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## *Chapter 19*

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### **Border Town**

**I**t was Sunday, May 22nd and about 7:00 am when we arrived at the house. The family was expecting us. Ghader spoke with the lady of the house in his native Turkish language and I followed him to the kitchen floor where breakfast was served. The breakfast consisted of homemade bread, white cream cheese mixed with mountain vegetables, homemade plain yogurt and hot tea. I was not too concerned or fussy about the food. I was just in a state of perplexity, and did not know if I was dreaming or if it was real. After the meal, we were directed to the guest room where we could relax, watch TV, or take a nap. I chose to lie down for a short nap until Jamsheed and Ali arrived.

The house belonged to a man who had several children and they all were very kind to me, but none of them spoke any other languages except Turkish and Kurdish. One of the older children started telling me that he would like to go to a university in America, and brought his English book to show me what he had been studying in high school. He spoke a few words in English but mostly in Turkish, so Ghader interpreted for me. I used his book to open up a conversation with him and he liked the idea of communicating with me in English.

Most houses, including the one we were staying in, were equipped with a satellite for TV viewing, but the electricity was not very reliable as it went off several times during the day. Occasionally, Ghader would translate what was being said on TV.

Ali and Jamsheed finally arrived by cab two hours later and joined us at the house. We rejoiced to see each other and were very happy to have overcome such an obstacle! Ali started telling me about the ordeal he faced while going through customs. Security had decided to check our suitcases and started looking through all my notes and pictures, reading and asking questions about the notes and wanting to know to whom the pictures belonged. Most of my notes were in English and they could not read them, otherwise they would have even caused more problems for Ali for no apparent reason. Customs security kept them for at least thirty minutes going through the bags, but mostly reading my personal stuff.

Later, another customs agent came to see the reason for the hold-up at their booth. Ali finally told them that these notes and pictures were the life story of one of his relatives named Saiid and they were from thirty years ago and that he was delivering them. He asked Ali if he was delivering them to me or someone else. Ali replied: "Does it matter if I am taking them to Saiid or someone else, since they were notes going back thirty years ago?" He responded, "No, it does not matter."

Then the custom agent pointed to my picture, asking if I was the one he was taking these things to. Ali told them yes.

When Ali saw their concern and the cause of the holdup, he turned around, gathered all the notes and pictures and handed them to Farsheed, one of Jamsheed's relatives who had driven them to this point so that he could take them back to Iran with him. Ali did not want them to think they were of any value or for them to find someone to interpret them since they mostly were written in English. This would have taken more of their time and could have possibly caused the officers to have reason to deny them entry into Turkey.

As Ali was passing all the notes and pictures to Farsheed, he accidentally gave the custom officer's notebook to him also. (This is a notebook where they logged in any incidents.)

Finally, as Ali and Jamsheed were cleared and were on their way through the exit gate, someone tapped Ali on the shoulder. It was the customs officer again! Ali was terrified and turned around asking, "What is it now?" The officer wanted his notebook, claiming that perhaps he put it inside my suitcase by mistake.

Then they opened the suitcases again searching for his notebook, but it was not there. "Where could it be?" The officer asked. Ali answered, "It could have been with the things I gave Farsheed, the one who drove us here. You will have to go after him if you want to see if he has your notebook." So they proceeded to chase after him to see if that's what had happened. By the way, we never found out the outcome of that!

It was terrifying and funny at the same time! For he deserved what he got in return for giving Ali such a hard time, not to mention reading through my personal notes!

After Ali and Jamsheed had arrived and we had some time to catch up, we decided to rest while waiting for the owner of the house to come home from work. As we talked, we found out that the lady of the house was related to Jamsheed and had been born in Iran. She was married at a very young age and had moved to Turkey with her husband to live.

At noon, they brought a long tablecloth in and spread it on the floor for us to have our lunch on. The lunch consisted of homemade bread, plain yogurt and potato soup. They all spoke Turkish except for Jamsheed and Ghader who spoke both Farsi and Turkish, so they became our translators.

Now that we had overcome our first obstacle, we started to talk about our second obstacle; how to approach the US embassy. We had been told that the United States had a consulate in the city of Van, which was a few hours away from where we were staying, but we found out that was not true. We also found out that there were several check points between the two cities as well.

***I began to read my passport for possible help. Under “tips for travelers”, it was written that American citizens who were traveling abroad could call the nearest Embassy or U.S. Consulate if they got into any trouble. It was very encouraging to know that, but I didn’t have the phone number!***

At about 5:00 pm, the owner of the house finally arrived with one of his co-workers. They were both shepherds and were arriving late because they had to carry some of their sheep to another town. We sat around the room and

continued our discussion about how to approach the U.S Embassy.

