court. At first she refused. A liar hates admitting they lied. So I brought her back to something tiny. I told her: “Madina, they've charged me with Code 99—murder with intent. Sophia didn't cry.”

Madina shouted back: “Sophia didn't cry, but she didn't like it!” There it was. Compare her own words. In the police statement: “…she began to cry.” And then the claim is repeated: “…she began to cry.” But when I confront her: “Sophia didn't cry, but she didn't like it!” Whether Sophia liked lemon is almost irrelevant. She was a one-year-old baby tasting something sour. Madina saying that Sophia didn't like it was her interpretation of our daughter's reaction.

But crying isn't an interpretation. Either Sophia cried or she didn't. And now Madina herself was telling me: “Sophia didn't cry.” This was the first contradiction I caught in her own words. And although it concerned nothing more than a slice of lemon, for me it was enormous. Because now I knew I had to keep

asking questions. Carefully. --- The Attack As more of Madina's testimony reached me, the allegations became far more serious. Her description had become one of a sustained and violent physical attack. She claimed that I threw her onto the bed and began beating her on the head and other parts of her body. She said she could no longer remember exactly how I was hitting her. She described shouting, trying to evade the blows, somehow escaping from me and running towards the entrance door.

Stop there for a moment and picture what she is describing. At the time I was approximately six feet two inches tall and around 120 kilograms. Madina was approximately 165 centimetres tall and around 55 kilograms. She was tall and slim, with a fragile, model-like body and thin arms. She didn't train at the gym. If you're a woman reading this, think of a strong man you know. Think about play-fighting with him. Think about his rough hands around your wrist. Think about the sheer difference in strength you can feel through his grip, particularly if he trains at the gym.

Even when he's playing, you feel it. Now imagine he isn't playing. I knew my own strength. And I knew Madina's body extremely well. There is no question in my mind about the enormous physical difference between us. If I genuinely wanted to restrain Madina on that bed, my weight alone would make escaping extremely difficult. If I genuinely intended to twist her thin arm with enough force to break it, I know the difference in our strength was such that I could have done enormous damage very quickly.

Yet according to the story she gives, this 55-kilogram woman is thrown onto a bed by a 120-kilogram man, violently beaten around her head and body, somehow evades the blows, escapes from underneath him and runs towards the entrance. And the story becomes even more difficult when we reach the door. --- The Door In her first statement, Madina said: > “Then Mohamed began to press me to the door of the room, to which I opened the door and fall out into the corridor.”

Remember those words. Later, in another statement, the description becomes more elaborate. Now there has been the violent attack on the bed. Now she has escaped from me. She reaches the entrance. And: > “There was a struggle between us, during which I managed to open the door, and so I fell out into the hotel corridor.” There is a physical problem with this account. The door to Room 801 opened inwards. Later in this book I'll show you the evidence and let you see the door yourself.

Don't simply believe me. Look at it. Then reconstruct Madina's story. If I am pressing her against the entrance door from inside the room, she cannot simply push the handle and fall forwards through that door into the corridor. The door doesn't swing out towards the corridor. It swings back into Room 801. Space has to be created for it to open. Madina has to move out of its path. And if I'm immediately behind her, supposedly pressing her against it or struggling with her, that door is opening towards both of us.

Try to physically make the movements work. --- The Invisible Shield But suppose she gets through. Then comes another problem. Where did Mohamed go? This supposedly raging, violent 120-kilogram man has thrown Madina onto a bed. Beaten her. She has escaped. He has followed her towards the entrance. There has been a struggle at the door. She finally gets through. And then? Nothing. Mohamed doesn't follow her. Mohamed doesn't grab her. Mohamed doesn't emerge into the corridor.

It's almost as though there is an invisible shield across the doorway that allows Madina to pass through but somehow stops Mohamed. Of course that's ridiculous. That's exactly why the question matters. Where was I? Later, surviving CCTV becomes extremely important because we no longer have to depend entirely upon what Madina or Mohamed says. We can watch. Madina appears. Mohamed doesn't. She moves down the corridor. Mohamed doesn't follow. She is able to return towards the room she claims she has just escaped from.

Still no raging Mohamed. And hotel staff would later testify about where they actually found me: unconscious in the bathroom. We'll come back to that. --- Where Are the Injuries? Now look at Madina. Remember what she says happened to her. Thrown onto a bed. A 120-kilogram man on top of her. Repeated blows. Blows around the head. Blows elsewhere on her body. Trying to evade them. Escaping. Running towards the entrance. A further struggle. This isn't an allegation that her husband pushed her during an argument.

This is a description of a sustained physical attack. So where are the injuries? Where is the swelling? The bruising? The scratches? The redness? The physical marks from this struggle? Later, the reader will be able to see recorded images of Madina from multiple angles and make their own assessment. But there is something even more important. Madina refused a physical examination. And the police allowed her to refuse. Not every blow necessarily produces an obvious bruise immediately.

That's exactly why an examination mattered. Examine her head. Her face. Her arms. Her body. Photograph everything. Document tenderness. Swelling. Redness. Scratches. Bruising. Then compare the objective findings with the mechanism of assault she described. That opportunity was lost. This shouldn't have been a contest where investigators simply decided whether to believe Mohamed or Madina. It should have been an investigation. There was a hotel room. There was an inward-opening door.

