



Shohet

by
Edward J. McNeill

www.edwardjmcneill.com

CHAPTER 1

BEIRUT, LEBANON MARCH 1985

Ignoring new security restrictions, Brady decided to take his regular early morning walk. He stepped outside, clad in blue slacks and a yellow, short-sleeved knit shirt. The sun had risen moments before, in a cloudless sky.

Brady waved to the Marine guard as he went out the back gate, then hurried up Rifahi Street. He crossed over to the Avenue De Paris to enjoy an unobstructed view of the Mediterranean. The moment he reached a good spot to observe the passing scene out on the water, he noticed two burly Arabs about twenty yards to his left also come to a halt. One pointed seaward.

Brady glanced in the direction the man had indicated but saw nothing unusual, and continued with his walk. A block or so later, when he paused again, the Arabs did, too.

Brady laughed to himself. *Uh-oh, I've attracted a couple of flies. Only two. I got them outnumbered. Better see what these guys are up to.*

This time, he slowed his pace and then turned suddenly. They had advanced around ten feet closer.

One of the men called out in Arabic, "Hello, my friend. Are you from the embassy? We have papers. May we beg a favor?"

Brady stood in place. *More guys probably asking for asylum.* He shrugged, scratched his head. "Sorry, no speak Arabic." Then, in an under-the-breath mumble: "Go away guys. Let me enjoy my walk."

The second man said something Brady couldn't make out, so he cupped a hand to his ear and waved them nearer.

When they moved in, the man said, this time in accented English. "We have papers."

"Let's see." Brady did not try to hide his annoyance as he stuck his hand out.

“May Allah bless you with ten thousand virgins, sir. Show him the papers, Abdul.”

As Abdul reached into his pocket, the men moved closer still. Abdul pulled out a pistol.

“Jee-zus,” Brady muttered and waited for them to move closer so he could kick the pistol from Abdul's hand. Abdul and friend were going to wish they'd picked an easier target.

Brady regained a groggy consciousness in time to see a battered black Mercedes pull up to the curb. He tried to touch the back of his head, but couldn't move. His hands and feet were cuffed. Three sets of hands lifted him and stuff him into the trunk. In seconds, tires squealed and the car sped off.

After a short ride, the car screeched to a stop. The trunk lid sprang open. Brady squinted in the glaring sunlight and sucked in the fresh air. His captors carried him into a large house with boarded-up windows, and dropped him on the floor. Everything appeared hazy and his head throbbed. A sewer-like stench filled his nostrils.

Two of the captors grabbed Brady by the arms. Another took his feet and they half-carried, half-dragged him—face up—upstairs. Brady yelled, “Take it easy, you crazy sons of bitches.”

On the second floor they tossed him into a room only slightly larger than his walk-in closet. He landed on his back. “Damn it!” A guard, sitting on a barstool outside

the open door, held a rifle and pretended to crank off a few rounds, using Brady for his imaginary target.

He hoped the bastard didn't accidentally squeeze the damn trigger. Brady closed his eyes, trying to clear his head.

After counting to ten, he opened his eyes again. The guard had stopped the stupid game, but everything still looked hazy. The conk on the head had probably given him a concussion. How could he have been so dimwitted to allow himself to get suckered like that?

Brady surveyed his surroundings. The only window at the back of the room was mostly covered with a sheet of three-quarter plywood, bolted along the sides and at the bottom. A four-inch space at the top provided some light and fresh air. The tiny gap also allowed an entryway for the flies that buzzed the room and swarmed over a three-legged stool, a lidless chamber pot, a large bowl of water, a towel, a threadbare blanket, and a straw mat. *All the comforts of home.*

Two husky, bearded men stepped into the room. They grabbed Brady, pulled him into the hall, and removed the cuffs from his hands and feet.

"Do not rise," one snarled in Arabic. The guard aimed his rifle at Brady's head.

"I don't understand."

The same one said in English, "Do not move or you will be killed. Do you understand that?"

"Yeah."

The guard moved back a few steps and brought his rifle to a more relaxed

position.

The two stood Brady up and stripped him to his jockey shorts and socks.

The English speaker said in Arabic, "We will need the clothes if a photo becomes necessary. He must look unharmed."

The other man gave a perfunctory laugh, folded Brady's clothes, and stuffed them into a cloth bag with his shoes.

Both men pushed Brady back inside until he slammed against a side wall.

The guard again positioned himself at the doorway.

The English speaker said, "Do not move. Do not speak. We will return."

The men soon came back with two chains, each with a ring on one end, and some sort of clasp on the other. They snapped the clasp end around each of Brady's wrists, and fastened the ring ends to bolted latches on either sidewall. The long chains permitted movement throughout the room.