There was a phone in the house, but we were told that it was used for incoming calls only. Ali had his cellular phone with him and was able to communicate with his wife along the way. I was waiting for an opportunity to call my wife, but Ali wanted me to wait until he was able to purchase a prepaid SIM-card for his cellular phone before I made the call. He thought that it might cost a lot less than calling direct, so I went along with his wishes.

That afternoon, Ali and Jamsheed went into town. They wanted to visit some friends and exchange their money. Ali said he would purchase the SIM-card while he was out, but found out he could use his cellular phone just as economically as prepay would have been.

When he returned, he allowed me to use the phone to call my wife. I tried our home phone first, but no one answered. It was a little after 7:00 am there and I figured she was probably on her way to work, so I called her cell phone.

When she answered, I said, "Hello darling!" We had not talked for several days, so she was excited to hear my voice and asked me how I was doing. I tried to hold back my emotions because I didn't want those around me to see me with tears in my eyes, but I could not help it!

I took a deep breath and asked, "Where are you?" She said she was on her way to work.

"Could you please pull over for a minute so I can talk to you," I asked?

She pulled over and then asked, “What’s going on?”

“I’m in Turkey!” I responded.

She screamed with excitement and said, “I knew you might be up to something since I hadn’t heard from you in so many days! Are you ok?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Ali and I are inside the Turkish border in a family’s home. There are some things I need for you to do for me.”

I gave her the phone number to the home I was in as well as Ali’s cell number. I asked her to get me the phone number for the U.S. Embassy in Turkey. I felt that the U.S. Embassy was my best route to freedom since I entered the country illegally. She then told me that she would change her plans that day in order to make a few phone calls and that she would be in touch with me later on.

We were both excited and anxious at the same time, praying that everything would go well and without any problems!

As I looked back and thought about the events that had happened, I could not help but think how God was with me as I faced so many obstacles and danger. I had no choice except to trust Him when I chose to take this route, and I wanted to continue with the same assurance for the rest of my journey even though I felt like I was walking on some hot coals at times!

For the next hour, the owner of the house and the rest of the family sat down and drank hot tea and smoked on their cigarettes nonstop until the dinner was ready to be served.

We had soup, chicken, plain white rice and salad, which consisted of onion, tomato, and cucumber diced up and mixed together. It was tasty and delicious! Then we watched Turkish TV while we continued our conversation about our next step.

After a little while, I became so tired and desperately needed to rest. There were individual sleeping mats already prepared for each one of the guests in another room, so I excused myself and went to bed.

I slept well that night! At about 5:00 am I woke up. It was daybreak and the light was beginning to shine into the window. The owner's co-worker, who was also their friend, woke up, prayed his morning prayer and went back to sleep. At about 6:30 am I noticed the sun was way up high and shining through the windows of the house. The owner and his friend left for work, for they had to tend to their flock. The rest of us got up around 9:00 am. After eating breakfast, Ali and Jamsheed departed for the town and left Ghader and me behind. There was nothing to do except watch TV or drink hot tea. The electricity would come and go as it pleased, usually about four times a day. The place we were staying was so peaceful and beautiful. There were mountains all around us. Outside of the house was farmland with cows and hens roaming around. There was a spring of fresh running water for their personal use, as well as for their animals and for watering the crops.

Ghader occasionally would keep himself busy by getting his opium out to smoke. Apparently, it was all right to smoke opium or other drugs similar to that without trying to hide it. One of the women staying in the house brought him a small propane cylinder to be used as fire. He then used a

small rod on the fire. When the rod got hot, he touched it to the small piece of opium where it created smoke, and with a straw he would inhale the smoke through his mouth similar to smoking a cigarette.

While we were traveling through the mountains, Ghader offered me a small piece of a type of opium called “Sheereh” (left over of the smoked opium), but I declined. He said that he used it to help him with his backache. I had a backache too, but I decided my Ibuprofen would do just fine!

The children were all very nice and hospitable toward us and they kept the hot tea coming almost every two hours. The mother of the family was born in Iran but she only spoke Turkish, so we could only communicate with each other through simple sign language. Ghader would interpret when it was needed. I had brought a bag of tea and some candy from Iran with me, which I gave to her for their hospitality and kindness they had shown toward me.

I guess the children in the community, especially the girls, had not seen anyone who spoke different languages before, so they would come to the house one by one from the farmland, school, or work, and attempt to see and talk to me with sign language. On one occasion while I was shaving, I noticed three of them standing by the door giggling as they were watching me shave my face. That reminded me of some of the old western movies on the big screen where everyone was watching the strange cowboy who just came to town. It was funny though!

