

# The Thorn and the Carnation

Written by prisoner Yahya Sinwar  
2004

Translated by:  
Dr. Faisal Al-Dawli  
Mr. Abdul Latif Al-Dahmali

Reviewed by:  
Dr. Abbas Al-Mutahhar



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# **The Thorn and the Carnation**

**A novel by the Palestinian author Yahya Al-Sinwar**

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## Introduction

### The Thorn and the Carnation

Embodies the duality of pain and hope in a way that touches the heart.

The "thorn" reflects the bitterness of harsh circumstances and the ongoing suffering under oppression, while the "carnation" symbolizes renewed hope and the dream of freedom and liberation. This blend of pain and hope encapsulates the philosophy of Palestinian struggle, which transforms suffering into a driving force for liberation and dignity.

Through this profound duality, it delivers a humanistic message about perseverance, resistance, and the belief that light can emerge even from the darkest moments. It tells a story that intertwines hardship with the desire for life, becoming a living testament to the strength of the human will in facing adversity.

The Thorn and the Carnation is not a story about one person or an individual experience, but a narrative of an entire nation.

Written by translator Abdul Latif Al-Dahmali

In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

### **The Book and the Author**

**Book:** The Thorn and the Carnation

**Author:** Yahya Ibrahim Al-Sinwar

A Palestinian from a family that was displaced from the city of Asqalan in the year one thousand nine hundred and forty-eight to the Gaza Strip.

- He was born in the year 1962 in the Khan Younis refugee camp.
- He earned a bachelor's degree in Arabic language and literature from the Islamic University of Gaza, and was among the first to raise the banner of Islamic resistance in Palestine.
- He was imprisoned at the beginning of 1988, and sentenced to life imprisonment, and since that date, he has remained a captive in the prisons of the occupation.
- He wrote this novel ( The Thorn and the Carnation ), pouring into it his memories, and the story

of his people, from pains and hopes, and making it the story of every Palestinian, the story of all Palestinians, in a dramatic work where the events are real, most of the characters are fictional, and some are real.

- In it, he addressed most of the key milestones in the history of the Palestinian people, since the Naksa of 1967 until the early days of the blessed Al-Aqsa Intifada.
- This novel was written in the darkness of captivity in the prisons of the occupation in Palestine. Dozens labored to transcribe it, striving to conceal it from the eyes of the oppressors and their tainted hands, and they exerted immense effort in that.

, A task akin to that of ants, working tirelessly to bring it to light, so that it may reach the hands of readers, and perhaps find its way onto screens, presenting before the audience a true image of reality in the land of Isra.

In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

## Author's Preface

This is not my personal story, nor is it the story of a single individual, though every event within it is real. Each incident or set of events belongs to this Palestinian or that. The only element of fiction in this work lies in its transformation into a novel centered around specific characters, granting it the form and essence of a literary narrative. Everything else is true—I have lived much of it, and I have heard even more from the very lips of those who experienced it: they, their families, and their neighbors, over decades, on the beloved land of Palestine.

I dedicate this to those whose hearts are bound to the land of the Night Journey and Ascension, from ocean to gulf—indeed, from ocean to ocean.

Yahya Ibrahim Al-Sinwar

Be'er Sheva Prison, 2004

## Chapter One

The winter of 1967 was relentless, refusing to depart and making way for the spring that struggled to appear with its warm, radiant sun. The winter fought back with thick clouds amassing in the sky, and then, suddenly, rain poured down in torrents, drenching the modest homes of the Beach Refugee Camp in Gaza City. The alleyways flooded as streams of water surged through them, invading homes and forcing their way into the small rooms with floors set lower than the nearby streets.

Time and again, the winter torrents rushed into the small courtyard of our home, then seeped inside. Our family had lived in this house since settling in after being displaced from the town of al-Faluja in the occupied lands of 1948. Each time, terror gripped me, my three brothers, and my sister all of whom were older than me. My father and mother would rush to lift us off the ground while my mother scrambled to save the bedding before the invading water could drench it. Being the youngest, I would cling to my mother's neck, right alongside my infant sister, who, in such moments, was always cradled in her arms.

Many nights, I woke up to the touch of my mother's hands as she gently moved me aside to place an aluminum pot or a large clay dish right beside me on her mattress. These makeshift containers caught the water dripping from the cracks in the tiled roof of our tiny room. A pot here, a clay dish there, another vessel in a different spot. Each time, I would try to fall back asleep sometimes succeeding only to wake again to the rhythmic sound of water droplets hitting the pooled water in the vessel. As the container neared its brim, the splashing intensified with each new drop. My mother would then rise, replace the full vessel with an empty one, and step outside to pour the collected water away.

I was five years old. One morning, after a long winter night, the sun of an eager spring struggled to reclaim its rightful place, trying to erase the traces of winter's dark assault on the camp. My seven-year-old brother, Muhammad, took my hand, and together we walked through the camp's winding paths toward its outskirts, where an Egyptian army post stood guard.

The Egyptian soldiers in that camp loved us very much. One of them got to know us by name, and whenever we appeared, he would call out to us... *Mohammed, Ahmed... come here...* We would run to him, standing beside him with our heads bowed, waiting for whatever he had to give us, as always. He would reach into the pocket of his military trousers and pull out a piece of pistachio candy for each of us. We would snatch our share and bite into it greedily, while he patted our shoulders, ruffled our hair, and sent us back home. Dragging our feet, we would trudge through the alleys of the camp.

Winter finally departed after a long and harsh stay. The air was growing warm and pleasant, and the rain no longer assaulted us with its wrath. I thought winter had stayed too long and would not return anytime soon. But I sensed a deep unease around me—an anxious turmoil greater than any stormy night. My mother was busy filling every container she could find with water, setting them out in the courtyard. My father had borrowed a *turiyya*—a digging hoe—from the neighbors and was working on a long, deep pit in front of our house. My brother Mahmoud, who was twelve at the time, helped him somewhat.

When they finished, my father placed wooden planks over the pit, then covered it with sheets of corrugated zinc, the same ones that had sheltered part of our yard like a makeshift arbor. I sensed my father's distress as he turned, searching for something. Then, to my astonishment, he began dismantling the kitchen door and laid it atop the pit, burying it there. I watched as my mother and Mahmoud climbed down through an opening that remained uncovered, vanishing into the darkness below. Only then did I grasp that the work was done.

Summoning my courage, I crept toward the opening and peered inside. What I saw was a dim underground space—a room unlike any I had known. I could not understand what was happening, but it was clear that we were bracing for something difficult, something far worse than the stormy nights we had endured.

No one took my hand anymore to lead me to the Egyptian army camp for our share of pistachio candy. My brother refused to go, again and again—a change that bewildered both me and Mohammed. I couldn't understand why. Neither did Hassan, though perhaps he knew our secret but was simply not part of it. I wasn't sure why he hadn't joined us before. But my cousin Ibrahim, who was close to my age and lived in the house next door, was in on it—he knew.



When Mohammed refused to go and take me along, I decided to visit my uncle's house and stay with Ibrahim. I pushed the door open and stepped into the room. My uncle was sitting there, his face a blur in my memory, holding a rifle and working on it. I thought to myself that perhaps I could do something similar with it. The rifle gripped my attention; my eyes remained fixed on it the entire time.

My uncle called me over and sat me beside him. He placed the rifle in my hands and spoke to me about it in words I could not understand. Then he patted my head, led me out of the room, and I left with Ibrahim, heading toward the outskirts of the camp to visit the nearby Egyptian army base.

When we arrived, everything had changed completely. That soldier was not waiting for us as usual, nor did he greet us with his familiar warmth. Something was wrong. The Egyptian soldiers had always welcomed us with kindness, but now they shouted at us to leave and go back to our mothers. We turned back, dragging our feet in disappointment, our hearts heavy with the loss of our usual pistachio treat. I could not understand what had changed.

The next day, my mother took some bedding from the house and spread it inside that pit. She carried down two or three jugs of water, some food, and then gathered all of us inside. Soon, my uncle's wife joined us with her children, Hassan and Ibrahim. I felt suffocated in that cramped space where we had been forced to stay for no reason I could comprehend. We had abandoned our home—its rooms, its courtyard, the streets and alleys of the neighborhood—and now we were trapped here against our will. Whenever I tried to push toward the opening, my mother would pull me back and make me sit down. From time to time, she handed me a piece of bread and a few olives.

As the sun faded and daylight vanished, darkness crept into the pit that had become our shelter. Fear seeped into our young hearts, and we began to cry and struggle to get out. My mother and my aunt held us back, their voices sharp with warning. "Children, there's a war outside! Don't you know what war means?"

At that moment, I did not know what war was. But I knew it was something terrifying—something unnatural, suffocating, and dark.

We pushed and struggled again, and again they stopped us. Our cries grew louder, and they tried in vain to calm us down. Then Mahmoud asked, "Shall I bring the lantern, Mama? Shall I fetch the light and light it?"

"Yes, Mahmoud," my mother replied.

Mahmoud rushed toward the entrance, but my mother's hand shot out, grabbing him before he could escape. "Don't go out, Mahmoud! Stay here, my son!" she pleaded, her voice filled with fear.

She seated him and left, only to return moments later with a kerosene lamp. She lit it, and the glow filled the space, bringing a sense of calm and reassurance. Sleep overcame me, just as it did my siblings and cousins, while my mother and my uncle's wife struggled against their exhaustion, only to be eventually overpowered by it.

The next day held nothing remarkable—we spent nearly the entire time in the trench. Our neighbor, the teacher Aisha, never let go of her radio. She made sure to stay close to the trench's opening so that the device could still catch the broadcast waves. She listened intently to the latest news updates and, after each bulletin, relayed what she heard to my mother and my uncle's wife. With each report, the air grew heavier with sorrow, and a veil of silence settled over us. My mother and my uncle's wife, burdened by grief, became less receptive to our voices and requests. Their hands, once gentle, now weighed heavily upon us as they demanded our silence.

The fiery speeches of Ahmad Said, the commentator from Sawt al-Arab in Cairo, once filled with promises of throwing the Jews into the sea and threats against the Zionist state, began to fade and lose their force. At the same time, our families' dreams of returning to the homes from which we had been uprooted started to collapse, like the sandcastles we, as children, had built while playing in the alleyways.

The greatest hope now was merely to return to the area where we had taken refuge—to see my uncle, who had been conscripted into the Army of Palestinian Liberation, come home safely to his family, and for my father, who had joined the popular resistance, to return to us unharmed. But with every new broadcast Aisha listened to, the atmosphere grew more suffocating, anxiety deepened, and hands rose more frequently in prayer, pleading for safety and the return of our loved ones.

Meanwhile, the sound of explosions grew louder, closer, and more relentless.

My mother would step out of the trench every now and then, disappearing for a few moments inside the house before returning. Sometimes, she came back with something for us to eat or cover ourselves with; other times, she merely returned to reassure my uncle's wife about the fate of my grandfather, who had stubbornly refused to join us in the trench, choosing instead to remain in his room inside the house. At first, he clung to the hope of returning to our home and fields in al-Faluja, convinced that no real danger threatened us. He believed that the danger was upon the Jews, who would soon be crushed under the boots of the advancing Arab armies. But as the new reality of the battle became painfully clear—that the tides were not turning in our favor—he refused to come down. Life had lost its taste, its meaning. He asked, How long will we continue to hide and flee from our fate? At what point do we stop running? Life and death had become two sides of the same coin. Darkness fell once again, and we drifted into sleep, only to be jolted awake repeatedly by the deafening roar of explosions—each one louder, more violent than the last. By the next morning, the bombings had escalated in intensity, their thunderous echoes shaking the earth beneath us. That day, nothing stood out—nothing, except for a single incident. A sudden commotion erupted. A great crowd surged forward, shouting in alarm:

"Spy! Spy!"

It was clear that they were chasing that spy—he had something like a vehicle with wheels or something similar—and that people were in pursuit of it. From my mother's conversation with my aunt's wife and Mrs. Aisha, I understood that this spy had some connection to the Jews.

The explosions grew more intense and powerful, drawing ever closer. It became evident that they had begun to strike the western houses. With each new explosion, fear, screaming, and wailing escalated, despite all attempts at reassurance. Every now and then, Aisha would approach the opening of the trench, listening for news and updating my mother and aunt's wife on the latest developments. After several days of this, my mother could no longer leave the house as she had in the first two days.

Aisha listened to the news bulletin, and as she did, she broke into sobs and wails. Her legs could no longer support her, and she collapsed, mumbling, "The Jews have occupied the land." A heavy silence followed, broken only by the anguished cries of my little sister, Maryam, who screamed in pain at what was happening. Her cries unraveled us, and soon we were all weeping along with our mothers.

The sound of shelling and explosions ceased, leaving only sporadic bursts of gunfire. As evening approached, even those faded, giving way to silence. That night, voices of the neighbors began to rise as they emerged from the trenches where they had been hiding or from the homes they had remained in throughout the ordeal. Aisha stepped outside to survey the situation, then returned shortly, saying, "The war is over... come out."

My mother and aunt's wife stepped out first, then called us to follow. For the first time in days, we inhaled fresh air, though it was thick with the scent of gunpowder and the dust of the houses that had crumbled around us. Before my mother pulled me toward the house, I caught a glimpse of the devastation in every direction. The bombing had struck many of our neighbors' homes. Ours, however, remained unscathed.

As we entered, my grandfather took us into his arms, kissing each of us one by one, murmuring prayers of gratitude for our safety and supplications for our fathers' protection and their swift return.

That night, my aunt's wife and her two sons stayed with us. My father and uncle did not return, and it seemed it would be a long time before they did.

By morning, life began to stir in the camp's alleys. Neighbors searched for their children, relatives, and friends, checking on one another and thanking God for their survival. Others sought news of the fate of those whose homes had been hit by shells, reduced to ruins or left in partial destruction.

There were only a few deaths in the neighborhood, as most of its residents had fled—some to the seashore, others to the orchards and open fields nearby, while some sought refuge in the trenches they had previously dug.

The occupation forces had faced fierce resistance in one area, forcing them to withdraw. Shortly afterward, a convoy of tanks and military jeeps appeared, flying Egyptian flags. The resistance fighters rejoiced, believing that reinforcements had arrived to support them. They emerged from their hiding places and trenches, firing their weapons into the air in celebration, and gathered to welcome the approaching forces. But as the convoy drew nearer, it suddenly unleashed a barrage of gunfire upon them, cutting them down where they stood. Then, the Egyptian flags were lowered, replaced by Israeli ones.

Meanwhile, people had swarmed the deserted schools that had served as Egyptian military camps before the war, each seizing whatever remained. One carried a chair, another a table, a third a sack of grain, and yet another took kitchen utensils. Rather than leaving the spoils to the occupation soldiers, the people saw themselves as the rightful heirs to what the Egyptian army had abandoned. Some, caught up in the chaos, pried open the doors of nearby shops, looting goods and supplies. Others, more focused, collected the weapons and ammunition left behind in the camps. This state of disorder persisted for several days, with each person preoccupied with their own priorities and concerns.