There were cameras. There were hotel employees. There were two adults whose physical condition could be examined. There was forensic evidence. There were countless ways to test the story. --- 07:10 And now we return to the morning. At approximately 6:30 a.m. on 24 October, Madina made me tea. She reached for the small pharmacy bag. She gave me medication. “Drink your medicine,” she told me. I drank it. Shortly afterwards I began feeling seriously unwell. Sweating.

Chest tightening. Increasing discomfort. My condition deteriorating. By 07:10, when the concierge called to advise me of my airport pickup, Madina answered. I

was sitting on the edge of the bed. Sophia was alive. Then: “Madina, Madina, my heart!” Sophia woke and cried. Madina reached for her. “She's scared, Mohamed.” “I'm scared too.” Then I blacked out. This is why Madina's repeated portrayal of me as heavily intoxicated matters so much to me. Because by that morning there really was something seriously wrong with Mohamed.

But was it alcohol? I had openly admitted drinking a beer and two whiskies the previous evening. The footage showed my behaviour. Witnesses described what they observed. And then, hours later, immediately before my condition seriously deteriorated, my wife handed me medication. So there is a question that should have been pursued relentlessly: What exactly did Madina give Mohamed? What was in that pharmacy bag? What medication? What dosage? Was the packaging recovered?

Was it photographed? Was it seized? Was it tested? Was Madina required to identify exactly what she had handed me? I won't invent an answer. But an investigation into the death of a one-year-old child and the sudden incapacitation of her father should have established it. --- From a Lemon to a Confession When I first questioned Madina, I didn't know where any of this would lead. I couldn't start with: Who killed Sophia? That would have ended everything. I had to make her comfortable enough to keep talking.

So I started with a lemon. Then another contradiction. Then another. Each time I learned something new, I could move a little further. And eventually this stopped being merely Mohamed accusing Madina of lying. There would be written words. “I kill her.” And there would be a voice recording in which Madina spoke about how she killed Sophia. That recording would later be subjected to forensic voice examination, identifying the voice as Madina's. The material would eventually travel far beyond the prison walls and be reported publicly.

But we're not there yet. If you want to understand how I reached those words, you need to follow the path I had to follow. Because I didn't begin with a confession. I began inside C18 detention, without even being given my wife's statements, cautiously trying to work out what she had told the police. And the first lie I confronted her with was perhaps the smallest lie in this entire case. Whether a little girl named Sophia cried when her father gave her her first taste of lemon.

She didn't. And Madina eventually said so herself.

Chapter 121: Sliding doors

Sliding Doors

When I was younger, I watched a film called Sliding Doors. The idea stayed with me. People cross paths. Places pass in front of your eyes. At the time, the moment means absolutely nothing. You continue with your life because you have no idea that somewhere further down the road, that person or that place will come back into your story. I've had a few sliding doors in my life. One of them was in

Astana. I had gone to the British Embassy simply to complete a document I needed for our visa paperwork. That was where I met Aigul.

At the time, she was simply someone at the Embassy helping me with a document. Nothing more. As I was leaving, I walked past Derek in the lobby. I identified immediately that he was British and suspected he worked for the Embassy. For a moment, I even thought about introducing myself. But I was in a rush. I had a flight to catch and needed to get back to the airport. So I walked past him. Why wouldn't I? I had absolutely no idea what the future held for me.

No idea that these would later become the people at the British Embassy with whom I would share some of the biggest problems of my life. And then there were those blue buildings. I remember that journey in the car. We were driving past the casinos when, for some reason, these blue buildings in the middle of nowhere caught my eye. Just a passing thought of curiosity. What are those? Why did they catch my attention? Why did they stand out enough for me to remember them?

Then the car continued and so did my life. Had I lost hundreds of thousands of dollars in one of those casinos along the way, I suppose I'd have remembered the casino instead. But I didn't. I remembered the blue buildings. At the time they meant absolutely nothing to me. Years later, I was being transferred as a prisoner to LA-155/8, Liger. As we approached the gates, I looked out. And there they were. Those blue buildings. The same buildings that had caught my eye through the window of a car when I was still free.

The same buildings I had looked at for a few seconds with nothing more than a wondering thought of curiosity. Now I wasn't passing them. I was entering them. Those blue buildings in the middle of nowhere became my prison. They have been my prison for the last seven years. The irony. How many people do we walk past without stopping? How many buildings do we glance at through a car window? How many times are we one decision, one delay, one introduction away from something that could change the direction of our lives?

I could have stopped and introduced myself to Derek. I didn't. I could have driven past those blue buildings without ever noticing them. For some reason, I didn't. Aigul. Derek. Those blue buildings. Completely irrelevant moments when they happened. Then life moved forward and gave every one of them meaning. Maybe that's why I still think about Sliding Doors. You never know which door matters when you're walking through it. Sometimes you only understand years later, when you look back and realise:

I've been here before.

Chapter 122: Sinister

Sinister

This chapter contains my own observations. You reserve the right to believe my words or not. Not everything I write has to be backed by documents, videos, voice recordings or WhatsApp messages. After all, this is a book. It is my account

of what I lived through. And after everything you've read and understood by now—after seeing how Madina's damning words were accepted over factual evidence to force the conviction of an innocent man, me—I believe I have earned the right to tell you about the things I personally observed and felt, even when I wasn't able to preserve evidence of every moment.