Back in the US, my wife went to work to let them know that she needed to be off in order to help me. Everyone was so understanding and told her to do what she needed to do.

She still worked at the same doctor's office she had started in 15 years before when we first came to Asheville, but it was now called Parkway Family Physicians. Dr. William Hamilton was one of the doctors there. When he heard the news, he told Ursa that Eric Ager, his nephew, was in Turkey at that time and gave her his phone number. Eric's parents, John and Annie Ager are also good friends of ours, and live in the same town as we do.

At the time, we did not know how or in what capacity Eric would be involved, but God knew, for he was there to help in a way that we could not even imagine! Romans 8:28 speaks well of this:

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***Romans 8:28 "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."***

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My wife went home and started making phone calls. She called our Congressman and Senators' offices. They suggested she call the U.S. Embassy in Ankara to let them know of my situation and that we needed their full support. She then called me back and gave me the phone number for the U.S. Embassy in Ankara, Turkey.

I called the Embassy in Ankara, introduced myself and gave them my U.S. passport number. I told them of my situation and asked for their help to get back to the United States. The gentleman that I spoke with told me that I needed to turn myself in to the police and they probably would send me back to where I just came from!

“Oh No!” That was not what I wanted to hear! It felt like a knife going through my back and I could feel the pain all over my body!

“Please do not tell me that! I have read the information in my passport which states that if any American citizen is in trouble on foreign soil, to call the U.S. Embassy immediately for help... and now I am calling you; but you are telling me that they will send me back to Iran!”

The gentleman said, “You have broken Turkish law by entering the country illegally and this is what you have to do according to their laws.”

I told him I was not satisfied with his answer and thanked him for his time. I immediately called my wife.

*“It was Monday morning and I was on my way to work. My cell phone rang. I answered it and heard my husband’s voice on the other end. “I’m in Turkey,” he told me. I couldn’t believe it! I was so excited when I heard the news and relieved to hear he was out of Iran! The last time I had talked to him was three or four days before, and I hadn’t heard from him since. He had been talking to me about the possibility of escaping, but I would always plead with him not to try that because of the incredible danger. But honestly, there was a part of me down deep that wanted him home whatever it took. He knew not to tell me and just did what he knew he had to do. And by the grace of God, he had made it into Turkey safely!*

*I pulled over and took down the telephone numbers where I could reach him, and went on to work. I excitedly told everyone the news and they were all so happy! The doctors and so many of my co-workers had seen what I had been through over the past few months and had been such a support for me. I have worked in this family practice for almost 20 years now, and am blessed to work in a place where people truly love each other and lift each other up in times of need. It is also a place where we are not only allowed, but committed to be a place where we show love and compassion to our patients through the love of Jesus Christ. It is truly a wonderful place to work!*

*One of the doctor's I worked with at the time was Dr. William Hamilton. When I told him about Saiid being in Turkey, he was so excited and began telling me about his nephew, Eric Ager, who was serving in the military and just happened to be stationed in Turkey working at the embassy there! You could say, "What a coincidence!" But oh no, this was no coincidence! It was the beginning of many miracles that would bring my husband home.*

*I stayed at work only a few hours that day. I realized quickly after making a few phone calls that I needed to be home and near the phone. And it truly took almost every minute of every day for the next week, and sometimes night as well, talking to many different people; politicians, the Turkish embassy, the Turkish police, Eric Ager, the airlines, and family and friends. I knew he*

*wasn't out of the woods yet, especially after an official at the Turkish embassy told me that he should turn himself over to the police and that they would most likely send him back to Iran! That was a moment I will never forget! I felt like a 'cement block' had been placed on my chest and I couldn't breath. But after they realized that he had his United States passport and had an airline reservation home, they were very helpful, staying in touch with the Turkish police making sure he was treated well.*

*I praise God that my youngest daughter, Elizabeth, was able to be with me most of that week. She had just graduated from nursing school and had some extra time. My daughters Crystal and Alyson were a great support to me as well and they did what they could. Crystal lived in West Virginia at the time. Alyson lived close by, but worked full time along with having to care for our first grandchild, Roman. We are very blessed to have three precious daughters on whom we can depend and who love the Lord. We have also been blessed with 3 wonderful son-in-laws who also love the Lord and take good care of our girls. And now we are blessed to have 5 beautiful grandchildren, and one on the way! Saiid and I are both convinced that being a grandparent is one of the greatest blessings from God above!"*

*Ursa*

**I believed that going back to Iran was like signing my own death certificate!** For him to respond the way he did made me wonder if he believed at all. I was not in any position to argue or disagree with him, so when I called my wife back, I asked her to please call the Congressman and Senators' offices in North Carolina and ask them to telegram the U.S. Embassy in Ankara to help me.