One morning, shortly before noon, the distant blare of loudspeakers echoed through the streets, announcing in broken Arabic a strict curfew: everyone was to remain indoors, and anyone caught outside risked death. Military jeeps, equipped with speakers, roamed the area, repeating the warning. Soon after, another announcement followed, ordering all men over the age of eighteen to gather at the nearby school. Those who disobeyed, the voice declared, would be putting their lives in grave danger.

My father and uncle never returned, and my eldest brother, Mahmoud, was still too young to be summoned. As for my grandfather, when he stepped outside toward the school, a soldier shouted at him to go back home, seeing his frailty and old age. He turned away, murmuring in frustration.

Not long after, large groups of occupation soldiers stormed the neighborhood, moving in squads with rifles raised, searching every house for any men who had failed to report to the school. When they found any, they shot them on sight—without hesitation.



The men of the neighborhood gathered in the nearby school, where soldiers had seated them on the ground in tightly packed rows. The soldiers surrounded them from all sides, rifles raised and aimed at them.

Once the task of gathering the men was complete, a covered military jeep arrived at the school. From it emerged a man dressed in civilian clothing, yet clearly part of the occupying forces. The soldiers obeyed him in a striking manner, following his every command with precision. He began directing the men, ordering them to rise one by one and walk past the newly arrived jeep. The men obeyed, each stepping forward at the indicated signal.

From time to time, the wail of a siren would pierce the air as one of the neighborhood men passed. At that moment, the soldiers would lunge at him with force, seizing him violently and dragging him away with humiliation to a heavily guarded area at the back of the school. The security there was even tighter than in the main courtyard.

It soon became evident that whoever passed and triggered the siren was doomed—marked as a dangerous man. The process continued until the last of the men had walked past. Occasionally, the siren would sound, and another man would be taken. Those who passed without hearing the ominous wail were directed to sit on the far side of the courtyard.

When the task was finished, the officer in civilian clothing stood before the seated men and began speaking to them in Arabic. His accent was heavy, but his words were clear. He introduced himself as "Abu Al-Deeb," an Israeli intelligence officer in charge of the area. He then launched into a lengthy speech about the new reality after the Arabs' defeat, emphasizing that he wanted order and stability. He warned that anyone who disturbed the peace would face execution or imprisonment. His office, he declared, was open to anyone who needed "services" from the Israeli Defense Forces.

When he finished, he ordered the men to leave one by one, quietly and without commotion. The men rose and slipped away from the school, each feeling as if he had narrowly escaped certain death. They had separated nearly a hundred men from the neighborhood.

The officer drove the same jeep he had arrived in to the square where the men had been gathered. He ordered them to stand, one by one, and pass again in front of the vehicle. Each time the horn blared, the passing man was seized once more and lined up against the nearby wall, his face turned toward it, while the others sat at the edge of the square.

Fifteen men were selected from the group and placed against the wall. The officer gave his orders, and several soldiers took their positions opposite them. They raised their rifles, knelt on one knee, took aim, and fired. The men collapsed, lifeless.

As for the others, sweat poured from their bodies as their hands were bound behind their backs and their eyes blindfolded. They were loaded onto a bus that sped toward the Egyptian border. The soldiers accompanying them ordered them to cross into Egypt, warning that anyone who hesitated or turned back would be shot dead.



## Chapter Two

Days passed, yet my father and uncle did not return, nor did we receive any news of them. My grandfather, my mother, and my uncle's wife left no one unasked—whoever might know something about their fate was questioned, but to no avail. Our anguish was shared by many of our neighbors, for the missing—whether from the Palestinian Liberation Army or the ranks of the popular resistance—were numerous. The neighborhood, like all the areas in the West Bank and Gaza, was drowning in despair, frustration, and chaos, and people had no idea what fate had in store for them.

Every morning, my grandfather would take up his cane and go out, searching for his sons, asking both those who knew and those who did not, until exhaustion wore him down. My mother and my uncle's wife—who had not left our home for theirs since the war ended—would sit by the door, waiting for his return, yearning for any news. Fear and anxiety over their husbands' unknown fate consumed them. My siblings, cousins, and I all understood what was happening to some extent, but I was still too young to grasp the full reality of what was unfolding around me. Overwhelmed by their worries, my mother and uncle's wife could not tend to us as they once did, so my eldest sister, Fatima, took on some of the responsibility—preparing whatever food she could from time to time and maintaining the basic cleanliness we could not do without.

One evening, as the sun set—around the time my grandfather was expected to return from his relentless search—my mother opened the door, her eyes scanning the street for his arrival. Soon, his frail figure appeared in the distance, leaning heavily on his cane, his steps dragging as though burdened by the weight of the news he carried. My mother, sensing something, cried out to my eldest brother, Mahmoud, urging him to run and support his grandfather. Mahmoud rushed toward him, searching his face, which was streaked with silent tears. He tried to coax a single word from his lips, but my grandfather remained silent all the way home.

As he reached our doorstep, he leaned against the wall, his legs barely holding him up. He took a single step inside before his body gave way. My mother and uncle's wife sprang up, catching him before he collapsed, their voices trembling as they pleaded, "What is it? What have you learned? What news do you bring?" But my grandfather could neither speak nor move. Those in the house who could assist hurried to lift him inside, settling him on his mattress. We all gathered around, holding our breath, waiting for a single word to escape his lips.

My mother handed him the clay pitcher, but he was too weak to lift it. She helped him raise it to his lips, and he sipped a few drops of water.

His gaze lingered more on my uncle's wife than on anyone else, a silent indication that the news he carried concerned my uncle more than my father. Her anxiety deepened, and she pleaded desperately, "What happened, Abu Ibrahim? What news do you bring? Please, tell me it's good."

Tears welled up in my grandfather's eyes as he struggled to hold himself together, but his composure faltered, and the tears fell. My uncle's wife erupted into sobs, understanding what he could not bring himself to say. She cried out in anguish, "Is Mahmoud dead?"

My grandfather nodded.

A wail tore from her throat as she clutched at her hair, her grief consuming her. My mother, too, began to weep, though she remained steadier, trying to console my uncle's wife, who kept repeating, "Mahmoud is dead... Mahmoud is dead."

"He did not die, Umm Hassan. He was martyred."

My cousins wept, my brothers and sisters wept—everyone in the house was crying. I stood frozen in place, unable to grasp what was happening. Then came a knock at the door. My brother Mahmoud went to answer it. A group of neighbors had heard the wailing and rushed over to learn what had happened and share in our sorrow. The room filled with women, their feet shuffling around me as I stood lost amid the chaos. The cries and lamentations rose, echoing through the house.

Days passed, yet there was still no word of my father's fate. The last people to see him swore he had been alive when the city fell to the Jewish forces—he and a group of resistance fighters had withdrawn southward. That was all we knew, and no new information had surfaced.

After my uncle's mourning period ended, my grandfather resumed his search, desperate for any news of my father. But his efforts yielded nothing. As more time passed, he reached a painful conclusion—he had no choice but to wait. The search had become futile. If news were to come, it would come on its own. My father knew where we were, but we had no idea where he was.

And so, life had to resume its course. Everyone had to adapt to the new reality.

The schools reopened, and my siblings, my sisters, and my eldest cousin returned to their studies. Each morning, my mother and my uncle's wife would rise to prepare them for school, sending them off together. I remained at home with my infant sister and my young cousin, Ibrahim. As the day wore on, my grandfather would leave the house, sometimes returning with a handful of vegetables—a few tomatoes, a bunch of spinach, some potatoes, or an eggplant. My mother or my uncle's wife would cook whatever he managed to bring, ensuring a meal was ready when the children returned from school.



Every morning, my mother or my uncle's wife would carry the clay water jars and the iron water heater, taking them to place in line among similar vessels in front of the water tap that the Relief Agency had installed in the neighborhood square. Water would flow for only two or three hours a day, and those who managed to reach their turn would fill their containers, while those who didn't had to wait until the next day or borrow some water from their neighbors. Many times, a woman who had failed to wake up early enough to secure a good spot in line would try to sneak her vessel ahead of the others. When caught, a quarrel would break out—first, a shouting match over whose turn it was, then escalating to shoving, hair-pulling, and hurling insults. Sometimes, it even led to the breaking of fragile clay jars.

Near the tap, the ground was always covered with shards of pottery. When my brothers and the neighborhood boys returned from school and finished their lunch, they would gather outside to play the game of Seven Shards. They would collect pieces of broken pottery from around the tap and stack them into a tower of seven circular pieces, each smaller than the one below it. Then, they would take a ball made of fabric—stitched together from old socks that we received from the clothing distributions held twice a year by the Relief Agency. The ball, stuffed with scraps of cloth and sewn tightly, fit perfectly in one's hand.

The boys divided into two teams. A player from one team would stand a few meters away from the stacked shards and throw the ball, trying to knock them down. If he failed, a player from the other team would take his turn. If he succeeded, he and his teammates would immediately scatter, while the opposing team's player at the center would grab the ball and start throwing it at them, trying to hit one. If he managed to strike a player, his team would take their turn at knocking down the stack. If he missed, he would wait for his teammates to return the ball to him. Meanwhile, the first team would rush to rebuild the stack. If they succeeded, they got to continue playing. But if they saw the ball flying back toward them before they finished, they would dash away again, hoping to avoid being hit—thus keeping the game alive.

As for the girls, they played Hopscotch. They would find a smooth, flat piece of tile or stone and draw three consecutive squares on the ground, each about a meter long and wide, ending with a circle at the top of the third square.

The girl throws the stone into the first square and jumps into it, balancing on one foot. She then strikes the stone with the tip of her foot, sending it into the second square, and hops after it, still on one foot. She kicks the stone into the third square, hops to it, then strikes it toward the circle and jumps in, where she is finally allowed to land on both feet. From there, she kicks the stone back to the third square, hops toward it on one foot, and so on. If she stumbles or steps on one of the lines, she loses, and it becomes her competitor's turn. Sometimes, the girls play jump rope instead.

Sometimes, the boys play "Arabs and Jews." They divide into two teams—one for the Arabs and one for the Jews—each carrying wooden sticks fashioned into rifles, pretending to fire at one another while shouting, Bang! I shot you! The other responds, No, I shot you first! Often, the game turns into an argument over who "shot" whom first. Most of the time, though, the Arabs' team is expected to win because the older and stronger boys choose the teams, ensuring that they are always on the Arabs' side.

Once a month, my grandfather would go to the ration center, taking with him the two insurance cards—ours and my uncle's. He would be gone until the afternoon, then return alongside other men and women from the neighborhood, leading a cart pulled by a donkey, loaded with sacks of flour, jugs of ghee or cooking oil, and a few baskets containing small bags of legumes—chickpeas, lentils, and the like. When the cart arrived in front of our house, children would scramble to climb onto it. The cart driver would wave his stick at them, shouting for them to get down, and they would scatter. My grandfather would point to our supplies, which the driver would then unload into the house. Afterward, my grandfather would pull out a small cloth pouch from his pocket, take out a few coins, and hand them to the driver, who would accept them gratefully, slip them into his own pouch, and say, May God bless you. Then, he would tug at his donkey's reins and continue on his way, while the children ran after the cart, only to be scolded and chased away by the older folk.

Every now and then, my mother would take my baby sister, Maryam, to the health clinic—the Swedish clinic—on the edge of the camp. There, in the maternal and child care unit, she would be examined and weighed, along with many other children brought by their mothers. The women would gather in the waiting hall, sitting on long wooden benches painted white, while others sat on the floor, engaging in conversation.

Each woman would confide in the others about her troubles and concerns, sharing her complaints with them, and in turn, they would comfort one another, realizing that the burdens they carried were no lighter than their own. My mother often took me along on her visits to Al-Suwaidi. At the entrance, a few street vendors stood selling various sweets they had made to earn a living for their children. I would tug at my mother's dress, pleading for a piece of namoura (a traditional semolina dessert). Relenting to my persistence, she would eventually buy me what I wanted, despite my father's prolonged absence and my grandfather's inability to work, as job opportunities were scarce at the time, even for the young and strong. Yet, compared to our neighbors, our financial situation was relatively stable. I would occasionally see some money with my grandfather or my mother, though I never knew exactly where it came from. Before the war, I sometimes noticed gold bracelets on my mother's wrists, but since the war began, I had never seen them again.

My uncle Saleh visited us from time to time. He would give my mother some money and hand a few coins to whoever was present, whether one of us or one of my cousins. We would then rush excitedly to buy sweets from Abu Jaber's nearby shop. My uncle was a fortunate man; he owned a textile factory equipped with a few electric weaving machines he had brought from Egypt before the occupation of the region. Even after the occupation, the factory continued to operate, producing substantial quantities of fabric, which he sold to textile merchants in the area. After the 1967 war, movement between the West Bank and Gaza gradually resumed, and he began selling some of his fabric in the southern West Bank, particularly in Hebron. Since he was financially well-off, he made sure to give my mother a share of his earnings from time to time. She would try to refuse, but he would swear by it, feigning displeasure, and say, "If I don't help you, then who will? How will your children survive?" Eventually, she would accept, lowering her head as tears streamed down her cheeks. He would then chide her, saying, "Every time, you cry!"

My uncle's wife and her children lived with us almost entirely, sharing our bread and water. My grandfather asked my brother Mahmoud and my cousin Hassan to demolish part of the wall separating our house from my uncle's, merging the two homes into one while maintaining some privacy. My uncle's wife's family was in a dire situation and unable to support her in any way after she lost her husband and her sole provider. Over time, they began pressuring her to remarry. Since her husband had passed away, they saw no reason for her to remain a widow. But she refused, fearing for her children's future. They tried to persuade her, assuring her that their grandfather and her husband's family would take care of them and that they would also try to help. Still, they insisted that she should remarry—she was young, and the future lay ahead of her. She should not let it slip away.

Time and the passing years devour youth, leaving them stranded as the train of life departs without them. Thus, the days, months, and years carried us forward.

One time, my uncle visited us, and as he reached into his pocket to hand my mother the money he usually gave her, she adamantly refused to accept it. Despite all his attempts, he could not persuade her to take it. So, he resorted to a clever ruse—he convinced her that he did not want to hire a new worker for cleaning and organizing the factory, as Mahmoud and Hassan had grown into young men and were now capable of taking on the job. He told her he preferred to employ them rather than hire a stranger, and that they were more deserving of the wages. He assured her that this payment was merely an advance on their monthly earnings.