From day one, Madina was acting strangely. Eventually I told her directly: “Madina, everyone knows you're lying.” It was probably one of the most discussed subjects amongst everybody involved in the case. My lawyers. Her lawyers. Translators. Even Nurlan Bolatov acknowledged it. Everyone knew Madina was lying. But some of the things I want to tell you now went beyond contradictions in statements. They showed me another side of her. A side that, in my opinion, was sinister.

Hearts After reading parts of Madina's statements, you might imagine what she would do whenever she saw me at the police station. Surely she would hate me. Surely the woman telling people that Mohamed had beaten her and killed her daughter would recoil when the monster himself walked past. You might expect her to spit at me. She did exactly the opposite. Whenever she could get close enough, Madina would run over to me, throw her arms around my neck and repeatedly kiss my forehead and cheeks.

When she couldn't reach me, she would stand at a distance and make heart shapes towards me with both hands. Hearts. It looked surreal. I was already deeply traumatised, struggling with the constant feeling that none of what was happening around me could possibly be real. And now the woman who, behind the scenes, was walking around telling anyone who would listen: “Mohamed killed Sophia.” —was standing across from Mohamed making hearts with her hands. I couldn't understand it.

Which Madina was real? The woman telling everyone I murdered our daughter? Or the woman running towards the alleged murderer, wrapping her arms around his neck and covering his face with kisses? Innocent Then something else happened that I still struggle to understand. Madina received a document declaring that she was innocent. Think about that for a moment. The victim needed a document saying she was innocent. Why? I still don't understand the logic. And from what I have seen in the case files, I have never found evidence showing what investigative actions were actually carried out to eliminate Madina as a possible suspect before giving her that status.

But I noticed something almost immediately afterwards. Madina changed. She went shopping. She had her nails done. Her hair. Her eyebrows. When I saw her, I was horrified. I couldn't even bring myself to shave. I was an emotional wreck. A shadow of the man I had once been. My daughter had just died. I was imprisoned and accused of murdering her. I could barely comprehend the world around me. And there was Madina. Looking like a million dollars. I stared at her.

“Madina, Sophia only just died. It hasn't even been two weeks yet.” Her answer? She wanted to make herself feel better. Maybe different people grieve

differently. Maybe somebody reading this will see nothing strange about it. That's your right. I'm telling you what I felt when I saw my wife less than two weeks after our daughter's death. I was horrified. Sophia's Smell There was something I desperately wanted. Something tiny. I asked Madina to send me one piece of Sophia's clothing.

Anything. I wanted to smell it. I wanted something that still smelled like my daughter. Even now, after all these years, I miss Sophia's smell. I can still remember it. And Madina gave me an answer that I don't think I will ever forgive her for: “I gave all of Sophia's belongings away. I didn't want them around me reminding me of her.” Everything. Gone. The clothes I wanted to hold against my face inside that cell just so, for a few seconds, I could smell my daughter again.

Gone. Because Madina didn't want to be reminded of her. Perhaps you understand that reaction. I didn't. I still don't. Nurlan Then there was Nurlan Bolatov. One evening, while I was talking to Madina on the telephone, she casually said: “I have to go soon. Nurlan is coming to talk with me.” The words came out before she seemed to realise what she had just said. I looked at the time. It was close to midnight. “It's nearly midnight, Madina!” Suddenly Nurlan was crazy.

He was stalking her. She started complaining about him. But the original words had already escaped: “Nurlan is coming to talk with me.” Close to midnight. And as time passed, I began seeing more of this relationship myself. At one of my expert assessments, my family had arrived to support me. Madina knew they were coming. She had already visited them at their hotel to collect the monthly allowance I had arranged for her. So I expected her to arrive with them.

She didn't. Madina rolled up with Nurlan Bolatov in his police car. Afterwards, she drove away with him to the police station and waited for me there. Then came another scene I will never forget. Madina sat across the table from me. She held my hand. She looked into my eyes. She talked about our love for one another. She talked about our future. What our lives would be like once we had somehow solved this nightmare. And then Nurlan opened his desk. He took out my mobile phone.

He handed it to Madina. Madina asked me to unlock it for her. That phone contained my banking applications. Madina already knew my PIN numbers. I took the phone. And deliberately entered the wrong password until it reset. Think about the scene. The investigator responsible for the murder case takes the accused man's personal telephone from his desk and hands it to the accused man's wife—the principal witness against him—so that she can ask him to unlock it.

Why? Preparing for the Psychologists There was another incident I couldn't ignore. The psychologists assessing me sent a written request to Nurlan Bolatov stating that they needed to speak with Madina. He refused. But when Madina learned that she might have to face psychologists, she went out and bought books. Books about hiding emotions. Books about how behavioural psychologists catch

criminals. Again, I'm telling you what I observed. You decide what significance you attach to it.

Perhaps you think it means nothing. I didn't. A woman whose husband is accused of murdering her daughter learns that behavioural specialists may want to speak with her, and she starts reading about how emotions are detected and how psychologists identify criminals. Strange? Obvious? You decide. “I Have to Get Mohamed Back” There are so many moments I could describe that eventually I begin wondering whether I'm dragging this section out. But it's funny how sometimes you have to fall out of love with somebody before you can finally see them clearly.