"There, you may move freely." The English-speaking Arab pulled a piece of black cloth from his pocket, twirled it into a blindfold and tied it over Brady's eyes. "You must wear this at all times. Have a nice day." They exited laughing.

When Brady heard the door close, he pushed the blindfold up to his brow. The four-inch crack in the plywood on the window allowed only a negligible shaft of light to come through—barely enough to see. He pulled against the chains. Nothing budged, but he had enough slack to move almost to the window and beyond the door.

He tried turning the knob. What sounded like the guard's rifle butt crashed against the door. "Okay, pal," Brady mumbled.

He sat on the stool, deciding to conserve his energy while pondering the situation. After less than a year on the job he knew everyone at the embassy. Surely someone would miss him. Mark would, when he failed to show for their late-morning talk and coffee session. But they'd probably never find him. He'd have to rely on his own resourcefulness to escape. Linda, his parents, and even his brothers would be worried sick.

It felt like hours later when a different hall guard unlocked the door, catching Brady with the blindfold raised. Brady smiled sheepishly.

The guard said nothing. With his foot he pushed a bowl of a foul-smelling grayish gruel and a jar of water into the room. He returned to his post leaving the door partially open.

Brady gulped his water. But when he took a whiff of the bowl, he made a face and held his nose. The guard laughed. Brady figured he'd found one humane Shiite.

Just then he heard someone on the stairs. The guard must have heard it too, for he quickly and quietly closed the door. Brady decided he'd best eat, regardless of the smell, and dipped his fingers into the bowl. The gruel tasted better than it smelled. It had a thick pasty consistency—somewhat like wet white bread, mixed with pulverized vegetables. As he ate, he hoped it wouldn't make him sick. It didn't.

Several days later, as Brady sat on his stool, covered with the blanket to keep the flies off, he scratched his chin and wondered how he'd look with a beard. At the sound

of voices outside the door, he threw off the blanket and pulled down the blindfold.

The door opened and someone tore off the blindfold. Two new bearded men dragged him to his feet and toward the door. One man placed a stool behind him and forced his rear end onto it.

A replacement guard stood watch.

Behind him another bearded man glared at Brady while stropping a straight razor. Then, with an evil smile, he held the razor under his own chin, a fraction of an inch from his throat and moved the blade from side to side.

Oh Christ, he's gonna slit my throat. Jesus...no.

Brady gritted his teeth and tried to keep his features neutral. He refused to give the son of a bitch satisfaction by showing any fear. Perspiration dampened his forehead and his body.

The first two men went down the stairs, and one soon returned carrying a small table with a basin of water and a cake of brown laundry soap. While the stone-faced guard aimed his weapon at Brady's head, the man with the razor dipped the soap into the basin and swished it around. He lathered Brady's face and looked at the razor.

The sadistic barber narrowed his gaze on Brady, then simply leaned over and started shaving him. Brady didn't dare show any sign of emotion, for fear of changing the man's mind. The Arab scraped the sharp razor over Brady's face, removing every trace of stubble.

Brady's face burned like hell.

As he finished up, the man said in English, "You are fortunate, American dog. I

have cleaned you up for a meal and, perhaps later, some photos.”

Again the mention of photos.

The barber went on: “My razor is not always so merciful to enemies. Perhaps some day, maybe tomorrow, I will display my sculpting skill.” He then told the other man in Arabic, “Clean up.”

The two men dragged Brady off the stool with little concern about the pull of the chains on his arms, and reset the blindfold. After they left, he raised it to his brow. Soon, another smell fouled the air—the smell of cooking. *The condemned man is served his final meal.*

Since they’d fed him one bowl of that stuff for a couple of days and it appeared to be the chef’s specialty, he decided he’d keep on eating it. But he’d pretend it was something else—perhaps his favorite Navy chow, SOS, or what sailors called “shit on a shingle.” This lacked the shingle, but so what, he’d eat it anyway.

In view of the fact that for a week they’d increased his food to two meals a day, and it appeared they’d keep feeding him, he decided to make up a workout routine. The challenge would also help to keep his mind active. He first devised a program of callisthenic exercises he could perform in a confined space. His SEAL training aboard submarines helped immensely in this endeavor.

His captors refused his request for writing materials, so he tried memorizing all the five daily Muslim calls to prayer and the voice of each caller from the nearby

mosque. He committed to memory every recurring sound, both in and outside the house. He would try to imprint in his brain all the captors' voices and faces so they could later be brought to justice. And, he hoped, the sounds would help to find the house again.

He thought constantly about Linda, and their future life together. In order to maintain his sanity, he began to mentally design and construct, plank-by-plank, nail-by-nail, the house he would build one day for his beloved, after his release.