Only then did she agree to take the money, but on one condition—that they begin working the very next day. And so, Mahmoud and Hassan took on the responsibility of supporting the family. Every day, they returned from school at noon, set down their cloth schoolbags, and sat for lunch with the rest of the family—my siblings, my cousins, and me. Then, my mother would begin her long lecture, instructing them on how to walk safely to the factory, how to work diligently, how to clean properly, and how to conduct themselves. She would then pat their shoulders, walk them a few extra steps beyond the door, and send them off. Near sunset, she would welcome them back as if they were triumphant warriors returning from battle.

Thus, things continued as my uncle handed my mother the same sum he used to give her before—now disguised as Mahmoud and Hassan’s wages—though, in reality, they did little at the factory beyond their daily visits.

Many times, I would wake at dawn to the sound of my grandfather reciting his familiar prayers as he performed ablution. I found great comfort in his voice, in those gentle supplications, and in the way he recited Al-Fatiha, followed by verses from the Quran during his two rak’ahs of the Fajr prayer. I memorized, through repetition, his whispered supplication: “O Allah, guide me among those whom You have guided...”

My grandfather could not perform the Fajr prayer at the mosque, for at that hour, the curfew was still in effect. Anyone who stepped outside risked death at the hands of the occupation patrols roaming the streets of the camp, or lurking in the shadows. The curfew was imposed daily from 7 p.m. until 5 a.m. As for the other prayers, my grandfather would usually perform them at the mosque—unless something urgent prevented him, such as going out to fetch supplies or a day when curfew was enforced.



The mosque in the camp resembled a large room roofed with corrugated metal, featuring a few windows and a small minaret that the muezzin would ascend via stone steps to announce the call to prayer with his loud voice. At the mosque's entrance, there was a single latrine and a few clay pitchers for ablution and drinking. The floor of the mosque was covered with old, worn mats or carpets, and at the front stood a small pulpit made of several wooden steps.

My grandfather often took me with him to the mosque just before the noon prayer, holding my hand, which seemed to drown in his large one. Despite his carefulness in walking slowly and being over seventy years old, I found myself having to run behind him as he nearly dragged me along. We would pray in the mosque before the call to prayer, and I would stand next to my grandfather, mimicking him as best as I could. I would sit beside him cross-legged, resting my head in his hands like well-behaved boys. Sheikh Hamid would come, pulling a watch from a pocket near his chest, glancing at it, and as the time for the call approached, he would climb the minaret and announce the call to prayer. I would begin to look around joyfully, eager to hear that sweet voice. Sheikh Hamid would finish the call and descend from the minaret, and we would perform the Sunnah prayers. I stood beside my grandfather, imitating him as best as I could, and a few elders from the camp would arrive to perform the noon prayer together, their number barely exceeding ten, all of them elderly except for me and one or two other children brought by their grandfathers.

It seemed that my grandfather and mother had resigned themselves to the reality regarding my father's unknown fate, as their conversations about him had begun to dwindle and became rare. They seemed to have realized that they had to wait since they had no alternative (there was nothing they could do).

The only new development in our home was that my uncle's wife had been forced to remarry, which was not an easy matter. He would spend the night at her place, and my mother would fulfill her duties towards them just as she would for each of my siblings. However, there was no doubt that this did not compensate for the loss of a father and a mother, but it eased the burden somewhat. Thus, the days passed, marked by the sound of my grandfather performing ablution and praying at dawn, after which my mother would wake my siblings, my cousins, and my cousin's child, preparing them for school as they set off.

My grandfather would go to the market, my mother would begin tidying the house, and I would sit next to my little sister Mariam, fearful that she might wake up and start crying while my mother was busy arranging the house. My grandfather would return alone, and my siblings and cousins would come back from school, at which point my mother would prepare lunch for us, or we would eat together.

Then my mother would begin her usual advice to my brothers Mahmoud and Hassan, sending them off to the door as they headed to work at my uncle's factory. We would go out to play "Arabs and Jews" or "Seven Shuqafat," while the girls played "Al-Hajla" until evening approached, when Mahmoud and Hassan would return from the factory. Thus, life flowed in its routine without any changes.

One evening, Mahmoud and Hassan did not return from the factory as usual; they were delayed and did not come home alone but with my uncle Saleh. As always, we greeted each other warmly, and he hugged each of us, distributing coins to everyone. Then he began talking to my mother about my aunt Fathiya, as he had received a proposal for her hand in marriage. The suitors were a group my uncle knew well from the West Bank, a small town in the Hebron district, who traded in fabrics and came to buy the cloth produced by my uncle. Having known them well, he wanted my mother's opinion on the matter. My mother clarified that the decision was his, and as long as Fathiya was agreeable and he was also in favor and knew the suitors, then may it be blessed. During this conversation, my mother got up and left us with my uncle, who inquired about our news, asking about each of us in school and other matters.

A little later, she returned with a teapot of tea, and my uncle joined us for tea. Then he stood to leave. My mother tried to persuade him to stay the night, but he declined, saying, "You know I can't stay overnight, as I only have daughters." My mother then prayed for him, saying, "May God compensate you, Saleh, with goodness." My uncle left, saying, "I'll inform the group of your approval, and when they tell me the date for the engagement, I will let you know so you can come along with Haj Abu Ibrahim and the children."

The following day, early in the morning, shortly after my grandfather finished his prayer, he began to listen to the loudspeakers mounted on military jeeps announcing in broken Arabic the imposition of a curfew until further notice: "Hello, hello... Curfew is in effect until further notice. Anyone who violates this risks death." The announcement repeated several times. My mother said to everyone, "There are no schools today, children, and no one is allowed to leave the house." She then went to the other room to ensure that my grandfather and my cousins Hassan and Ibrahim were aware of the situation. We stayed indoors, the door remained closed all day, and every time one of us approached the door, my mother would shout at him not to open it, threatening to hit him if he did.

We heard again and again the announcement of the curfew. My siblings and I were forced to play inside the house, and that day, my mother prepared “Baysarah” for lunch, a dish made from crushed fava beans with dried molokhia. My siblings, my cousins, and I sat studying from our schoolbooks, while I watched them, glancing at their pages. In the evening, we once again heard the loudspeakers confirming the curfew and warning that anyone who violated it would be at risk.

The next morning, after the sound of my grandfather’s prayers and supplications, it wasn’t long before the loudspeakers announced the end of the curfew, effective from five o’clock. My mother woke everyone up and prepared them for school, and things proceeded as usual.

The new development that day was that we learned the reason behind the curfew from the previous day. Someone had thrown a hand grenade at an occupation patrol, which exploded and injured the soldiers in the jeep, leading them to open fire randomly on the people, resulting in many injuries.



## Chapter Three

On Friday, my mother dressed us in the best clothes we had, which she had sewn anew from the rations we had received, in preparation for visiting my uncle's house to see my aunt and congratulate her on her upcoming engagement. Then, she took the seven of us and walked with us for long hours, beyond the borders of the camp, along one of the main roads where military and civilian jeeps occasionally passed by. Soldiers, rifles in hand, aimed at the passersby from the slow-moving vehicles. We walked for a long time until we reached my uncle Saleh's house. His home was far better than ours; unlike ours, which was roofed with tiles, his was built with concrete, its floor paved with tiles, and it had electricity.

My brother Mahmoud went ahead and knocked on the door. My cousin, Wardah, opened it and immediately cried out, "It's my aunt and her children!" She greeted us warmly, and we stepped inside, where my uncle, my aunt, my uncle's wife, and his second daughter, Suad, had all come to the hallway to welcome us.

My aunt kissed each of us in turn. My mother, my brothers, and my sisters congratulated her on the engagement that would soon take place, and they sat talking while we busied ourselves with playing, chasing one another around. Before evening fell, we returned home.

A few days later, when Mahmoud and Hassan returned from working at my uncle's factory, they told my mother that my uncle had asked them to inform her that the family would be coming to hold Aunt Fathiya's marriage contract the following Friday. Once again, my mother prepared us as she had the previous Friday. We went to my uncle's house in the afternoon. Three cars arrived, carrying men and women who stepped out and entered my uncle's house. All of us children whispered among ourselves, pointing at a young man with a light brown complexion and a faint mustache—"That's the groom," we murmured.

The men gathered in the house's main hall, with the sheikh seated among them, his red tarboosh on his head. The women sat in one of the rooms, while we, restless as ever, ran back and forth between the rooms and outside, clambering over the cars. The men were occupied with the sheikh, who was officiating the marriage, while the women were busy with Aunt Fathiya, the bride. One thing we would never forget was how much baklava we ate that day—endlessly, without restraint—until our mother grew fearful that we might fall ill. Finally, they agreed on the arrangements to take the bride.



After about a month, in the pitch-black darkness of the night, silence and stillness cloaked the wretched, impoverished homes of the camp. No sounds could be heard except the distant barking of a dog or the meowing of a cat searching for her kitten, which had been taken by a boy to raise in his house, hoping that when it grew up, it would hunt the mice that plagued the family.

In the narrow, intertwined alleys of the camp, despite the prevailing curfew and the lurking dangers, Abu Hatem moved like a cat, slipping through the alleys with agility, grace, and quietude. Each time he needed to round a corner, he paused, vigilant, scanning for any lurking or moving threat. Only when he was certain the area was clear did he continue his swift, fluid movement.

Abu Hatem was a tall, agile man with a strong build. He covered his head with a keffiyeh, wrapping it around his face so that only his eyes were visible. He had once been a shawiish (sergeant) in the Palestinian Liberation Army during the Egyptian administration of Gaza. He had fought with extraordinary valor in the war of '67, but what could he and a handful of brave men do in a battle that was lost from the start?

He slipped through the streets and alleys of the camp, knowing his way well. He stopped briefly to scan his surroundings before heading toward the window of one of the houses. He knocked lightly—three taps, then one, then two.

Yes, this was real.

Abu Yusuf stood by the window, pressing his head close to it, and whispered in a barely audible voice, “Who’s there?”

A hushed voice replied, “Abu Hatem.”

Muttering in disbelief, Abu Yusuf said, “Impossible... It can’t be.”

A voice answered softly, “It is possible, Abu Yusuf, it is.”

Still dazed, Abu Yusuf murmured, “I’ll open the door.”

Abu Hatem slipped inside as Abu Yusuf quickly shut the door behind him. In an instant, they threw themselves into each other’s arms.

Abu Yusuf, still murmuring in disbelief, said, “I can’t believe it... Thank God you’re safe, Abu Hatem.”

Umm Yusuf had woken up. She covered her head and stepped out of the room. She, too, approached, whispering, “Thank God for your safety, Abu Hatem. Come in, my brother, come in.”

Abu Yusuf and Abu Hatem entered the room as Umm Yusuf headed toward the kitchen.

Abu Hatem called out, “Don’t prepare food or tea, and don’t light the stove.”

Umm Yusuf turned back, puzzled. “What’s wrong, Abu Hatem? Have you come to a house of beggars?”

Abu Hatem smiled faintly and whispered, “May you and your kindness be safe, but I’m neither hungry nor do I want the sound of the stove to be heard.”<sup>1</sup>

May you and your kindness be safe.

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<sup>1</sup> The Stove – The Primus

Umm Yusuf turned, whispering, "Alright, I'll bring you some bread and olives." Abu Hatem smiled, whispering, "Alright, I knew you wouldn't let me leave without eating at your house, Alright, Umm Yusuf," Abu Yusuf smiled the entire time. Abu Hatem and Abu Yusuf began whispering to each other. Abu Yusuf asked him, "Where have you been? I honestly thought you had been martyred or had gone to Egypt." Abu Hatem told him that he had been wounded in the clashes in the central camp areas. He had crawled to one of the vehicles, where a Bedouin family found him. They took him in, treated his wounds, fed him, and hid him until he recovered. Umm Yusuf entered, greeting them in a whisper, and they returned her greeting. She placed a woven tray with a few loaves of bread, a bowl of olives, and beside it, a clay jug of water. Then, she left the room to sit in the children's room, where the light of a kerosene lamp swayed joyfully, illuminating the small space roofed with gray tiles. Meanwhile, Abu Hatem and Abu Yusuf leaned in, each placing his mouth near the other's ear, then switching positions. Abu Yusuf asked, "Are any of the young men still alive?"

Abu Hatem replied, "Yes, many. Abu Maher and I are in Khan Yunis, Abu Saqr is in Rafah, and Abu Jihad is in the central camps. I saw them personally and agreed with them to resume the resistance," Abu Yusuf leaned in closer to Abu Hatem's ear and whispered, "What about the Mukhtar?"

Abu Hatem leaned in and whispered back, "I heard he is still alive and moving through the eastern groves of Shuja'iyya and Zeitoun. I'm trying to find him, and I may locate him within days. The important thing is that we must start organizing our efforts so that the resistance begins across the entire sector at once. The country is fine, Abu Yusuf, the country is fine. The young men are ready and prepared; they just need someone to arrange things and spark the movement. We must all meet and organize everything next Friday morning. Salih Al-Mahmoud is marrying off his sister, and her groom will take her to Hebron. Their house will be empty that night. I agreed with him to leave the key under the doorstep. The group will meet there to plan everything and begin operations as soon as possible, God willing. You know Salih's house. On Friday after dinner, we meet there. If anyone is delayed, they should knock on the window with the same pattern." All the while, Abu Hatem had been taking small bites, and with each bite, he ate an olive, insistently sucking on the pit in a distinctive way—a gesture that revealed his deep affection for the owner of this house and his longing for Umm Yusuf's cooking.

Friday We prepared ourselves from the morning, dressing in our finest clothes, and set off to my uncle Saleh's house. Despite our early arrival, we found his home bustling with people, movement, and wedding preparations. We busied ourselves with playing, while my sisters, along with my uncle's daughters and other girls, engaged in drumming, singing, and dancing. Mahmoud and Hassan took care of tasks like arranging the chairs and sprinkling water over the courtyard in front of my uncle's house to keep the dust from rising. My mother, my uncle's wife, and other women were occupied with preparing the bride and organizing her clothing trunk, while my uncle rushed back and forth, overwhelmed with a thousand things at once. As the day went on, more people gathered, and the rhythmic beats of the drum became more coordinated, led by an older girl from my aunt's neighbors and her friends. Shortly after, several cars and a bus arrived, carrying members of the groom's family. The vehicles came to a stop, and the passengers stepped out, led by my aunt's groom, Abdel Fattah. The air filled with the familiar sounds of drumming and singing, but in a distinctively coastal dialect. The guests proceeded towards the house, where my uncle and a group of men emerged to welcome them. The men greeted each other with handshakes and embraces, while the women exchanged kisses before entering the hall inside. The men remained in the courtyard, where trays of baklava were passed around. My brother Mahmoud, ever the most energetic, took the lead in distributing them, along with glasses of red juice to the guests, all while the sound of drumming and the women's singing echoed continuously. This went on for about an hour, with my uncle engaged in conversation with the groom and his father, joined by other men I did not recognize. Then, my uncle stepped inside, and everyone readied themselves as the groom and his father stood at the door. With the beat of the drum and the singing rising, my uncle reappeared, holding the arm of my aunt Fathiya. She was dressed in a white gown, a delicate white veil draped over her head, enhancing her beauty until she looked like a full moon in its prime. She walked slowly, gracefully, toward the entrance, where the groom took her arm amid the joyful ululations of the women. The newlyweds made their way to one of the cars, followed by the crowd. My mother stayed close to my uncle the entire time, while my uncle's wife stood beside her. The bride and groom entered their decorated car as men and women started boarding the vehicles and the bus. My mother turned, looking for Mahmoud, calling out to him urgently, "Take your siblings back home, and you stay with them and your grandfather. I will take your sisters with me and return to you tomorrow, God willing. Everything is prepared at home; you won't need anything until I come back. Watch over your grandfather and your cousins. Lock the door before curfew and do not open it for any reason until sunrise." Mahmoud nodded, confirming his understanding of his role as always, quick to grasp and execute my mother's instructions. Fatima carried Maryam in her arms. My mother, along with my uncle's wife, my sisters, and my uncle's daughters, got into one of the cars. Mahmoud gathered us near our grandfather, who stood leaning on his cane.