So I'll leave you with one final scene. Several months into the nightmare, I was taken in to sign the case materials. And finally I was able to read Madina's statements properly. Madina was sitting to my right. Nurlan was across the desk. Aigul was there, and so was my translator, Shynar. Madina arrived completely dressed up. Hair. Makeup. Everything. She looked like she was trying to impress somebody. Shynar noticed. She commented on it. And Madina replied:

“I have to get Mohamed back!” Get Mohamed back? I began reading. Page after page. Her statements. What she had said about me. The drunken Mohamed. The violent Mohamed. The abusive father. The alleged beating. Everything. Eventually I looked up at her. “Is this what you said about me?” Madina started stuttering. “I'm trying to fix it. I will tell everything in court!” Then I looked across the desk at Nurlan. I was furious. “And this is the bullshit you accepted as testimony? You call yourself a captain? You call yourself an investigator? You're a clown, Nurlan. You're telling me you can't see the lies and the differences in the statements?”

His expression changed. “I'm a clown? Me, clown?” Then came the threat: “I will throw you in prison!” And then something happened that stopped the room. One word. Madina looked at him. “Nurlan.” That was it. But it was the way she said it. The authority in her voice. The familiarity. The control. For one surreal second, you would have thought she was his wife, not mine. The room went silent. There are moments that stay with you because of what somebody says.

And there are moments that stay with you because of how they say it. This was one of them. “Nurlan.” I haven't forgotten it. Yes, I came to see Madina as sinister. She knew how to play the victim. She knew how to present herself. And, in my view, she understood very well how to use her appearance, her vulnerability and her body to influence the people around her. But we're going to leave that subject here for the moment. Because later, we're going to come back to it.

And when we do, you'll understand why that single word across an investigator's desk— “Nurlan.” — never left my mind.

Chapter 123: The Worse Feeling in the World

The Worst Feeling in the World

The worst feeling in the world is not simply knowing that somebody is against you. It is the feeling that an entire group of people has decided to destroy you, and that everywhere you turn, the person who is supposed to help you has found some reason why it is more beneficial not to. It is discovering that the person you thought you loved was deceiving you all along. It is watching an investigator assess the situation and decide that there is more to gain—more money, more opportunity—from pursuing the foreign airline captain than some village girl from Shelek.

It is finding out that the lawyer you hired to defend you is meeting with your wife and her parents, plotting how to make absolutely certain that she remains innocent while extracting the maximum they can from you. It is watching prosecutors retest everything in the case, not because they are searching impartially for the truth, but because everything is being pushed in only one direction: Towards achieving a conviction. It is sitting in front of a judge whose bias could not be more obvious. A judge who had already decided where this trial was going long before it got there.

Then you hire new lawyers. They see what's happening. They know you're going down. But instead of telling you what they really think, they feed you hope because hope keeps the contracts signed and the fees coming. Around you are prison guards who couldn't care less. To them, it's fair game. Feeding time. You're a foreigner in prison. You don't understand the system. You don't have the networks. You don't have the family connections. You become vulnerable. An easy target to extort.

And vulnerability has a price. Everyone seems to want their piece. 2025 Then, years later, you finally think something might change. In 2025, we pushed again. We submitted the evidence. We challenged what had happened. And once again, all our efforts were shut down by the Prosecutor's Office. By then, something extraordinary had happened with Madina. There was a voice recording. Madina said the voice wasn't hers. So the voice was examined. The forensic voice analysis proved it was hers.

Then the explanation changed. Madina was interviewed and claimed that I had manipulated and pressured her into confessing. Manipulated her. Pressured her. And this is where I struggle to reconcile the Madina presented as my frightened victim with the Madina I continued to see with my own eyes. I am still in possession of a video that Madina recorded herself. She is walking down the street. There are tears in her eyes. She declares her undying love for me. She says that she can only ever have another baby from me.

Nobody is standing behind her forcing her to say it. She records herself. And yet, at the same time, she was living another life. She was performing sexual acts on sexcams. She was sleeping with other men. She presents herself as a law-abiding citizen who pays her taxes, even though the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Kazakhstan has deemed sexcam operations illegal and arrested people involved in them. I seriously doubt she paid taxes on the money she made from it.

Then there were drugs. Cannabis is illegal in Kazakhstan. That was her drug of choice. I have multiple videos of Madina smoking it, and in those videos she even confirms with her own voice what it is. But like I said before: Madina loves to play the victim. And yet this chapter isn't really about Madina anymore. It's about what happens to you when every direction you turn leads to another betrayal. What It Leaves Behind When you have never had a single bad thought about the person you loved the most in this world, when everything you ever felt for her was pure, unconditional love, and then she is taken away from you in a split second, you're left feeling paranoid and numb.

That's what happened to me. Sophia was there. Alive. Then I blacked out. And when I came back into this world, my life was gone. My daughter was gone. My freedom was gone. My career was gone. My family was thousands of miles away. And the people who were supposed to establish what happened were building a case to make sure I would never walk out of prison again. People talk about evidence. Law. Appeals. Expert examinations. Court judgments. Articles of criminal codes.