When he asked for something to read, they gave him only negative articles about the United States. The physical and mental exercises helped, but he wished for something else to do during the long, lonely hours.

He had plenty of time to regret his offhand remarks to his fellow CIA co-workers about the security restrictions: "You guys can be prisoners here. I'm not letting a bunch of thugs run my life. Besides they're letting hostages go. I heard they're about to free everyone."

As days became weeks and weeks became months, the time eventually dragged into years. He dreamed that one day they'd just open his door and tell him, "Go."

Each day resembled the day before—two meager meals, a trip downstairs to empty his chamber pot, a bowl of water and a rag for washing, upstairs to the room to exercise, hours of thinking about Linda, and nothing else. He awaited with great anticipation his daily chamber pot-emptying chore because they unshackled him and

allowed him to walk, and he began to look forward to his twice-weekly shave. He felt relatively comfortable with the process now, and at least had some interaction with others.

Each morning at the first call to prayer from the mosque, Brady used a link from his chain to dig out a notch in the plywood that covered the window. Yesterday's tally counted a grand total of 700 notches. By his reckoning, adding in the several weeks he hadn't notched, it had to be sometime in 1987.

One day, with a close-to-overflowing chamber pot, his guard close behind, Brady stepped into the first-floor hall. Suddenly a man shoved him against the wall, causing a slight spillage. The man ordered Brady's guard to remain on the stairs, and shouted in Arabic, "Do not move. We have a new prisoner."

In a moment, the outside door opened and four men carried in Brady's boss, Mark Steele. Steele looked at Brady, but gave no sign of recognition.

Oh God. They got Mark. What the hell is going on out there? Maybe the bastards raided the compound. The men dragged Steele to the cellar. When the cellar door slammed shut, Brady and his guard continued on their way, without cleaning up the floor. *Well, at least, I'm not alone anymore.*

However, another year passed and, although imprisoned in the same house,

Brady had no contact with Steele—not even by sight. Every once in a while he would overhear conversations among the guards. One morning he heard:

“The other American will not be so defiant when the Holy One arrives.”

“I, too, look forward to the arrival of the imam with great anticipation. He will mete out the greatest pain upon this American infidel—pain beyond human endurance.”

A third guard chimed in, “The infidel will gladly surrender his secrets and beg the Holy One for death.”

One of the three said, “And he shall have it—it will not be merciful.”

The three men had laughed and left the hall outside Brady’s door. He felt a sick feeling in his gut.

The next day Brady awakened to screams from below. The anguished cries started about one hour before the call to prayer, and ended just as it sounded. Brady covered his ears. The following day, Brady heard nothing.

The same pattern went on for several weeks—horrifying screams, then a day of silence.

During what sounded like a particularly brutal session, the cries became weaker and weaker. When Brady lowered his hands from his ears, he heard nothing but silence. He waited a moment. Yes, the screams from the cellar had definitely stopped.

One thing Brady knew for certain: the sadistic bastards hadn't stopped for humane reasons. Feeling helpless, he angrily smashed his forearm against the wall. The guard outside struck something against the door and, in Arabic, growled, “Silence, dog.”

The house remained still. *Maybe they got what they wanted out of him. Oh Christ, maybe they're gonna start on me.* Naked, except for the replacement undergarment they had provided when his became too filthy and tattered to wear, Brady stood shivering in fear, sweat oozing from every pore.

He waited, but heard nothing.

Suddenly, a stream of excited jabber came from below. He heard multiple footsteps hurrying up the stairs. They came to a stop outside the door. A key turned in the lock. He reset the blindfold leaving a peek space at the bottom. Three pairs of feet filled his limited range of vision.

Someone removed his shackles and pushed him out of the room. Then they shoved him along the hall and half-carried him down into the basement. Two of the men held onto Brady's arms as he stood on a stone floor.

Through the peek space he saw two sandaled feet almost toe-to-toe with his. Whoever stood before Brady reeked of strong body odor—it overpowered his own. He gagged. A hand gripped the blindfold and ripped it off. Brady squinted, blinking rapidly. A wide, squat Arab, dressed in a cleric's robe and head covering, had moved less than a foot away.

The sandaled man reached to his right and opened a curtain. Brady gaped in horror. There, on a thin wooden table lay the spread-eagled naked body of Mark Steele—looking like a bloody slab of beef. Brady barely recognized his friend, who stared back with dead, unseeing eyes.

Brady looked at the cleric and then past him to two men with pistols trained on

him. *This is it. They're gonna kill me.*

He yelled, "You bastards! You bastards!"