After everyone had gotten into the cars, my uncle and the groom's father were busy organizing matters. My uncle excused himself to return home and lock up, asking them to wait a little. He rushed back, grabbed a bag from the kitchen, and placed it in the guest room before locking the front door. As he did, something slipped from his hand, and he bent down to retrieve it, secretly hiding the house key beneath the threshold. Then he hurried back, got into the car, and the convoy set off, while the sound of the drum and the women's singing still echoed in the air until they vanished from sight. We then returned home with my grandfather.

We arrived just before sunset, exhausted from a day filled with play, feasting, and joy. Mahmoud secured the door tightly, and we all sank into deep sleep.

Night cast its black veil over Gaza, drowning it in a sea of darkness where one could hardly see their own fingers. Occupation patrols roamed the city's main streets, and loudspeakers announced the beginning of curfew. Then, a heavy silence settled over everything, broken only by the occasional hum of patrol vehicles asserting their presence and maintaining "security."

With quiet resolve, seven men stealthily approached my uncle's house. Retrieving the key from beneath the threshold, they slipped inside without turning on the light. Once they were all in, they drew the curtains and layered blankets over the windows to ensure no beam of light would escape. Then, they switched on the lamp. Abu Hatem spotted the bag my uncle had left and opened it, finding it filled with an assortment of food and sweets. He murmured, "Saleh, you are noble indeed—generous even when away from home."

The men sat in a tight circle, whispering in hushed tones for hours deep into the night. Then, they took turns keeping watch while the others slept. As dawn approached, they began slipping out of the house one by one. The last to leave was Abu Hatem, who locked the door behind him and placed the key back under the threshold. They set off with God's blessing, softly reciting:

**((“And We placed a barrier before them and a barrier behind them, and We covered them so they could not see.”))<sup>2</sup>**

I woke to the sound of my grandfather performing the Fajr prayer. Mahmoud had risen early to play the role of our mother, waking up my two brothers, Hassan and Muhammad, as well as my cousins, Hassan and Ibrahim. He prepared breakfast for them before they all headed off to school. Only my grandfather and I remained in the house.

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<sup>2</sup> Surah Ya-Sin,(9).



The summer vacation came, and my mother enrolled me in school. I began preparing to go there in just a few days. She bought me a new pair of shoes—well, new to me—though they were second-hand, sold on the stalls for used shoes in the camp market. With a bit of paint, they looked as if they had just come out of the factory. I really liked the red color, and my grandfather liked them very much too. My mother made me a small bag from old clothes that were no longer wearable, and soon I had everything I needed for school, especially what my brothers, sisters, and cousins had told me about it—the morning assembly, the classrooms, the teachers, and the break time between classes.

Before the summer vacation ended, one of the resistance fighters ambushed an army patrol in one of the alleys overlooking the main street, where the patrols usually passed. As they approached, he threw a grenade at them, which exploded and injured several soldiers in a jeep. The jeep came to a halt after crashing into a nearby wall, and the soldiers' cries and screams filled the air. Once those inside regained their senses, they began firing at everything on the street. Immediately, reinforcements arrived, and loudspeakers announced a curfew, warning that violators would be punished. People started to enter their homes, and then soldiers rushed into the camp's outskirts, brutally beating men, women, and children with batons.

The loudspeakers called on men aged 18 to 60 to come out to school as usual. Once the announcements stopped, voices rose in protest, urging everyone not to leave, explaining that they could not enter the camp because the resistance fighters filled it and were prepared. Indeed, only the men from the outskirts of the neighborhood, where the occupation forces faced little risk, went to school. Whenever the soldiers attempted to enter the camp, they were met with gunfire from the small, winding alleys, forcing them to retreat while running and shouting.

Those who went to school endured double the beatings and insults before being allowed to return to the camp. The curfew lasted a full week, during which we lived on bean soup, lentils, fava beans, and olives. Although mixed with fear, it was some of the tastiest food we had eaten since the occupation began. Everyone felt a sense of pride under the protection of the resistance's rifles.

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After the first two days of curfew, people began to dare to leave their homes and sit at the doors of their houses in the narrow alleys deep within the camp, where the occupying forces could not easily reach before being repelled by the resistance fighters who lay in ambush in the corners of the camp. I saw many resistance fighters, but I could not recognize any of them; they were wrapped in their keffiyehs, armed, and stationed behind this wall or around that corner.

I noticed several neighbors from our block sitting in one of the corners, sipping tea, some rolling cigarettes and smoking, talking about their feelings and fears. They felt a sense of pride and dignity that had been insulted by the occupiers weighing down upon us. They were apprehensive about the unknown that lay ahead. Would the situation remain as it was? Would they not storm the camp with large forces? Or would they refrain from shelling it or burning it down over the heads of its inhabitants? Opinions varied, but the prevailing sentiment was one of resilience; the notion echoed: what do we have to lose? We possess nothing but chains and the agency house, so what is there to fear? Thus, all conversations would conclude, “Oh man, a life of a single moment with pride and dignity is worth more than a thousand years of misery beneath the boots of the occupying soldiers.”

This was not limited to our camp; it was the same in all the camps across the Gaza Strip, in every street of the cities and villages, or in many of them. In the West Bank and Gaza, resistance began to intensify throughout the homeland, some organized and much of it individual, with local initiatives from the free men of the homeland. We began to hear special news about the distinguished resistance efforts in the nearby Jabalia camp. There, Abu Hatim led the resistance, which attracted dozens of young men and fighters from the camp and nearby areas, and everyone began to refer to Jabalia camp as the “Camp of Revolution.”

News spread through the camp like fire through dry brush, increasing people's joy and lifting their spirits. Even we, as children, were affected; our games transformed into Arabs and Jews, and we began to play them daily. It became the prevailing notion that the Arabs would triumph and vanquish their enemies.



## Chapter Four

All night, I was either getting ready for school or talking about it, asking my siblings about various things related to it, or dreaming about it. Tomorrow would be my first day there. Just before sleeping, I went to the small wardrobe in our room and took out some clothes, putting them on along with my new shoes. When my mother saw me, she exclaimed, "What are you doing, Ahmed?" I replied in a low voice, "I'm getting ready for school." She laughed and said, "There's still a long time until school tomorrow, my dear."

In the early morning, I woke up to my grandfather's prayers and blessings, and I couldn't fall back asleep afterward. As soon as my mother woke up, I jumped out of bed to get ready for school. After a while, I woke my siblings and sent my brother Mahmoud to wake my cousin's son, who was sleeping in the other room with my grandfather. My cousins got dressed, and my mother dressed me in my clothes, preparing me as if I were going to my wedding. She gave me many pieces of advice while praising me for being "smart," "grown-up," and a "man." Then, she gave each of us a "shillan," which was five agora of the Israeli lira, and put a piece of bread in each of our bags, which were completely empty.

My mother advised my brother Mahmoud to take good care of me since Muhammad was in the third grade and was in the same school as me—the Boys' Primary School for Refugees A. My sister Maha was in the fifth grade at the Girls' Primary School for Refugees B, while my brother Hassan was in the first year of middle school at the Boys' Middle School A. My sister Fatima was in the third year of middle school at the Girls' Middle School A, and my brother Mahmoud was in the second year of high school at the Carmel School. As for my cousin Ibrahim, he was in the second grade at my school, and my cousin Hassan was in the first year of high school at the Carmel School.

We all left the house together. My brother Muhammad held one of my hands, while my cousin Ibrahim held the other. I hung my fabric bag around my neck, and we set off for school. After a short journey, we began to separate, each group heading in a different direction, leaving the three of us together.



The streets were bustling with boys and girls like us, from all generations, making their way to school. The boys wore a mix of colors and styles, while the girls were dressed in a uniform known as "the marial," a striped fabric in white and blue, each color measuring half a centimeter. They tied their hair with white ribbons. What set us boys apart was our closely shaved hair, nearly down to the skin.

We arrived at the school, where vendors—men and women—were selling goods, some carrying their wares on small carts and others displaying them on small stalls.

As we entered the school, we found a very large courtyard filled with tall trees, surrounded by numerous classrooms. At the entrance, there was a small garden with flowers and plants, along with a water basin. My brother Muhammad began to show me around the school: "This is Class One (A), this is Class One (B), and this is Class One (C). These are the second-grade classrooms, and those are the third-grade ones. Here is the teachers' room, and over there is the principal's office. This is the canteen, these are the restrooms, and those are the drinking fountains."

The morning bell rang, and the teachers arrived to quickly organize the older students into their classes. Meanwhile, we new students in the first grade were gathered together by the teachers, who began calling our names. Each student called would step aside until we were divided into three groups. Each teacher took their respective group, and our teacher was an elderly man dressed in a traditional robe and wearing a "tarbouch," indicating that he was an Al-Azhar scholar.

We entered Class One (A), where he arranged us by height, starting with the shortest. We were divided into three groups, each consisting of three students sitting on a wooden bench. We sat on a wooden plank over a meter long and about twenty-five centimeters wide, with a board of the same length and approximately forty centimeters wide in front of us, where we placed our notebooks and books. Below us was another plank for our bags, all fastened together with wooden supports, forming a single unit known as the "bank."

In the classroom, there were three rows of these banks, each row containing about seven banks, and each bank seating three students. There was about a meter and a half of space between each row. In the middle of the room, in front of these banks, stood the teacher's desk and chair, while on the wall was a blackboard, which we referred to as "the board."

Each of us sat in the middle of the bench assigned to him by the teacher, who then introduced himself as Sheikh Hassan. He began getting to know us one by one, asking each student his name. As he did so, he inquired about our fathers, uncles, and grandfathers, making it clear that he was well-acquainted with our families. When it was my turn and I introduced myself as "Ahmad Ibrahim Al-Saleh," Sheikh Hassan lifted his hands to the sky and called out in a solemn voice, "May God return your father safely to you." It was then that I realized he knew my father was missing and that we had no idea where he was.

Not long after, they brought in stacks of books, notebooks, pencils, and erasers for our class. Sheikh Hassan began distributing them, giving each of us a reading book filled with colorful illustrations beneath which were words we could not yet decipher, a math book, and a copy of Juz' Amma from the Qur'an. Each of us also received five notebooks, five pencils, and an eraser. The notebooks had covers in shades of green and red, adorned with the emblem of the United Nations Educational Agency – UNESCO. Sheikh Hassan then introduced us to our new supplies. "This is your reading book. This is your math book. These are your notebooks. Keep three of them at home with your mothers. We will use one for reading and one for math. Every day, bring both books, Juz' Amma, two notebooks, a pencil, and your eraser." He then wrote each of our names on our supplies in beautiful, flowing black ink, his handwriting so elegant that we could not help but admire it.

At the end of the school day, Muhammad and my cousin Ibrahim took me by the hand, and we set off for home. Each of us carried a fabric satchel, now filled with school supplies. The days passed swiftly, and I gradually learned to read, write, and do arithmetic. Like the rest of my classmates, I began memorizing the shorter surahs of the Qur'an. We went to school together, played during recess, and ate the sandwiches our mother had prepared for us—filled with duqqa or finely chopped chili. On rare occasions, we had labneh sandwiches. Sometimes, we would trade half of our bread with the women sitting outside the school gate, buying a little labneh to spread on it. There was nothing more delicious than its tangy taste.

After school, we would return home for lunch, after which Mahmoud and Hassan would leave for Uncle Saleh's factory. We spent the afternoons either playing in the alley or studying our schoolbooks, completing the assignments Sheikh Hassan had given us. Sometimes, at night, we would gather around a large washbasin, turning it upside down to serve as a makeshift table. We would place a kerosene lamp at its center, each of us spreading out our books and notebooks, bending over them while sitting cross-legged on the floor. Our mother and the others, those who were not studying, would sit nearby, chatting softly as we worked.

Not a week passed without hearing the loudspeakers announcing a curfew, and we would immediately understand that a fedayeen had carried out an operation against the occupation forces—throwing a grenade or opening fire on one of their patrols. Again, the occupation forces attempted to storm the camp, only to be met with fierce resistance from the fedayeen, forcing them to retreat in failure. But this year, something new had happened. Abu Yusuf—our neighbor—had been martyred. He had set out with two other young men to carry out a fedayeen operation against an occupation patrol. The plan was simple: one of them would hurl a grenade at the patrol that passed through the main street at the same hour every day. Then he would withdraw in a way that ensured the soldiers saw him retreating. As he pulled back, Abu Yusuf and the other fedayeen, armed with Carlo submachine guns and hand grenades, would lie in ambush, waiting for reinforcements to arrive in pursuit. Everything seemed to be going according to plan—until it wasn't. The young man had taken his position, waiting for the patrol. But before he could act, the soldiers attacked from behind. At the same moment, they ambushed Abu Yusuf and his companion, Ibrahim, catching them off guard. Gunfire erupted. The two men were struck down instantly, martyred where they stood. This time, the occupation forces did not impose a curfew on the camp. Instead, the entire camp erupted, as if one body, pouring out into the streets—men and women, young and old. Most were in tears, mourning Abu Yusuf's death. A grand funeral procession took place, with every resident participating, their voices rising in unison: "With our souls, with our blood, we sacrifice for you, O martyr!" "With our souls, with our blood, we sacrifice for you, O Palestine!" The crowd carried the coffins through the camp, circling its streets over and over before finally making their way to the nearby cemetery for burial. That afternoon, my grandfather took me with him to the corner of the house where the men and elders of the neighborhood would gather to talk, pass the time, and discuss the latest developments. Naturally, the topic of the day was Abu Yusuf's martyrdom. Everyone was in shock. One of the men shook his head and said, "They caught them off guard." Another frowned. "How so?" "The shots came from behind—opposite the direction they were expecting the enemy to come from." A third man's eyes narrowed. "What are you saying?" "Exactly what you heard," came the reply. My grandfather exhaled slowly. "Does that mean it was treachery? Betrayal?" The man shrugged. "I don't know... But that's what happened." Someone muttered, "It's enough to drive a man mad." "May God have mercy on you, Abu Yusuf," another sighed. "And may He grant us good in your stead." A few days later, just before sunset—right when the curfew was usually about to be enforced—we were playing in the alley when a group of masked, armed fedayeen swept into the street. Each one took up a position at the entrance of a narrow passageway. Then came Abu Hatem. He was dragging a man by his ear—a man from our own camp. The sight of him was wretched. Disgrace clung to him like a second skin. In one hand, Abu Hatem held a rattan cane. A rifle hung from his shoulder. We froze in place, our game forgotten. People began emerging from their homes, peering out cautiously. Abu Hatem came to a stop. The man he held tried to shield his face with his hands, his body bending forward as if he could somehow fold into himself and disappear.