But none of those words describe what happens inside your head when this goes on year after year. You become paranoid. You become numb. You question everybody. When somebody offers to help, you wonder what they want. When somebody smiles at you, you wonder what's happening behind your back. When good news finally arrives, you're almost afraid to believe it because you've learned that hope can disappear as quickly as it arrived. And beneath absolutely everything is Sophia.

Sophia. That's the part nobody can repair. This system has not only let me down. It knowingly destroyed me for something I never did. And after everything I have experienced, I know how much of this was about money. Money to make problems disappear. Money to change outcomes. Money from the foreigner. Money from his family. Money from his desperation. Money from his hope. Everyone takes something until eventually there is almost nothing left to take. Except you.

A Question I Can't Stop Asking Eventually you reach a point where you don't even know what emotion you're supposed to feel anymore. Anger? Grief? Fear? Hatred? Exhaustion? You feel all of them for so long that eventually they seem to cancel each other out. What remains is numbness. And too often I hear myself inside my own head returning to a song I used to listen to as a teenager. DMX. Somebody's Knockin'. In the song he's talking to God. He says: “And now here I am, confused and full of questions, am I born to lose or is this just a lesson?”

When I was a teenager, it was just a song. I listened to those words without ever imagining that one day I would understand them. I could never have imagined that years later I would be sitting inside a prison in Kazakhstan, serving a twenty-year sentence for murdering my own daughter, asking God the same question. Am I born to lose? Or is this just a lesson? I still don't know. Maybe that is the worst feeling in the world. Not hatred. Not anger. Not even fear.

It is losing everything you loved, knowing you didn't do what they say you did, and being left alive long enough to keep asking why.

Chapter 124: The Years Lost Fighting

The Years Lost Fighting

People measure a prison sentence in years. Ten years. Twenty years. Life. What they do not measure are the years you lose fighting. From the day of my arrest, it took one year and eight months for Nurlan Bolatov and the Bostandyk prosecutors to finish what they had started. One year and eight months of meddling with expert opinions, preparing witnesses, rebuilding evidence, changing conclusions and constructing the case that would eventually convict me and send me to prison for twenty years.

You might imagine that once I was convicted, the fight simply moved to the next stage. Appeal. New evidence. New lawyers. New applications. That is how a legal system looks from the outside. From the inside, it is very different. It took me another two years before I finally received Madina's voice notes and WhatsApp messages containing her confessions. Think about that. Two years. When you are free, two years can disappear surprisingly quickly. You work. You travel. You celebrate birthdays. You watch your children grow. You change jobs. You go on holiday.

Another Ramadan comes. Another Eid. And for me, Ramadan was never just a month on a calendar. It was family. Sitting together around a table, waiting patiently for the moment we could break our fast. Looking at one another and understanding, without needing to say very much, exactly what we were thankful for. It was a month when family unity and love seemed more present than at any other time of the year. The patience. The waiting. The food in front of us that nobody touched.

The looks in each other's eyes. That quiet understanding that, whatever problems existed outside that room, we were together. Then Eid would come. Another year would have passed. When you are free, you rarely think about how precious those moments are while you are living them. In prison, you remember every one of them. And you know that somewhere outside, your family is sitting around that table again. Only this time, one chair is empty. In prison, two years is different.

You count it. You live every day of it. And when those recordings and messages finally reached me, I could not simply press a button and release them to the world. I had them. I knew what was in them. I knew what they meant. And I had to sit there with them until 2025, when I finally received permission to release them. More years. More waiting. More of my life disappearing. For those of you who have never had to fight a criminal case from inside a prison, there is something you need to understand about how a legal system can defeat a person without ever having to prove that person wrong.

It drains you. It drains your money. It drains your energy. And, most effectively of all, it drains your time. You are arrested and isolated. Suddenly, almost everything you could once do for yourself has to be done by somebody else. If you do not have people fighting for you on the outside, it becomes almost impossible. And even when you do have people, you become dependent upon them. Do they have time today? Do they understand what you are asking them to do?

Do they agree with you about what is important? Do they think something else would be better for you? Will they actually deliver the document? Will the lawyer submit it? Will the authority register it? Will anybody answer it? You can know exactly what you want done and still have almost no ability to make it happen. A lawyer tells your family: "We need Madina." And suddenly that becomes the strategy. Then somebody else decides: "We should emphasise that he had epileptic seizures."

And somewhere, in a cell hundreds of kilometres away, you can be screaming at the top of your lungs: I have never suffered from epilepsy. I was an airline captain and instructor. Had I suffered from epilepsy, I could not have held the medical certification required to fly professionally. What I was trying to explain was something completely different. I had suffered a seizure after being given a couple of tablets while already in a state of extreme exhaustion and sleep deprivation.

That is not the same as suffering from epilepsy. Not medically. Not professionally. Not legally. But once the wrong words are used, the damage begins. A lawyer says one thing. A translator renders it badly. That bad translation becomes misinformation. The misinformation enters a document. The document enters the case. And then you have an investigator sitting there, waiting for any opportunity to make your arguments look ridiculous. They saw the mistake. They saw that the lawyer had described me as having epileptic seizures.

They saw that the translation had made the position even worse. And instead of asking what I had actually meant, they jumped on it. Of course they did. Because now they had something they could point to and say: Look at this. Even his own defence does not know what it is saying. Suddenly, instead of discussing whether a seizure could have been triggered by tablets, exhaustion and everything else that had happened to me, the conversation becomes: Mohamed has epilepsy.