It turned out that my wife had also just spoken with the U.S. Embassy in Turkey and they told her the same thing! She was crushed, but would not take that as an answer either. But another lady there seemed more understanding to our needs and was willing to help. She wrote down her name for me to talk to and gave it to me.

I called her and introduced myself, but was not sure at that time if I was calling the same building as before or if it was in a different building. First she told me that I should speak with the same gentleman that I spoke with earlier, as he was in charge of those matters.

I told her that I had already spoken to that gentleman and was not satisfied with what he had to tell me.

She then said the same thing the gentleman had already told me.

I told her that I needed help from the Embassy!

Then she responded: "Let me connect you to someone else."

That person was another lady that seemed to be more sensitive and compassionate toward my need. Although she told me the same thing as the gentleman did, she gave me

more explanation as to what I would need to do. She told me that if I had a confirmed airline ticket to my destination along with my passport, I would need to go to the nearest police station which was called Amniyat and they “usually” will deport you to your destination. She also told me that my wife had called them as well and that they were aware of the situation.

After that conversation, I felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders, and it sounded a lot better than before. As a result, it gave me more hope and I understood the correct course of action to take.

I asked Jamsheed if he had a police friend that we could talk to and get some advice from in order to go to the right section of the police department. I did not want to just walk in the police department without knowing which section was going to handle my situation and I did not want to get shuffled around by the wrong group of investigators. I had seen in some movies and even heard that if you are not careful, you could get into the wrong hands where you could be treated improperly.

By this time, the owner of the house was home from work along with a couple of his friends. They sat in the guestroom for three hours talking, smoking and drinking their hot tea.

Jamsheed, after thinking about who he might know in the police department and talking to some people, told me that he believed that he might know someone who could help. He then asked the owner of the house for his mobile phone to call his police friend. An hour later, two police officers in their civilian attire came to the house, drank hot

tea, and talked. They were speaking in Turkish of course and I could not understand what they were saying, but occasionally I understood a word or two. Then the two officers left the house to speak with another detective who specialized in this type of situation. They said they would call Jamsheed on the cellular phone at a later time.

That night, we were invited to a friend's house for dinner, which was only a few blocks away. There were twelve men at the dinner table including Ali and me. The women stayed in the kitchen. Their conversation was over a piece of farmland they owned and the problems they were facing.

We were almost finished with our dinner when the cellular phone rang. The phone was for Jamsheed and after a short conversation he went outside to meet with the caller. It was the same police friend who came by the house earlier. He asked for me and Ali to take a ride with him. He did not tell us where we were going or what we were going to do. I did not ask either; I just knew God was not going to get me out of "Egypt just to drown me in the Red Sea!" He is so faithful!

We got into his truck and drove around. Jamsheed sat in the front seat while Ali and I sat in the back. As we were driving around, he took us on some back roads away from the main street. I did not know what was going through his mind and since I did not know the language could not understand what they were talking about. I have to admit that I felt a bit uneasy since we were in the middle of nowhere!

After driving around for half an hour (though it seemed a lot longer), we finally went to a house to pick up the police officer's son, took him to another location and dropped him off. I felt much better after that since we were now on busier streets. Then he picked up a detective that we were supposed to meet with. They continued their conversation as we were riding around. They drove by the police station and pointed out to me where I should meet with the detective the next morning. He would take me in to the proper authorities who would then create a file for me. He said the paper work would probably take about an hour and then they would give me a certified paper that would give me permission to travel anywhere in the country and so I could pass through any checkpoints without any problems. (He had good intentions but things never go that smooth when you have to depend on others!)

Then they drove us back to the house. We thanked them for what they were doing to help and they went on their way. Jamsheed then told us that the officers wanted some money for their troubles and were asking for \$1,000. I told Jamsheed that I did not have that much money to spare. I needed to hold on to most of what I had because I had no way of knowing how long I would be in Turkey or what I would need to use my money for. I told Jamsheed that the most I would be able to give them is \$100 each. The owner of the house heard our conversation and did not like what he was hearing. He saw their greedy intentions and told Jamsheed that it was the police officers job to help and that they should not be asking for money. He said if they are going to behave like this, then we will go in ourselves without their help!

I also wondered if it was the police officers who had asked for money or if it was Jamsheed who was really trying to collect more money from me. I would never know the answer to that!

Ali chimed in and reminded Jamsheed of the agreement we made from the beginning. If we had to pay any extra now then it would be deducted from what we already owed them. He agreed, and we gave them \$200 dollars. On that note, we ended our conversation about the money. It was getting late and I was tired. I had a long day ahead of me, so I excused myself and went to bed in the other room.