A heavy silence settled over the camp, broken only by the deep, commanding voice of Abu Hatim: "People, you all know Abu Yusuf, the leader of the People's Liberation Forces in the camp. You've heard of his bravery, of the operations that made us all proud, the ones that taught the occupiers a lesson. And you all know this wretch—the traitor we uncovered—who spied on Abu Yusuf, watched his every move, and led the enemy straight to him!" A murmur spread through the crowd—whispers, indistinct and agitated. Abu Hatim raised his staff high, then brought it down with force. He turned to the accused and shouted, "You scoundrel! Speak in front of the people! Tell them what happened!"

The man muttered something under his breath. Abu Hatim's staff struck him—once, twice, again and again. The traitor crouched, shielding his head with his hands. "Get up!" Abu Hatim ordered. The man scrambled to his feet, trembling. "Tell the people what you did!" His voice shaking, the man confessed. He had informed "Waz" about Abu Yusuf and his two comrades in exchange for a small sum of money. He hadn't known they would be killed... The staff lashed out once more.

The crowd erupted. "May God disgrace you!" someone shouted. "Traitor! Spy!"

Abu Hatim raised his staff again, silencing them.

"These Jews took our land, drove us from our homes, slaughtered our men, and dishonored our women. And yet, among us, there are those willing to betray their own people, to side with the enemy against the fedayeen who have given their lives for the cause. Tell me, people—what is the punishment for a traitor who works with the Jews?"

The answer roared through the camp: "Death! Death!"

Abu Hatim unslung his rifle, raised it to the traitor's head.

My mother's hands covered my eyes, but I struggled against them, desperate to see. Before I could, gunfire cracked through the air. The crowd erupted: "Death to the traitors! Death to the collaborators!"

The next day, the fedayeen lay in ambush for an enemy patrol, swearing on the blood of the martyrs that they would avenge Abu Yusuf. When the jeep arrived, they hurled grenades at it and riddled it with bullets. Several soldiers fell instantly; others collapsed, wounded. None had time to lift their weapons, to fire back, to even turn on the civilians around them.

Reinforcements poured in—waves of occupation forces encircling the area. Soldiers stormed into homes, dragging people out with kicks and blows, shoving rifle barrels into their backs, firing shots into the air.

Men were lined up against the wall, their faces pressed to the cold stone, rifles trained at their heads. The beating did not stop. The kicking did not stop.

And above it all, the sky remained silent.



The intelligence officer responsible for the area arrived and began reviewing the men one by one. He called them individually while sitting in his car with the door open, instructing each to stand before him with guns pointed at them. He began asking dozens, if not hundreds, of questions, hoping to glean the slightest piece of information that would help him identify the guerrillas.

Days later, the curfew was lifted, and we went to school as usual. During the break after the first three classes, I went to the restroom. There, I found the boys climbing a low wall, peering over it, and chatting with others. I approached the wall, climbed up like the others, and looked down, discovering that we overlooked the preparatory school where my brother Hassan studied. The boys attending that school appeared much older; they were taller than me by a significant margin.

That day, on our way back from school, my brother Mahmoud, my cousin Ibrahim, and I navigated through the crowd of students filling the street. Among the hundreds of students, I spotted my cousin Hassan a few dozen meters away, with a considerable number of students between us. I thought I saw him lift his hand to his mouth and put something there. Was it a cigarette? Then I saw him lower his hand and exhale smoke. I tightened my grip on Mohammed and Ibrahim's hands, which they usually held, and pointed my eyes toward Hassan in astonishment. They didn't understand and looked at me with curiosity, asking what was wrong. I said, "Hassan!!" They responded, "What about him?" Hassan had noticed that we were behind him, so he threw away the cigarette he had been smoking, and Mohammed and Ibrahim saw nothing. By the time we reached home, I preferred to remain silent, fearing that one of his kicks might land on me.

When we returned home, I found my mother alone after the commotion had subsided. I approached her, whispering in her ear, "Mom, I saw cousin Hassan smoking." She turned to me with a sharp look and said, "You must be mistaken, don't say this to anyone." I nodded in agreement and went on my way, but I couldn't help but notice that my mother had secretly met with my cousin Hassan, speaking to him while he kept his head down, and I could not hear their conversation. Days later, after we returned from school, I overheard my brother Mahmoud talking to my mother about how cousin Hassan hadn't gone to school that day; he had dropped out. I saw confusion on my mother's face, pondering what she could do to address this issue.

I saw her talking to my grandfather, and they called Hasan and talked to him harshly. He tried to defend himself in vain, as they threatened that they would make Mahmoud and Hasan hold him down and tie him to the pillar of the garden trellis, beating him if he ever skipped school again. A few days later, my mother found several cigarettes and a quarter lira in his pants pocket. She took them and went out to my grandfather, who was sitting in the courtyard, saying, "Look what I found in your grandson's pocket." My grandfather looked at what my mother was holding in astonishment and asked, "Where did this boy get the money?" At that moment, my mother shouted for Mahmoud and Hasan to bring my cousin Hasan immediately. They left and were gone for a while before returning with Hasan.

My grandfather had grown weak and weary, unable to do anything. It was then that my mother took charge of the interrogation with my cousin Hasan, asking, "Where did you get the money?" Hasan asked, "What money?" She replied, holding up the quarter lira and the cigarettes. Hasan fell silent, as if he were saying this was a disaster. He tried to evade, but my mother yelled for Mahmoud and Hasan to grab him. She screamed for Fatima to bring the rope quickly. Everyone rushed to fulfill their tasks, while my brother Mohammed, my cousin Ibrahim, and I watched from behind my grandfather, terrified and astonished by what was unfolding.

Mahmoud and Hasan held my cousin Hasan and pulled him to the pillar. Fatima brought the rope, and my mother began to tie him to the pillar while interrogating him. When he realized things were serious, he shouted, "I found half a lira from my grandfather, and I took it." My grandfather was astonished—how could he have lost half a lira, and how much money did he even have?! My mother continued interrogating Hasan, asking where it had fallen. At that moment, Hasan started stuttering, which only confirmed his lie. My mother yelled for Mahmoud and Hasan to tie him to the pillar and waved the rope, saying, "I took it. It was in my grandfather's bag when he hung it on the hook while he was asleep."

My mother shouted, "You took it and call this taking?! You stole it from your grandfather's bag!" She turned to my grandfather and asked, "What do you think, Abu Ibrahim? What should we do with him?" My grandfather clapped his hands together after pulling out his money pouch and examining its contents, finding only half a lira in it, meaning Hasan had taken the other half—essentially stealing half the family's expenses. My grandfather said weakly, "Tie him to the pillar... tie him up." My mother looked at my grandfather as if to ask if he was serious about this. He nodded affirmatively, moving his eyes toward us, as if to say that the children must see him being punished for this, or how would it affect them?

My mother tied Hasan to the pillar, wailing and mourning her fate as well as Hasan's. "Oh, how I pity you, son of the martyr! Your father is a martyr, Hasan. Do you understand the meaning of 'martyr'? Your father is a martyr, and yet you steal half of what's in your grandfather's bag! Half of the family's expenses, Hasan! Shame on you!" Then she shouted at us all, "Everyone, get into the room!" Without hesitation, we obeyed.

That night, a curfew was imposed—not just by the occupying forces outside the house, but also by my mother within the confines of our room, where she forbade us from leaving for the entirety of the night, except in the most dire emergencies. She compelled us to go to bed early.



## Chapter Five

Aunt Fathiya and her husband came to visit us. My mother welcomed Aunt Fathiya with kisses and warm affection, and Aunt Fathiya began to kiss each of us one by one. My mother went inside to prepare the bedding for the guests, calling out to my grandfather, "Oh, Uncle Abu Ibrahim, our guests have arrived." Grandfather emerged from his room and came over to greet Aunt Fathiya's husband, who was carrying a woven basket filled with several paper bags that he handed to my mother.

Fatima prepared tea, and they drank it together. Then Aunt Fathiya's husband took his leave to go to Uncle's house, mentioning that Aunt Fathiya would stay with us for the day and night, and he would return tomorrow to accompany her home. My grandfather tried to persuade him to stay the night with us as well, but he politely declined, stating he needed to attend to some matters. Grandfather, Mother, and Aunt Fathiya escorted him to the door before Grandfather returned to his room, and Mother and Aunt Fathiya came back to our room, where we gathered around her.

My mother brought out the basket and began to unpack its contents. In one of the bags was a large red apple, one we had never seen before, and certainly never tasted, for we had only eaten apples two or three times in my life, and never of this variety. In another bag was a fruit I didn't recognize at the time; I learned its name when I grew older—it was a peach. In the third bag were pieces of dried yogurt. My mother looked at Aunt Fathiya and said, "You've gone to great lengths, Fathiya." Tears welled up in Aunt Fathiya's eyes as she replied, "I wish I could help you as you deserve, my dear sister." She then added that her husband's financial situation was good, thank God. My mother took the fruits and went outside with them, returning shortly after having washed them. She handed Mahmoud nearly half of the apples and peaches, asking him to take them to Grandfather's room and my cousin's.

My mother and Aunt Fathiya continued to converse late into the night, while we gathered around them, filled with joy at the arrival of our beloved aunt.

Aunt Fathiya's husband, Abdul Fattah, went to Uncle's house, where he spent the night with him, discussing the situation in the Hebron area, in the city and the towns surrounding it.

Abdul Fattah had completed his high school education a few years prior and began helping his father with his agricultural work and sheep raising. He was contemplating going abroad to study at one of the Arab universities in Jordan or Saudi Arabia. Uncle was asking him about the conditions of the resistance fighters, the standard of living for the people, and their preparedness and morale over the three years since the Israeli occupation.



Since the occupation of the city of Hebron, large groups of tourists began to flock to the city within days, visiting the Ibrahim Mosque. The Jews believed they had a historical right to the site, which opened the door for economic revitalization in the city. Many merchants took advantage of this, opening their shops and displaying their goods to the tourists, selling them everything at exorbitant prices. They even sold them acorns, under the impression that acorns were sacred, hailing from the land of our father Abraham, peace be upon him. The situation did not stop there; Jews would come to Hebron to purchase their necessities from various vendors and markets, leading to a genuine economic resurgence in the city and an improvement in the standard of living. It was observed that the occupation soldiers took care to avoid excessive mingling with the locals. This was likely due to a request made by the mayor, Sheikh al-Jabari, to the senior Israeli leaders who met with him following the occupation. He urged them to ensure that their soldiers would not violate the dignity and property of the people. Those leaders, led by Moshe Dayan, recognized the importance of this advice and were keen to implement it, resulting in minimal interaction between the soldiers and the local population.

The people had not yet recovered from the shock of the setback and defeat; a state of terror prevailed among the majority due to the occupation and the Jews. Consequently, a Jew could roam the city alone without encountering any opposition, nor did anyone dare to think of assaulting him. Even if someone considered it, the locals would deter him out of fear and caution.

However, there were instances of resistance from time to time. In sporadic intervals, operations were carried out involving gunfire, sniping, or throwing hand grenades at the occupation patrols on the outskirts of the city or in the surrounding villages and towns. Despite many villages and areas having remained untouched by the occupation forces, there were still some fighters living in the mountains, in caves extending deep within the hills. They would occasionally emerge to attack the occupation patrols, causing injuries among them and, on rare occasions, even fatalities. They would then retreat to the mountains, where the occupation forces could neither pursue nor dare to penetrate those treacherous areas they did not know. Among the most famous of these fighters was a man known as "Abu Sharar," a fighter who kept the occupiers awake at night in that region.

Fatah was attempting to organize the beginning of resistance in the city and its surroundings, but successes in the area were extremely limited. The occupiers were arresting groups that were trying to initiate resistance or had already taken their first steps, which struggled to stand on their own. Perhaps the preoccupation of the people with their daily lives, economic production, and prospects for success hindered the emergence of prominent and dominant forms of resistance in the region.

However, a movement of political protests began to emerge in the city, organized by members supportive of Fatah, especially among the student community. There were also attempts to initiate action from the Popular Front. Due to the lack of clear success in the realm of resistance, the focus of activities shifted to political and popular work, along with some social initiatives. My uncle listened attentively to my aunt's husband, Khalaf al-Fattah, as he described the situation in the area in detail, occasionally posing clarifying questions to understand every small detail, trying to grasp the differences between the situation in the West Bank and that in the Gaza Strip.

In Gaza, the Popular Liberation Forces had arrived to gather officers and fighters from the Palestine Liberation Army, which had disintegrated in the 1967 War. These liberation forces were the largest resistance gathering. At the same time, resistance was starting with groups from Fatah and the Popular Front, and the level of resistance in Gaza was generally good despite the successes achieved by the occupation in assassinating some leaders and further infiltrating the area to learn more of its secrets. Days after my aunt Sarah left, news spread in the neighborhood of a dead collaborator whose body was found west of the al-Mashta area. We began to rush to see the body, as is customary whenever such news circulates. The body lay there, and no one knew exactly who had killed that girl. Rumors circulated that she was a collaborator and had been killed on that account. No one dared to raise their voice in objection or question the details, but murmurs and whispers filled the neighborhood. It was rumored that she was not a collaborator, and that some who had impersonated the fedayeen exploited their immunity, deceived her, and then violated her honor. Fearing exposure, they killed her and accused her of being a collaborator. The occupation's intelligence intensified its operations to infiltrate the ranks of the people, exploiting vulnerabilities, needs, and poverty. They worked to recruit collaborators who would provide information about the resistance fighters, their movements, and those who sheltered and assisted them at every opportunity.