Except Mohamed does not have epilepsy. I never had epilepsy. And once again, I am inside a prison cell while other people are outside deciding how to describe my own body, my own medical history and my own case. You can be screaming the truth from inside a cell, but a badly chosen word outside can travel further than your voice ever will. And once that mistake reaches the investigator or prosecutor, they are not going to correct it for you. They are going to use it.

That is what people do not understand when they say: But you had a lawyer. Having a lawyer does not mean the lawyer understands everything. It does not mean the translator translates everything correctly. It does not mean

misinformation will be corrected before it reaches the case file. And it certainly does not mean the prosecution will give you the benefit of the doubt when your own side has made a mistake. Sometimes the opposite happens. Your mistake becomes their opportunity.

And by the time you realise how badly it has been presented, it may already have been quoted, repeated and used to undermine you. That is the helplessness I am trying to explain. You are not only fighting the prosecution. Sometimes you are fighting bad translation. Sometimes you are fighting misinformation. Sometimes you are fighting your own lawyer's strategy. And sometimes you are fighting an investigator who is simply waiting for one mistake from your side so he can use it to make everything else you say look ridiculous.

Meanwhile, you are still in the cell. And the damage is happening outside. But what about this complaint? What about this evidence? What about this witness? What about this contradiction? What about the document I spent nights writing inside a prison cell? You hand it to somebody. And sometimes it simply never finds its way into the case file. That piece of paper may have taken you days to prepare. The delay can cost you months. A lawyer who is frightened of losing his licence does not necessarily tell you:

Mohamed, I'm frightened. He delays. He avoids. He tells you now is not the right time. He says perhaps we should wait. He tells your family there is another strategy. Meanwhile, you are the one sitting in prison. Another week. Another month. Another year. And every delay costs money. Lawyers. Translations. Expert reports. Documents. Travel. Notaries. Applications. New lawyers to repair what previous lawyers failed to do. People sometimes ask why prisoners do not simply keep complaining until somebody listens.

Because prison does not work like the outside world. Once you enter prison, you are no longer an individual. Everything you do can affect the people around you. Who you speak to. Who speaks to you. What you write. What you send outside. What you record. What you tell journalists. What you tell your embassy. One mistake and you can make yourself a target. So even telling the truth requires calculation. Who can I trust? Who will carry this outside? Who will publish it?

What will happen to me afterwards? What will happen to the person who helped me? That is another thing people rarely understand. You can possess the truth and still spend years searching for somebody fearless enough to publish it. Because everybody has something to lose. Lawyers have licences. Journalists have editors. Editors have owners. Media companies have lawyers. Politicians have diplomatic relationships. Governments have interests. Even in Britain, large media organisations worry about being sued. They worry about governments. They worry about what they can prove, what they can print and what consequences may follow.

So you wait again. And while everybody else considers the risk to themselves, the prisoner continues paying with the only currency he can never earn back. Time. There is another problem. Governments do not like admitting when they are

wrong. The further a case travels through the system, the harder that admission becomes. At the beginning, perhaps one investigator has to be wrong. Then a prosecutor has to be wrong. Then forensic experts. Then another prosecutor.

Then a judge. Then an appeal court. Then senior prosecutors. Then institutions that reviewed the complaints and said there was nothing to see. Eventually, correcting one injustice can require an entire chain of people and institutions to admit that they either failed to see what happened or refused to see it. By then, you are no longer fighting one decision. You are fighting everybody who has attached their name, reputation or authority to that decision. And some of those people are extremely powerful.

You do not always see them. You do not always know who made the telephone call, who spoke to whom, who decided something should go no further or why a door that appeared to be opening suddenly closed again. You only experience the result. Silence. Delay. Rejection. Another door. Another application. Another year. That is how years disappear. Not because you stopped fighting. Because you were fighting. I have spent years trying to get evidence examined that should have been examined at the beginning.

Years trying to get people to look at contradictions that were already sitting inside the case. Years trying to get complaints registered. Years trying to find lawyers prepared to act. Years trying to persuade journalists to publish. Years trying to get officials to ask questions. Years trying to make people understand that twenty years of somebody else's life is not an administrative inconvenience. And all the while, the clock keeps moving. There is something particularly cruel about proving a point five years later.

People congratulate you. That's excellent, Mohamed. You've got it. This changes everything. Maybe it does. But who gives me the five years back? Who returns the birthdays? Who returns Ramadan? Who returns Eid? Who returns the nights sitting around a table with my family, waiting together to break our fast? Who returns the conversations with my parents? Who returns the years when my family grew older while I watched through prison visits and telephone calls?

Who returns the life I would have been living while everybody was deciding whether to read another complaint? Nobody. That is why delay can be so powerful. If you cannot defeat a man with the evidence, exhaust him. If you cannot answer his complaint, delay it. If he finds another lawyer, let him spend more money. If he finds new evidence, make him fight to have it recognised. If he reaches another institution, send him somewhere else. Eventually perhaps he will run out of money.