The man studied him with black, hate-filled eyes that squinted above a hawk-like nose. His short beard twitched.

"Lower your voice. It will not help you to shout, the walls are thick. Shouts cannot be heard outside. And even then, our Muslim brothers control the area."

It surprised Brady how well he spoke English.

The man gestured toward Steele's broken body, "Your late friend was CIA." He hesitated a long moment, then added, "He went to his death insisting he did not know you." He again hesitated, laughed wickedly, and said, "However, I feel you are CIA too. We will know the truth very soon."

The cleric drew a knife, walked to Steele, sliced the ropes binding his stretched limbs, and shoved his body from the table. Steele's lifeless body hit the floor with a crunch. He landed with his face toward Brady, his dead eyes still staring.

Brady made a move toward the cleric. "You—"

One man grabbed him from behind and held on until the other gun wielder aimed at his head.

The cleric cackled and pointed the knife at Steele's corpse. "This is how Hezbollah deals with the Great Satan's CIA."

He nodded to the man behind Brady and the one aiming the pistol.

"Yes, imam," they said. Their grips tightened on his arms. They pulled him toward the table.

“No!” Brady yelled, and thrashed about, until the Imam held the blade to his throat. He stopped fighting. Now instead, he spoke defiantly: “You filthy bastards. I don’t know anything!”

“We will see,” the imam said. Then turning to the others, he said in Arabic: “Put him on the table. Secure his hands and feet.”

They lifted him onto the table. One man held him down with a knife to his throat while the other sliced sections from a new coil of rope.

The hawk-nosed imam whispered something into the ear of the man with the knife.

The imam pulled Brady’s arms so they stretched above his head, wound the rope several times around his wrists, and tied them tightly to the table. He did the same thing with Brady’s ankles and then stood back as if to admire his handiwork.

When the imam reached into his robe and pulled out pliers, Brady broke into a cold sweat and prayed they would kill him fast.

The imam smiled at the pliers, then sneered at Brady.

He tried to work up a phlegm ball to unload in the imam’s face. *What do I have to lose? They’re gonna snuff me anyway and I’ll never see Linda again. Might as well go out like a SEAL.*

Then, sounds of pounding feet and shouting boomed overhead.

A second later the basement door opened, followed by quick footsteps coming down the stairs.

The newcomers spoke in Arabic.

“The Ayatollah has ordered you not to kill the prisoners.”

“Thank God, thank God, thank God.” Brady felt a warm wave of relief surging throughout his body.

The imam pointed with the pliers at Steele’s body. “You have come too late for that one.” Then he nodded at Brady. “And, this one?”

“Cut him loose.”

The imam glared at Brady. “Allah has smiled upon you today, filthy infidel. Perhaps we meet again, Allah willing.” He set aside the pliers with a sigh, then ordered his helpers, “Now! Bring him upstairs.”

So, they wouldn’t kill him, at least, not right now. But Brady couldn’t help wondering how long his reprieve would last.

The men walked Brady back up the stairs to the small room and clamped him in chains once again.

He languished there for another year and a half with the same regimen, but occasionally they added one additional bowl of gruel.

One night, two broad-shouldered Arabs he hadn’t seen before woke Brady from a sound sleep, dressed him in the clothes he had worn when captured years before, and led him blindfolded down the stairs and outside. They tied his hands and shoved him into a car’s back seat.

The two spoke. Brady gathered from their conversation that some Grand

Ayatollah had ordered him set free.

Free. Brady had difficulty believing what he'd just heard.

From their discussion, he also detected their minds didn't match their brawn. They sounded like two bickering teenagers as they argued about who would drive and who would risk being fouled by sitting next to the infidel. Finally, they compromised—one would drive, the other would point a pistol at the infidel from the front passenger seat. They would switch places at the release point.

"He will have to walk to his freedom," one said.

After an inordinately long chuckle, the other man said, "I wish the Ayatollah would allow us to slit the infidel's throat like we slaughter the sheep for the market." The two men giggled like a couple of schoolboys let out for recess until the other one said, "But the Ayatollah has left us no choice. We must obey the high one's command."

Brady was determined not to show his overwhelming joy, but tears moistened his eyes under the blindfold.

After a brief ride, the driver stopped the car. The gun-holding man gave the pistol to the driver and went back to untie Brady's hands. He then removed the blindfold and said in English, "You are free to go."

Those words made Brady's heart thump wildly. *Free!*

He exited the vehicle, but felt completely disoriented. "Where the hell am I?"

"Five blocks, you will reach the Green Line and the Christians. Go quickly, before we change our minds."

Brady hiked up the pants he'd worn thirty or so pounds ago, by his reckoning,

and began to walk swiftly into the black night.