The occupying forces conduct large-scale arrests of men and youths, transporting them to the Saraya building, the headquarters of intelligence. There, they are met by large numbers of soldiers who greet them with blows, slaps, and kicks. Their eyes are blindfolded, and they are lined up with their faces against the wall, hands tied behind their backs for hours on end, exposed to the rain and biting cold. They tremble from the chill and out of dread, while the soldiers stand behind them, taking turns kicking and hitting anyone who leans against the wall or moves left or right.

In a nearby room, several Shin Bet intelligence officers await. In the brightly lit, air-conditioned space, they summon the men one by one, seating them on chairs before them and removing the blindfolds from their eyes. They bombard them with thousands of questions about their work, their towns, their families, brothers, neighbors, and resistance fighters. They hurl hundreds of insults and curses at them, using the coarsest and most contemptible language that degrades the Arabic they attempt to speak. Sometimes they strike, sometimes they jest, alternating between intimidation and coaxing, seeking any information from the men, any willingness to cooperate, or any weakness in another that they can exploit to force compliance against their own kin.

Some men seethe with rage and despair at this humiliation, but what can they do? If they take action, it will only lead to more degradation and oppression. Some find themselves bursting with anger, wanting to attack the scum before them, only to realize their hands are tied behind their backs, and all they encounter is further indignity. Others try to navigate this crisis as best as they can, seeking to live quietly, neither with nor against the occupiers, nor with the resistance. They desire simply to live, feed their children and families, and that is enough. A few sell their souls and blood cheaply to the occupiers, willingly providing them with any information they know about the resistance and its fighters, agreeing to cooperate.

The state of resistance in the Gaza Strip was noticeably stronger than in the West Bank, and the main reason for this appeared to be the presence of a battalion of fighters known as the Palestine Liberation Army, established as a military force for the Palestine Liberation Organization. This was created at the behest of Arab regimes at the time, aiming to alleviate the burden of responsibility towards Palestine. Following the 1967 war, this army fragmented; some were martyred, while the majority left the Strip for Egypt or other places. A few remained in Gaza and formed the Popular Liberation Forces, which initiated the resistance. Subsequently, some groups and cells from Fatah and the Popular Front began to operate in the Strip, steadily increasing their presence, particularly in the refugee camp areas.

One day, while we were in the morning lineup at school, a great commotion erupted, followed by loud chants of "With our spirit and our blood, we sacrifice for you, O Palestine!" The schools poured out, merging with other schools into a crowd that echoed the chants and cries. Everyone was filled with great joy and overwhelming happiness. That day marked the Day of Dignity, when Palestinian fighters succeeded in repelling the Israeli attack on the Jordanian front. Demonstrations filled the streets of the camp, chanting slogans and raising flags before dispersing as we returned home. The feeling among everyone was one of utmost pride and dignity. After the 1967 setback, as people had come to refer to it according to the official terminology of the Arab regime, this was the first victory against the Israeli occupation army. Among the groups of fighters stationed on the eastern bank of the Jordan River in the area of Al-Karama, some began to conduct guerrilla operations across the border.

That afternoon, as usual, I sat with my grandfather in the square near the corner of the house, where the men of the neighborhood gathered to chat. They were all in a state of great elation, and the words "Palestinian Revolution" and the name of the National Liberation Movement (Fatah) began to resonate. It was clear that Fatah was starting to rise to prominence in leading the Palestinian national movement and resistance against the occupation. That day, I heard some men saying, "Uncle, this is the truth; only the oxen plow the fields." We had relied on the Arab armies, and we had been defeated. For the first time, we fought and achieved victory despite our limited means and weak weapons. The men nodded in agreement, supporting this sentiment.

In the following days, the pace of guerrilla operations inside the occupied territories in the West Bank and Gaza increased. As my mother always said, "These men are from our neighborhood," it seemed that the victory of the Battle of Al-Karama had revived the spirits of many with hope and readiness. The occupation's intelligence seemed to have gathered information indicating that many operations occurring in Gaza originated from the Al-Shati camp. Consequently, they imposed a curfew on our camp, and this time the curfew extended significantly, lasting more than three weeks and even surpassing a month. Our situation in the camp worsened and became harsher; the camp had been under curfew for a month.

Life continued normally just tens of meters away in the city. The call to prayer echoed from the minarets of the mosques in Gaza, particularly from the Abbas Mosque located on the main street of the city, Omar Al-Mukhtar Street. A number of men and youths were flocking to the mosque to perform the prayers.



After finishing their prayers, a young man in his early twenties stood before them, confident in his purpose. He praised God, extolled His blessings, and sent prayers upon His Messenger before addressing the congregation. His voice carried strength and urgency as he stirred in them a sense of honor and duty toward their brothers in the Beach Camp, where a curfew had been imposed for a month.

The elderly sheikh, his voice calm yet questioning, asked, "And what can we do, my son?"

The young man responded without hesitation, "At the very least, we can march in solidarity."

A surge of movement swept through the mosque as men pressed toward the exit, their voices rising in chants of "Allahu Akbar!" Some lifted the young man onto their shoulders as he led the crowd, his voice ringing through the streets:

"With our souls, with our blood, we sacrifice for you, O Palestine! We are all Palestine—refugees and citizens alike!"

As they marched, more and more people joined the swelling demonstration. The city streets were not far from the camp, and the soldiers in their patrol vehicles observed from a distance, wary but refraining from intervention. When the protest finally dispersed, a quiet satisfaction settled over the demonstrators—they had done something, however small, to answer the call of conscience.

By morning, the loudspeakers crackled to life, announcing the end of the curfew. Life in the camp was restored to its familiar rhythm.

That same morning, we lined up for school assembly. After a brief round of light exercises and the customary morning speech—delivered by a student standing atop the stone steps before us—our classes proceeded in orderly lines toward the milk kiosk. It was a walled-off courtyard on three sides, roofed with corrugated metal sheets. A raised concrete platform ran along its length, behind which stood several large vats. Four men, clad in blue overalls and white caps, worked behind them.

One by one, we filed in, our teachers watching closely. The men handed each of us a metal cup, filling it with steaming milk. But before we could drink, they pressed into our palms a small, dreaded pill of cod liver oil. We were made to swallow it first, only then permitted to drink.

We hated the cod liver oil with every fiber of our being. The teachers, ever watchful, ensured none of us dared to slip a pill into our pockets or toss it aside. Under their sharp eyes, we swallowed quickly, washing it down with the warm milk. Then we dropped our empty cups into a large pot of boiling water and hurried off to our classrooms.

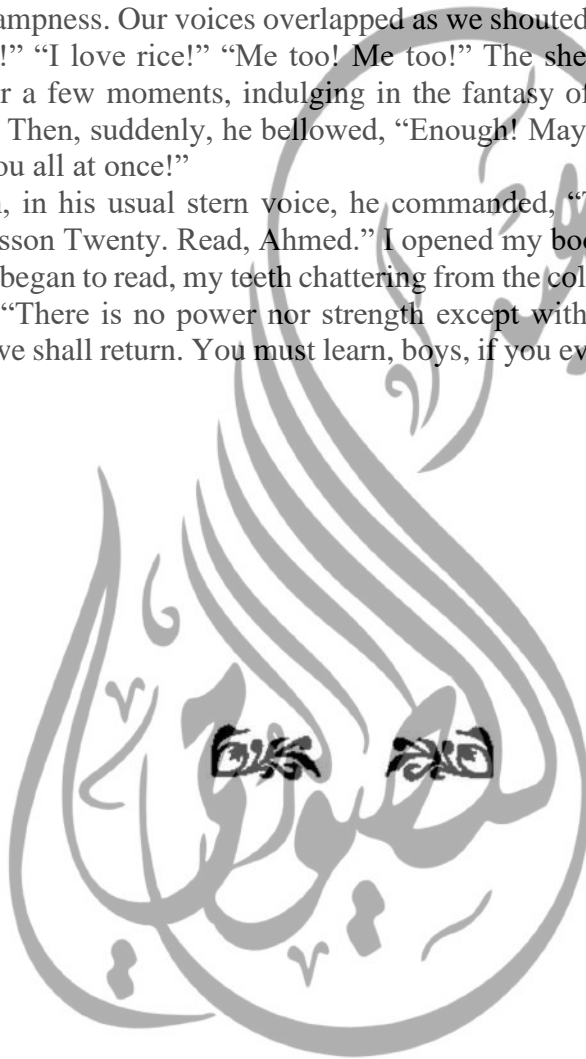
Every student in every UNRWA school drank the milk and swallowed the oil, day after day. It was a routine as familiar as the morning bell, as inescapable as the rising sun.

Fish oil was undoubtedly beneficial, but the warm milk was tolerable, and the best thing about it was the heat of the cup itself. Holding it in your small, nearly frozen hands on such bitterly cold mornings, you would feel, if only for a moment, as though your hands had reattached themselves to your body after nearly falling away.

One particularly frigid and stormy day, most of us arrived at school soaked from the rain. After drinking our milk, we sat at our desks, shivering. When our teacher, the sheikh, entered the classroom, he immediately sensed that we were in no state to study, read, or understand a thing. Hoping to lift our spirits, he said with a teasing smile, “Boys, imagine if the sky were raining rice and meat right now!”

The class erupted in excited chatter. The mere mention of rice and meat made us forget the cold and the dampness. Our voices overlapped as we shouted our preferences—“I’d eat only the meat!” “I love rice!” “Me too! Me too!” The sheikh let us revel in our playful dreams for a few moments, indulging in the fantasy of rice and meat falling from the heavens. Then, suddenly, he bellowed, “Enough! May it rain locusts instead, so they can bite you all at once!”

Silence fell. Then, in his usual stern voice, he commanded, “Take out your reading books. Turn to Lesson Twenty. Read, Ahmed.” I opened my book, its pages still damp from the rain, and began to read, my teeth chattering from the cold. The sheikh muttered under his breath, “There is no power nor strength except with God... We belong to God, and to Him we shall return. You must learn, boys, if you ever hope to become real human beings.”



## Chapter Six

My aunt Fathiya lived in the village of Surif, in the district of Hebron—a Palestinian village like all the others, which fell under occupation in 1967. It bore its share of exile and destruction, a punishment for its role in the resistance before the occupation and in the battles leading up to 1948. As a border village, it lay along the Green Line, separating the lands occupied in 1948 from those that remained under Jordanian rule until they too were seized in 1967.

Not long after the occupation, the patrols arrived, entering the village as they did with most of the towns and hamlets across the West Bank. Life there was simple, rooted in stone houses nestled among olive, fig, grape, and almond trees. The villagers raised livestock and poultry, earning their livelihood with patience and gratitude for God's endless blessings.

The men of Surif were known for their honor and strength, dressed in the traditional Palestinian village attire. You could see them striding confidently with their canes, watching over their sheep grazing on the mountain slopes. The women, the true masters of the household, stood tall in their embroidered dresses, their heads covered with scarves that framed their resolute faces.

For my aunt, moving from Gaza to Surif was not a great upheaval. The rural atmosphere, the rhythm of village life—these were different, yes, but the people, their customs, their deep-rooted dignity, were much the same. The local dialect varied slightly, but not enough to matter. She adjusted quickly, finding herself at home in the village's embrace.

Her husband, Abdul Fattah, had completed his secondary education at Tariq ibn Ziyad School in Hebron. Surif, like all the villages surrounding the city, had no secondary school of its own, so those who wished to continue their studies had no choice but to travel to Hebron. His years there had made him well-acquainted with the city, its streets, and its people. He had many friends, both from Hebron itself and from the surrounding villages, young men who had sat beside him in the classrooms of that school.

When my aunt gave birth to a son, she named him Abdul Rahim. My mother could not make the journey to Hebron to congratulate her, so instead, she visited my uncle's home, offering him her blessings and asking him to pass them on to Fathiya when he saw her. She knew our circumstances—our financial burdens, the weight that pressed upon our family—and she knew that my aunt would understand.

Uncle Abdel Fattah was preparing to travel to study at the University of Jordan, Faculty of Sharia, but his father's severe illness forced him to postpone his plans. When his father passed away, he abandoned the idea of university altogether. Instead, he decided to take over his father's trade in textiles and manage the family's land. To console himself for not completing his studies, he made it his mission to facilitate that path for his younger brother, Abdul Rahman, who was in his second year of secondary school at Tariq bin Ziyad School in Hebron.

Many times, Abdel Fattah would stand on the roof of their house, pointing westward toward the ruins of 'Alin,' where the fighters of the Holy Jihad had camped before the occupation of 1967. He would recount how the locals had provided them with all they needed. He often told the story of a man from Surif named Muhammad Abdul Wahab Al-Qadi, who, while herding his sheep near a place called Sinahin, spotted a convoy of Jews coming from Beit Shemesh toward Etzion. He alerted the fighters, who quickly set up an ambush at a place called Dhahr Al-Hajjah. When the convoy arrived, the fighters attacked and killed all thirty-five members—officers, soldiers, and doctors alike. The incident filled the Jews with hatred toward Surif, and when the occupation took place in 1967, they shelled the town with artillery, destroying numerous homes—an act of vengeance for that very event.

Through his work and connections in Hebron, Abdel Fattah developed an extensive network of relationships with its merchants and craftsmen. In their gatherings, long conversations and detailed discussions would unfold. They would sit in one of the shops, circling around the stove with embers glowing, sipping tea as they debated resistance and occupation. These discussions always reflected a deep skepticism among those present about the efficacy of resistance, doubting that it could yield any tangible benefit. They often believed that such efforts did more harm than good, prioritizing economic growth and wealth accumulation instead. Their reasoning was always the same: if the combined might of all the Arab armies had failed to stand against the Israeli army, how could groups of fedayeen, with their modest weapons and limited resources, hope to succeed?

Abdel Fattah never dared to openly oppose their views, but he would listen attentively, engaging them with reasoned and objective arguments. In the end, the gathering would disperse after an hour or so of tea and debate, often concluding with one of them saying, "Let's leave this matter to God—He will bring what is best," spoken in the distinctive accent of Hebron's people, who stretch certain syllables more than others.



In these meetings, gatherings, and relationships, my aunt's husband met Abu Ali, who seemed more convinced of the necessity of taking action regarding the cause. Even if resistance was not effective in liberating the homeland and driving out the occupation, it was, without a doubt, a national duty at the very least.

My aunt's husband and Abu Ali often walked together through the streets of Hebron during his visits there or in Surif when Abu Ali came to visit him. They would engage in long discussions about the occupation, the need to resist it, and the importance of not surrendering to the status quo or becoming preoccupied solely with making money, accumulating wealth, and building houses. Because their ideas aligned, their friendship deepened. One day, Abu Ali confided in my aunt's husband, saying, "I cannot stand idly by without fulfilling at least the minimum of my duty."

My aunt's husband asked him, "And what do you intend to do? Will you find yourself a weapon, attack an occupation patrol, and then go into hiding like Abu Sharar and other fedayeen fighters?"