Perhaps his family will become exhausted. Perhaps the journalists will lose interest. Perhaps the lawyers will become frightened. And while all of this is happening, his parents are getting older. Years of stress begin to affect their health. The son who once accepted responsibility for helping them through life is suddenly gone. His income is gone. His presence is gone. Instead of spending their later years knowing that their son is there for them, they spend those years

worrying about him, fighting for him, waiting for telephone calls and wondering whether they will ever see him free again.

And that thought terrifies me more as the years pass. Will my parents die sad and burdened by what happened to me? Will one of their last thoughts be: Where is Mohamed? I wanted to see him one last time. What legal system gives those years back? What court compensates a mother or father for dying while their son is still imprisoned, waiting for somebody to correct what should never have happened in the first place? Those are not merely years taken from the prisoner.

They are years taken from an entire family. And perhaps that is one of the cruellest parts of all. The sentence spreads. It reaches beyond the walls. It enters your parents' home. It sits with them at the dinner table. It follows them into bed at night. It becomes the telephone call they wait for. The letter they hope will arrive. The news they are frightened to receive. The question they keep asking themselves: When is Mohamed coming home? Perhaps that is what institutions never calculate when they delay a case for another month.

Or another year. They see files. Applications. Reference numbers. Procedures. Deadlines. The person inside sees his life disappearing. His parents see theirs disappearing too. And if he does not give up? There is always another year. That is the part of my sentence that no judge ever pronounced. The years lost fighting. I did not lose those years because I stopped fighting. I lost them because fighting itself took years. And perhaps that is why, after everything that has happened, the title of this book means more to me than ever.

They can take your money. They can take your career. They can take your reputation. They can take your freedom. They can take the years you should have spent with the people you love. And, year after year, they can take your time. But there is one thing you must never voluntarily hand over. Hope. Because hope dies last.

Chapter 125: His Majesty The King

His Majesty the King

His Majesty Charles the Third, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of His other Realms and Territories, King, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith. Whilst writing this book, a friend of mine who has supported the idea and encouraged me to continue and finish it made a suggestion. “Maybe we could ask a lawyer to send King Charles your book.” I smiled. Because he didn't know that somewhere inside me was a childhood dream.

I had always dreamed that one day a member of the Royal Family might read something I had written. Of course, back then it was His Majesty's mother, Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. So this final chapter is here just in case my childhood dream ever comes true. Just in case, somehow, this book finds its way

into the hands of His Majesty King Charles III. And if it does, there is something I would like him to know about the man who wrote it. A Flash Down Memory Lane

As I mentioned at the beginning of this book, I was born in front of Big Ben, at St Thomas' Hospital, on the 30th of August 1978. The first air I breathed was that of London, the first water I ever drank was that of the Thames, the first time I opened my eyes I was in Hutchings House. My first words were in English and the first alphabet I learnt was the English alphabet. My childhood is full of memories. Knock Down Ginger, BMXs with trick nuts, Top of the Pops and EastEnders, Coronation Street and Only Fools and Horses.

Last of the Summer Wine, Spitting Image, and the News at Ten being one of the last images before the television went fuzzy. BBC and ITV. The corner shop stacked with Hula Hoops and Skips, Lucozade Original and Um Bongo, Calypso ice lollies and Cornettos, Yorkies and After Eights. School dinners were chips and beans, rhubarb and custard for dessert. The 137 bus stop just downstairs, double-deckers and black cabs, salt and vinegar at the chippy. Ford Cortinas and Granadas, later in life RS Turbos and Cosworths, Fast Car magazine, top shelves stacked with naughties.

The Sun, Page 3, Samantha Fox. Stamp collections meant a Penny Black, back in the days of the one- pound note. Carry On laughing, “Rodney, you plonker!”, ten B&H or a pack of Silk Cuts. Annie the musical or Fiddler on the Roof. Butterfly king prawns on Queensway at Khan's, up to Uxbridge for Jack's fish and chips. RAF Northolt or Battersea Power Station. Summers at Hyde Park or hours in the rain, Buckingham Palace waiting for a wave. Crackheads at King's Cross or Regent's Park Mosque.

One memory after another. A flash down memory lane. The good, the bad, the beautiful, the stupid, the things that might mean absolutely nothing to someone who wasn't there but mean everything to me. Flashbacks of a life that don't simply make me British. I'm a Londoner. And proud. Proud of it all. My youth. My life. My heritage. My home. The Passport I've had a passport for as long as I can remember. My first British passport was the large black passport with the white inserts.

Then came the burgundy-red British passport. Sometimes I had two valid passports at the same time. As an airline pilot, we were permitted to have a second British passport, one that could be left at home in case the other was misplaced or sent away for a special visa. Passports became part of my life. Immigration counters. Crew lanes. Visas. Entry stamps. Exit stamps. Countries most people dream of visiting became places I flew to for work. Now the British passport is navy blue.

The colours changed. The monarch changed. But there was always something inside that passport that meant far more to me than its colour. Words I have read over and over and over again. Words I have always taken comfort in. Today, under His Majesty King Charles III, they read: “His Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State requests and requires in the name of His Majesty all those whom it may

concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance and to afford the bearer such assistance and protection as may be necessary."

I've read those words so many times. Perhaps most people open their passport, check the photograph, check the expiry date and never give them another thought. I did. Maybe because I travelled so much. Maybe because that little book accompanied me across the world. And if the Home Office hasn't been making the same mistake for the past forty-eight years, then under Nationality on mine it says: BRITISH CITIZEN. And if my entire childhood and youth wasn't just a dream, then those two words aren't simply something printed inside a passport.