Abu Ali replied, "No, that's not what I aspire to. I want to organize the resistance, to turn it into a movement, a current, an organization."

"And how do you plan to do that?" my aunt's husband asked.

"I will travel to Jordan and present my idea to Fatah. You know that after the Battle of Karameh, Fatah has established itself, and surely, they will welcome my idea and provide me with all the support I need."

My aunt's husband praised the idea and urged Abu Ali to take every possible precaution. He assured him that he could consider him a full partner in every step. They agreed that Abu Ali would travel alone and arrange for a commercial cover to avoid drawing attention.

At that time, after the victory at Karameh, Jordan was entirely at the service of the resistance. The refugee camps were filled with celebrations of triumph. Everywhere, people chanted in praise of the fedayeen, singing and praying for the Palestinian National Liberation Movement—the name behind that victory. It was not difficult for someone like Abu Ali to quickly locate the leadership of the fedayeen in Jordan and reach an agreement with them to begin organizing Fatah's military cells throughout the West Bank. He was promised funding and weapons to establish and train these cells, preparing them for armed resistance.

After visiting some relatives, he moved around Jordan, handling various business transactions to maintain the cover of his official mission. Then, Abu Ali returned to the West Bank, where he began contacting many of his acquaintances, particularly young men in different cities across the region.

He recruited them into the ranks of Fatah, instructing each one to bring in two or three trusted friends who were ready for armed resistance against the occupation. From the northernmost city in the West Bank to Hebron, even reaching some villages and towns, whenever he found someone he knew and trusted, he presented the idea. If they agreed, he asked them to form a cell and arranged to contact them soon.

The task of gathering weapons was entrusted to my aunt's husband, Abdel Fattah, whose movements and trade provided the perfect cover for such an operation. In a short period, cells and groups began forming, carrying out small-scale fedayeen operations—throwing hand grenades at military patrol vehicles, opening fire on them, or attempting long-range sniper attacks on selected targets.

As is often the case in resistance work, one of the cells made an operational mistake. Its members were arrested and subjected to brutal interrogations. Some of them broke under pressure and began confessing, leading to more arrests. Eventually, it all led back to Abu Ali. He was captured and subjected to severe interrogation in the dungeons of Hebron Prison. Yet, he demonstrated extraordinary resilience and courage, refusing to confess even to the simplest details that some of the younger recruits, deceived by the investigators' tactics, had already revealed.

Israeli intelligence arrested my aunt's husband after conducting an extensive investigation into Abu Ali's relationships and friendships. They raided his home, leaving behind a trail of destruction—smashing furniture, ransacking belongings, and subjecting my aunt and her young son, Abdul Rahim, to their brutality. Then, they took my aunt's husband to Hebron Prison, where he faced relentless interrogation and hellish torture. They pressed him for details about Abu Ali and his involvement, attempting to deceive him by claiming that Abu Ali had already confessed to everything. They told him there was no point in denying it, no reason to endure the suffering.

But Abu Abdul Rahim, my aunt's husband, stood firm. He denied everything. In response, they sentenced him to six months of administrative detention without charge. As for Abu Ali, he was sentenced to five years in prison due to the confessions accumulated against him from those whose resolve had not been strong enough to withstand the trials of interrogation.

And so began my aunt's journey into a new world—the world of prisons. Once a month, she would visit her husband. On the morning of each visit, she would wake up early, prepare her child, and set out, carrying him in her arms, making her way to the village center.

From there, she would take one of the few passing cars from the village to the city of Hebron. Upon arrival, she would walk a long distance to reach the building that housed both Hebron Prison and the military governor's headquarters. There, she would find hundreds of families gathered to visit their imprisoned sons and relatives. Standing among the women in line, she clutched her identification card, hoping her turn would come with this group of visitors. But sometimes, the guard would announce that the quota had been filled, forcing her to wait for the next round.

When her turn finally arrived, she would reach a small opening in the wall, extending her hand to pass her ID to the guard lurking behind it. He would inspect it, verify her details, and register her name before opening the adjacent door. Inside, she would enter the women's section, where a female soldier would conduct a deliberately humiliating search. My aunt would swallow her anger—she could not afford to lose the visit. Abu Abdul Rahim was waiting for her now, surely longing to see her and their son, Abdul Rahim. There was no reason to jeopardize the visit by reacting to this wretched soldier's provocations.

After the search, visitors would be gathered in a room, then escorted through long corridors and dimly lit passageways to the visitation section. There, a wall stood with small openings resembling windows, each covered with iron mesh. Behind each window, a prisoner would appear, and the families would desperately search for their loved ones.

The moment they found them, they would rush to the barrier, their emotions overflowing. A father, his eyes welling with tears, would gaze at his child through the iron grid, unable to hold him or play with him. A wife or mother would be overcome with sorrow, staring at her husband or son behind the bars, uncertain of what torment he endured within those cold, merciless walls.

Before they could recover from the exhaustion of travel, the humiliation of the searches, or the long walk through those suffocating corridors—before they could fully reassure themselves that their loved ones were still standing, still enduring—the guards would clap their hands sharply. Their voices would ring out behind the prisoners and visitors alike, shouting, "The visit is over."

The prisoners would be pulled away behind that soulless iron door, while the families were ushered out of the visitation area. Emotions would erupt in the captives' hearts. My aunt's husband would suppress his tears, unwilling to give the jailers the satisfaction of witnessing his pain. He would gather his emotions, his voice steady as he reassured her, "Stay strong, the end is near. Just five more months."

He would urge her to take good care of Abdul Rahim, to look after the house, and to send his greetings to family, friends, and neighbors. And as she wiped her tears with the corner of her embroidered white headscarf, she would call out, "Don't worry! Just stay strong and don't let it weigh on your mind. Goodbye."

In the narrow alleys of neighborhoods, villages, and refugee camps, new groups and cells were forming across the cities, towns, and scattered hamlets of the West Bank. Young men made their way to deep valleys or hid behind towering mountains to train with the weapons they had recently acquired—whether through delivery or retrieved from caches their fathers and grandfathers had hidden for years. They were ready for the next confrontation, seizing the first opportunity to strike. Their hearts burned with anticipation, eager to meet the enemy face-to-face, armed—even if their weapons were scarce, simple, and their experience limited. But the fire in their chests raged like a furnace

In that small shop, my aunt's husband and Abu Ali would meet with a group of merchants. The bitter cold of those days drew them together over steaming cups of tea. The traders would talk again about the battles, the imprisonment of my aunt's husband and Abu Ali, and whether their efforts had been worth it—whether they had wasted a significant part of their lives for nothing. Some of them dismissed the resistance altogether, arguing that their arrest was the ultimate proof of its futility.

One of them would begin calculating the days my aunt's husband would spend behind bars, pointing out that he had earned three Israeli liras a day from his trade. That meant he had already lost no less than five hundred liras—let alone the humiliation, the suffering, and the disgrace brought upon him and his family.

The dire economic situation of most people, combined with the Israeli leadership's belief that hardship would drive many toward "sabotage and resistance," led them to adopt a gradual approach to opening up employment opportunities for the local population—albeit under strict security screening. Their need for a large labor force to build their nascent state played a crucial role in this decision. Eventually, they made an official announcement, and the passport and permit offices began accepting applications from men seeking work inside the occupied territories of 1948. The move sparked fierce debate among the Palestinian people.

In a corner of our neighborhood square, where men would gather daily, my grandfather—despite his illness and advanced age—remained a steadfast participant in these daily discussions. The topic was hotly debated, dividing people into two camps. There were those who opposed it vehemently: How could they justify building the enemy's state and strengthening its foundations while its soldiers trained and prepared for war against them, against their people, against their entire nation? To them, working in Israel was nothing short of treason.

On the other hand, some pragmatists argued that reality had imposed itself. Israel existed, and whether hundreds or even thousands of Palestinian laborers refused to work there, it would neither collapse nor weaken.



The matter, however, needs to be discussed from the perspective that there are homes in need of a loaf of bread and a bottle of milk for our children, and we cannot find them. Working inside (Israel), despite its hardships and bitterness, is seen by some as a national duty, supporting the steadfastness of our people in the camps and villages, rather than forcing them to leave in search of survival.

In that shop in Hebron, the acceptance of working in Israel was more widespread. The people there understood the calculations much better; it was the game of numbers that prevailed. Opening up job opportunities for the people meant an economic boom for the country, raising its standard of living in various sectors and strengthening the resilience of the people, keeping them anchored to their land until God allows change on a practical level.

The resistance fighters, especially in the refugee camps, viewed this as a crime. In the beach camps, for example, they began collecting information on those who had obtained permits. They would gather these permits from the workers and destroy them after explaining their dangers and their contradiction to national loyalty. Sometimes, the holder of such a permit would receive several blows with a cane to the forehead, a slap to the face, or harsh words.

You would find one of these workers attempting to convince them, refusing to hand over the permit, pointing to his eight children behind him who had nothing to eat. What the UNRWA provided was far from enough, and often they went hungry. He would beg the fighters who wanted to take his permit to consider his situation, to let him keep it so he could work. But they refused, insisting on taking the permit. Their eyes would well up with tears as they saw the stark contradiction between the harshness of the reality, its urgent needs, and the lofty aspirations of national ideals. Perhaps they would discuss it later, after they had left, feeling the discomfort as they tore up the man's permit, feeling guilty for their actions.



## Chapter Seven

A few weeks before my brother Mahmoud's Tawjihi exams, a state of emergency was declared in the house. Whenever one of us raised our voice, my mother would shout, "Don't yell, keep the noise down for your brother Mahmoud; he has Tawjihi soon." If one of us ran after the other, my mother would yell. If something fell from one of us, if one pushed or poked the other—as was our custom when we gathered around the overturned laundry basin at night to study—he would receive a slap on the back of his neck, a pinch in his side, or a tug on his ear. It was imperative to keep quiet for Mahmoud's studying.

If one of us wanted to get the other in trouble to earn a beating from my mother, he would start discreetly, nudging him once and making funny faces. Often, my sister would fall into this trap because she couldn't help but laugh. She would hold back her laughter as best she could, but if we continued our funny antics, she would burst out laughing and receive several slaps from my mother, who rarely took the time to investigate the reasons behind the laughter and would punish the real instigator instead. We finished our school year exams, and Mahmoud continued studying since the Tawjihi exams were a month later than ours. Even after we completed our exams, the state of emergency remained in effect, and we awaited Mahmoud's exam completion more eagerly than we awaited the end of the occupation. On the last day of the Tawjihi exams, when Mahmoud returned home from school, we greeted him with the loudest celebration possible for a brother's return. We unleashed all that we had been holding inside for nearly two months.

The house erupted with noise and shouting, and we all rushed at Mahmoud—boys and girls alike—with punches, kicks, and pinches. Mimi observed us, trying to maintain a serious demeanor as she shouted, "Leave your brother alone!" Yet she failed to hide the wide smile on her face. After we finished with Mahmoud, we all turned on her, including Mahmoud, kissing her head, hands, and feet while she attempted to escape from us, not genuinely trying to do so, as she struggled to stifle her laughter without success.

Our results were announced, and we had all passed except for my cousin Hassan, who failed the second year of high school. Now, we had to wait for Mahmoud's Tawjihi results to be announced, and the state of emergency was declared again.

On that day, there were other more serious emergencies, but when Mahmoud returned, his face was beaming with joy, almost bursting with happiness. He opened the door, and the first word he said was, “Yama,” causing a sharp tear to roll down my mother's cheek. Then her ululation rang out, and we celebrated again in a loud party, as Mahmoud's success and excellence were achievements for all of us, with each one of us contributing to it.

My mother rushed to the kitchen to boil the fenugreek, mixing it with flour and sugar to prepare a tray of fenugreek sweets for Mahmoud to take to the neighborhood oven to bake. When he returned with it, we didn't wait for her to place it in the dishes she had brought from the kitchen; we reached for it from all sides while she waved her hand as if to swat anyone who extended their hand, but she didn't actually hit anyone. However, she succeeded in raising several plates to serve to those who came to congratulate her from the neighbors and relatives.

My grandfather was seriously ill, and it was clear that he was on the verge of leaving us. He rarely left his room, and he could only go to the mosque on Fridays. He no longer participated in the daily meetings held by the neighborhood men in the well-known square. Perhaps Hassan's failure had increased his worries and illness, and he no longer had the desire to partake in our celebrations. Nonetheless, we all gathered around him and spent the first night trying to amuse him and lighten his spirits.

Mahmoud had to wait for the summer vacation and a whole year after finishing his high school studies before he could join the Egyptian universities. This was a perfect opportunity for him to save some money for his travel expenses to Egypt.

The idea of working inside the occupied territories of 1948 was completely rejected, so he had to continue working in a vacant factory and look for any additional work to gather a few coins here and there for his studies. Mahmoud and my mother thought about it for a long time, and finally, they agreed that Mahmoud should stop working in the vacant factory, and his brother Muhammad would take his place there, allowing my brothers Hassan and Muhammad to work in the vacant factory while Mahmoud focused on a more serious job with better earning opportunities.

The plan was to start a business that wouldn't require much capital, so Mahmoud decided to set up a vegetable stand at the edge of the neighborhood market. This would only require a few liras, and he could earn a modest income, but saving over time could accumulate a reasonable amount throughout the year.

Indeed, my mother would wake Mahmoud early at dawn, and as soon as the curfew was lifted, he would head to the market, the wholesale market in the city, with three or four liras to buy what he needed.

He easily gathers various vegetables and returns to his stall, arranging the vegetables on it before he starts selling them. At noon, he collects the remaining vegetables to take home for his mother to use. Every day, they manage to save twenty piastres or a quarter of a lira from their daily earnings.

The daytime curfew was imposed repeatedly; however, the neighbors relied on the vegetables that Mahmoud sold. Despite the curfew, none of the vegetables spoiled at his stall, as it transformed into a home-based market. In the alleyways of the neighborhood, he could transport what the neighbors needed without fear of the occupation soldiers, who were wary of entering the camp due to the ambushes set by the resistance fighters. As the resistance and guerilla actions continued to escalate, military leaders recognized the overcrowding of the camps, the narrowness of their alleys, and the costs incurred in operations to invade the camps. They considered constructing wide streets to divide each camp into several quarters, facilitating their containment and combing operations.

Indeed, one day, a curfew was imposed on the camp, and a large force of soldiers arrived as if it were a new occupation. Among the soldiers were buckets of red paint and painting supplies. They marked large X's in red on the walls of some houses, while on others, they drew vertical lines after taking measurements, then placed small X's accordingly. Each homeowner whose house bore these marks received notices stating that their homes would be demolished. Those with large X's on their walls would have their homes demolished entirely, while those marked with small X's would lose only the sections adjacent to the vertical lines. With each notice handed to the homeowners, screams, curses, and wailing erupted. Where would these people go with their children, wives, and families? They would find themselves on the streets once again!