They're part of who I am. Without Let or Hindrance Those words mean something very different to me today. "To allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance…" Hindrance. I have spent years imprisoned in Kazakhstan. I was sentenced to twenty years for murdering my own daughter. A crime I did not commit. Throughout this book, I've shown you how I arrived here. I've told you about Sophia. I've told you about Madina. I've told you about the investigation.

The witnesses. The forensic evidence. The contradictions. The experts. The lawyers. The prosecutors. The judge. The prison. The money. The corruption. The recordings. The confessions. And the years that followed. I've told you what happened to Mohamed Barakat after he lost consciousness in a hotel room in Almaty on the morning of the 24th of October 2019. One moment I was an airline captain preparing to go to work. A husband. A father. A son. A brother. A Londoner.

Then I woke into a nightmare. And it never ended. Assistance and Protection But there is another part of those words inside my passport: "…and to afford the bearer such assistance and protection as may be necessary." Assistance. Protection. Powerful words when you're holding a British passport at an airport. Much more powerful words when you're a British citizen sitting inside a foreign prison. I grew up believing those words meant something. I still want to believe they mean something.

The current Labour Government is a government led by a party I used to vote for. But from where I'm sitting today, I don't believe they have taken the request for safe passage, assistance and protection as seriously as those words sound. They have watched Kazakhstan not only hinder me, but do quite the opposite of assist and protect me. They have watched the years pass. They have watched me challenge this conviction. They have been told about the evidence.

They have been told about what happened during the investigation and trial. They have been told about the treatment I've endured. They know I am here. And still I am here. I am not asking His Majesty the King to decide a criminal case. I am not asking him to sit as a judge. I am not asking the Crown to declare me innocent simply because I wrote a book saying that I am. I've spent this book telling you why I am innocent. I've shown you what happened. I've told you where the evidence exists.

I've told you what was ignored. Read it. Question it. Disagree with me if you want. But look at it. Because behind every case number, every diplomatic letter and every prison identification number is a human being. And behind that human being is a family. Mine learned that lesson in the cruellest possible way. If This Book Ever Reaches You So if this childhood dream ever actually comes true— if somebody really does place this book in front of His Majesty King Charles III—

then perhaps I may make one request. Not as an airline captain. Not as somebody asking for special treatment. Not because my life was once comfortable. Not because I've travelled the world. Simply as one of your subjects. A British citizen. A man born at St Thomas' Hospital in front of Big Ben. A boy whose memories are Knock Down Ginger and BMXs, double-decker buses and black cabs, chips with salt and vinegar, Top of the Pops and Only Fools and Horses, summers at Hyde Park and hours standing in the rain outside Buckingham Palace waiting for a wave.

A boy who grew into a man who became an airline pilot and carried that British passport around the world. A father who lost his daughter. And now, a tired Londoner facing a corrupt legal system abroad. Your Majesty, I have one request, if I may. The passport issued to me in your name asks those whom it may concern to allow its bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance and to afford him such assistance and protection as may be necessary. Kazakhstan has not allowed me to pass freely.

It has hindered me in every possible way. And I do not believe the assistance and protection afforded to me has matched the seriousness of what has happened. So I ask something very simple: Please enquire as to why one of your subjects has been treated this way by Kazakhstan. That is all I ask. Someone, somewhere, with the authority to make people answer questions: Please look at what happened to me. Look at the evidence. Look at what was ignored. Look at what was changed.

Look at what was retested. Look at what the witnesses said. Look at what Madina said. Look at what she later recorded. Look at what the forensic evidence says. Look at how the investigation was conducted. Look at how the trial was conducted. And then ask Kazakhstan one question: Why? I have spent years asking it. My family has spent years asking it. Maybe one day somebody they cannot ignore will ask it too. Until then, I remain what I have always been. British Citizen.

Londoner. Father of Sophia. And still waiting to come home. HOPE DIES LAST.....

In Place of an Afterword

If you are reading these lines, you have travelled the whole journey of this book with me. I do not know what opinion you have formed of me. Perhaps you believed what I said; perhaps you still have doubts. Perhaps reading it has left you with even more questions. I do not ask you to take my side unconditionally. I ask only one thing: do not let questions remain unanswered. Behind these pages lies no literary plot. This is my life. This is my daughter's death. These are years of imprisonment. These are the people I met behind bars. This is what I saw with my own eyes and lived through myself. For seven years I have fought for truth and justice, and that struggle does not end on the last page of this book. I will continue for as long as it takes.

I do not ask you to forget the verdict against me. I ask you to examine the circumstances that led to it. If I am wrong, let that be established by facts. But if a mistake was made, however difficult and uncomfortable the truth may be, it must be acknowledged. I still want one thing: for the circumstances of my daughter's death and my criminal case to be investigated fully, objectively and impartially. Perhaps one person cannot change the system. But one person can refuse to stay silent. With this book, I have done everything I could to carry my voice beyond the prison walls. Now my story is in your hands. Talk about it, ask questions, check the facts and draw your own conclusions. Because justice does not begin with belief in someone's words. It begins with the desire to learn the truth.

And as long as there is even one person willing to seek it, hope remains. And hope dies last.

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