Fortunately, none of the streets set to be constructed reached our house, as it bore no markings. It became clear that our home would overlook a wide street instead of that narrow alley. However, our neighbor's house would be completely demolished.

This seemed to be particularly fortunate for my brother Mahmoud; if our house or part of it had been demolished, the money he had saved for studying in Egypt would not have been enough to mend the situation, and he would not have been able to continue his studies.

We were forced out of the sector and left in the street, but God loves him and loves my mother (the poor woman), according to what I heard them talking about. Days later, the bulldozer arrived, accompanied by a large military force, and they announced the need to evacuate the houses that would be demolished. The bulldozer began to grind the homes as a monster grinds the bones of its prey, tearing apart the hearts of hundreds of men, women, and children who found themselves back in the street once again.

The bulldozer continued to come and go in the camp, and with every arrival or departure, one of the men would collapse, or one of the women would fall after pulling her hair and slapping her cheeks, or one of the men would be brutally beaten by the soldiers when he tried to place his body in front of the bulldozer to prevent it from advancing to demolish the roof that sheltered his sons and daughters.

By evening, hundreds of tragedies had reopened, and people were left to tend to each other's wounds. My uncle's house had been empty since his wife got married, as my cousins Hassan and Ibrahim moved in with my grandfather in his room. My mother allowed two families from our neighborhood to temporarily live in the house until they could sort out their affairs. You could not imagine the words of thanks and praise that poured over us. The next day, representatives from the Red Cross came to assess the situation and record the facts. The day after that, officials from the housing department of the Refugee Relief and Works Agency collected data and informed the people that they would be relocated to new homes built by the agency in other areas, bringing a sense of relief that descended upon the people from the heavens.

They began to bombard the officials with countless questions: When will we move? Where? How? etc. The officials had no clear answers, but it wasn't long before families began moving into their new homes in newly constructed neighborhoods in the sector itself or in the city of Al-Arish, where Israel had fully occupied Sinai in 1967. During this time, the two families who had taken refuge in my uncle's house also moved out, and each family received a new house. The opening of job opportunities in the territories occupied in 1948 created significant confusion among the people. However, the urgent need for people to provide for their children and secure their dignity in reasonable homes with doors that closed and walls that rose to shield what was inside from the street compelled them to work in the occupied territories.

The needs for education, medicine, inflation, and other matters were stronger than any objections to this work. Thus, the current of life revived the desire to continue living and improve the quality of life, while ensuring...



The parents tried to ensure the lives and futures of their children, making this flow gradually become a norm that the militants could neither prevent nor stop.

After the streets were paved on one hand and the doors to work opened on the other, amidst the fierce war waged by the occupation's intelligence and army against the resistance, it became clear that they were starting to feel a sense of relief. The lifting of the curfew in the mornings was more frequent than before, allowing workers to leave early for their jobs and arrive on time after hours of travel from the West Bank and Gaza to Haifa, Jaffa, and elsewhere. It became evident that the living standards of families whose breadwinners worked inside were gradually improving. In a short period, this man began to raise the roof of his house with tiles and replaced it with sheets of zinc; this man raised the wall of his house; this one installed a strong door for his home; and that one brought a bag of cement and a little coarse beach sand mixed with shells and called upon a construction worker to pave the floor of his house. Thus, houses around us began to rise again gradually, and their standards increased, while our home remained the same. Although it was the best house in the neighborhood since the days preceding the war, its condition started to decline compared to the improvements of our neighbors' homes.

Some neighbors who could not afford significant changes to their houses resorted to bringing large pieces of nylon, which they spread over the tiled roof to cover the entire surface. They then folded the edges and secured them with wooden strips, fastening them with small nails tied with ropes, each bag anchored together so that no bag slipped off the nylon. Such bags created a weight that prevented the nylon from shifting or falling.

This project did not cost much and provided a reasonable solution to the problem of rainwater leaking into the room and pouring onto our beds, forcing us to place containers to catch the drips between our beds as we slept. When my mother discussed the matter with my brother Mahmoud and learned of its cost, he decided to add nylon to our room's ceiling. Mahmoud bought the nylon, wooden strips, and nails, borrowed a hammer from a neighbor, and my brothers Hassan and Mohammed helped him. Placing the nylon on the ceiling was a remarkable development in our winter life, as we began to sleep comfortably without the leaks of water and the sound of drips falling into those containers, along with the splashes hitting our faces and bedding.

I had reached the third grade of elementary school, and it was customary for the clinic doctor to visit the school from time to time, touring the classes and checking on health conditions.



For students who clearly suffer from malnutrition and whose physical condition is notably weak, they can register their names. After a few days, these students are given cards allowing them to eat once at the nutrition center (health center) run by the Relief and Works Agency in the camp. The doctor came this time and toured the school, and when he entered our class, he asked me for my name and recorded it. I realized they would give me a card for food. After a few days, I received that card, and my joy was such that my head almost touched the ceiling.

I returned home with the card and announced the news to my siblings. Fatima became extremely angry and rushed at me, trying to snatch the card away while shouting, "We're not poor!" I cried out for my mother, who called her over and insisted that there was nothing shameful in receiving a food card, as we were refugees. It was perfectly normal for one of the children to receive a food card, especially since we were living off the Agency. Our house belongs to the Agency, the schools are Agency schools, and the health center belongs to the Agency. When people's homes were destroyed, who but the Agency provided them with shelter? Fatima had no choice but to reluctantly leave me alone, albeit begrudgingly.

Every day between classes or after they finished, hundreds of boys and girls would rush to the food center. We would stand in a long line, entering one after another, after jostling, pushing, and arguing to get inside. There, we had to be silent because the manager of the food center sat behind a table, taking one of our cards, crossing out the number and the date, then handing the card back while giving us a small loaf of bread. We were then sent forward, where another worker from the food center would give us a new plate containing several compartments, each with a type of food—three or four types, including fruit or pudding. We would take that and head to the hall where there were tables surrounded by chairs, where each of us would devour that delicious food. Afterward, we would take our plates and throw them out the kitchen window for washing, and exit through the exit door. At this door, one of the workers would stand, inspecting those leaving to ensure they hadn't taken food for someone else and hadn't eaten it themselves, as it was designated for them for health reasons. Anyone caught sneaking food would have it taken away and thrown into the trash to teach them that they needed to eat their food inside.

My cousin Ibrahim was my closest friend, and we were always together. One day, Tuesday, he came with me to the food center, agreeing that I would stuff half a loaf with meatballs for him, as Tuesday was the designated day for meatballs. I had brought a small nylon bag with me.

I sat at the table while Ibrahim waited for me at the exit door. With great caution and lightness, I stuffed half a loaf of bread with half my portion of kebab, placed it in a plastic bag, and hid it inside my pants. I ate the rest of the food and stood up, checking my pants to ensure they wouldn't give me away during the search.

I threw the plate out the kitchen window and approached Aunt Aisha, who stood at the door to inspect us, raising my hands above my head like a well-mannered boy. She conducted a quick search on me, and I dashed outside, glancing left and right for Ibrahim as I reached into my pants to pull out the half loaf.

As soon as it was in my hand, I noticed a group of about thirty boys from a family living near the health center. We called them the Hyksos because of their many troubles. They charged at me, attempting to steal the sandwich from my hand. I took off running, and they chased me.

But I ran with all my strength for a long distance, feeling that I had distanced myself from them. I turned to check if they had stopped or turned back. Just as I turned my head, a large stone was thrown by one of them, hitting me directly in the eye. Darkness clouded my vision, and the half loaf slipped from my hand, covered in dirt. I couldn't—or didn't want to—bend down to pick it up. I held on to the card and continued running, screaming, "Mama!" all the way home. I ran a long distance with my hand on my eye until I reached home. My mother jumped up in alarm, lifting my hand from my eye to see what had happened, screaming, "Oh my! The boy's eye is gone!"

She grabbed her headscarf and rushed to carry me, pulling me along as she held my hand tightly, running to the agency's clinic. After much effort and struggle, we arrived at the clinic and headed to the eye treatment room, where a specialized nurse was present. When we arrived, they asked my mother for the "clinic" ration card, which was required for any treatment. In her anxiety and fear for my eye, she had forgotten to bring the card. She began to plead and beg, trying without success. They told her to bring the ration card, or the boy wouldn't be treated. They seated me on the wooden bench in front of the eye clinic and she rushed out to bring the ration card before the clinic closed.

After the nurse confirmed that she had truly gone to fetch the card, he called me over, sat me down on the chair, and began examining my eye. He placed a piece of gauze over it—thick fabric—secured it in place, and I sat there waiting for my mother's return. She came back, panting, exhausted from the long distance, carrying the familiar scent of the road. They completed the registration procedures, and she reassured herself with the nurse that my eye was fine. Then, with all the tenderness of a mother, she held my hand, and we walked home at a leisurely pace. My real problem at that moment wasn't my injured eye but rather the fact that my sister, Fatima, had seized the opportunity and torn up my food ration card. It was as if she had gouged out my other eye, for she had deprived me of my meals at the food distribution center.

Our financial situation at the time was moderate. Some families had surpassed us, as their breadwinners worked inside the occupied territories, while others lived in far worse conditions, like our neighbor Umm Al-Abed. She was a mother of four boys and three girls with no provider, for the head of their household had been martyred in 1967, leaving behind his children and their mother, or as my mother used to say, "nothing but lumps of flesh."

The aid agency covered most aspects of life, but there were always corners left exposed, requiring financial means beyond what the agency could provide. Umm Al-Abed had to find ways to ease her family's burdens and secure additional necessities for her children. She left no door to lawful earning untried. Every Friday, her sons would set out with burlap sacks, heading far beyond the camp, near the 1948 border, where the garbage dumps of nearby Jewish settlements lay. There, they scavenged for old shoes, expired canned goods, and empty beer bottles—anything that could be sold or used. They filled their sacks with whatever they could find and carried them back home.

Their mother would wash the bottles thoroughly and sell them to a woman who sat outside the clinic, where people bought them to store the medicine dispensed to them. She cleaned the shoes, paired them, and sold them to a merchant in the market, who in turn sold them to the camp's residents. Every morning, she also visited the food distribution center, buying the milk rations that other women chose not to keep. From this, she made "jameed"—a semi-hardened yogurt—and sat outside the school selling it to the children. If they had no money, she bartered it for pieces of bread. She took what her family needed and sold the rest, collecting pennies here and there, gathering them one by one to provide for her children. And through it all, she remained content, raising the children of a martyr with the lifeblood of her very soul.

Mourad's acceptance into the Faculty of Engineering at Cairo University was a cause for celebration. When we learned the news, we celebrated in our usual way, shouting and playfully attacking Mourad with pinches and nudges. My mother prepared a tray of halva, showering him with congratulations and soothing words. Mourad began preparing for his trip.

The vegetable stand needed to continue operating, as it would cover the costs of his education for the coming years. Therefore, it was essential to manage it well to accommodate his studies and school schedule. This was, of course, until the last day before Mourad's departure to Egypt. He diligently maintained his work until the day of his journey, and I had to take my turn in cleaning and organizing the empty factory with my brother Mohammed.

Before Mourad's departure to Egypt, my mother packed many items for him to take along. She prepared some olive oil, tea, dried molokhia, dried okra, and other similar items bought with the Egyptian pounds they had saved from the currency market. Mourad took these to a tailor, who concealed them in the waistband of his trousers by sewing them inside the fabric, so he could use them as pocket money in Egypt. This was necessary because customs officials, who were often Jewish, confiscated money and prohibited its transfer with travelers to Egypt.

Mourad frequented the Red Cross office, which organized the travel process for students from the region to Egypt and their return, dealing with both the occupation authorities and the Egyptian authorities. Eventually, he learned his departure date. Like the other students, he had to go to the intelligence department at the headquarters, where they interrogated him and warned him against collaborating with any organizations, attempting to recruit those they could.

On the last night before Mourad's departure, we all stayed up later than usual, knowing he would be leaving us for nearly a full year. The night was a strange blend of laughter, tears, joy, and sadness—a peculiar mix of emotions, especially filled with my mother's instructions and reminders for Mourad.

In the morning, we woke up early. My mother had prepared two large, used suitcases that Mourad had bought, filling them with all his belongings. My brother Hassan carried one, and my cousin Hassan took the other, as my mother accompanied them to bid farewell to Mourad. We saw him off until the outskirts of the neighborhood, then returned home, sorrow etched on our faces as we began to grasp the meaning of parting from loved ones.



They escorted him to the Red Cross headquarters, where many people had gathered to bid farewell to their loved ones, The students waited inside the buses while their families stood across from them, waving from a distance, Then the buses set off, and the families continued to wave until the buses disappeared from sight.

Days after Mahmoud's departure, one of our neighbors came to complain that my cousin Hassan was bothering and harassing one of her daughters. My mother's face turned red with embarrassment in front of the neighbor, and she promised to put an end to the matter, My grandfather was bedridden with illness, Mahmoud had traveled to Egypt, and everyone left at home was younger than Hassan, who had grown and become difficult to control, So, my mother thought of using cunning and persuasion.

When evening came, she called him and sat down to talk, "My dear, neighbor's son, for the sake of the neighbor, your martyr father, your family's reputation, our honor, and what people will say," In the end, Hassan promised her that he would not go near the neighbor's daughter. She asked him, "A promise of honor, Hassan?" He replied, "A promise of honor, aunt."

A few days later, the neighbor returned, trembling, and entered the house screaming, "Oh, mother of Mahmoud! This boy is not saying peace upon the Prophet. He cornered the girl in the street and laid his hands on her!" My mother flared with anger and tried to calm her, bringing her into the house and saying, "Oh, mother of Abdul, you know that neither you nor I have any men to discipline him. God knows that your daughters are like my daughters, Let's think about how to put an end to this boy."

My mother proposed the idea of tying him up while he was asleep and beating him with the boys, and if he repeated the act, she would seek help from the fedayeen, come what may, to break his hands and legs.

My mother prepared a rope and a stick, When Hassan returned after dinner and went to sleep, my mother, along with my brother Hassan and my brother Mohammed, entered his room, After confirming he was asleep, my mother carefully tied his hands and feet with the rope and then woke my grandfather to tell him what had happened with my cousin Hassan. The grandfather began to tremble and said, "May God darken your face, Hassan... May God darken your face, Hassan. Beat him! Break his hands and legs."

Hassan awoke to find himself bound and began to threaten and curse, The stick began to fall upon his sides as he yelled and cursed, and they beat him mercilessly, My mother explained to him that they kept the matter within the house out of fear of disgrace, and if he harassed Suhad again, she would inform the fedayeen and ask them to break his hands and legs, They then left him tied until morning, where she asked my cousin Ibrahim to untie him.

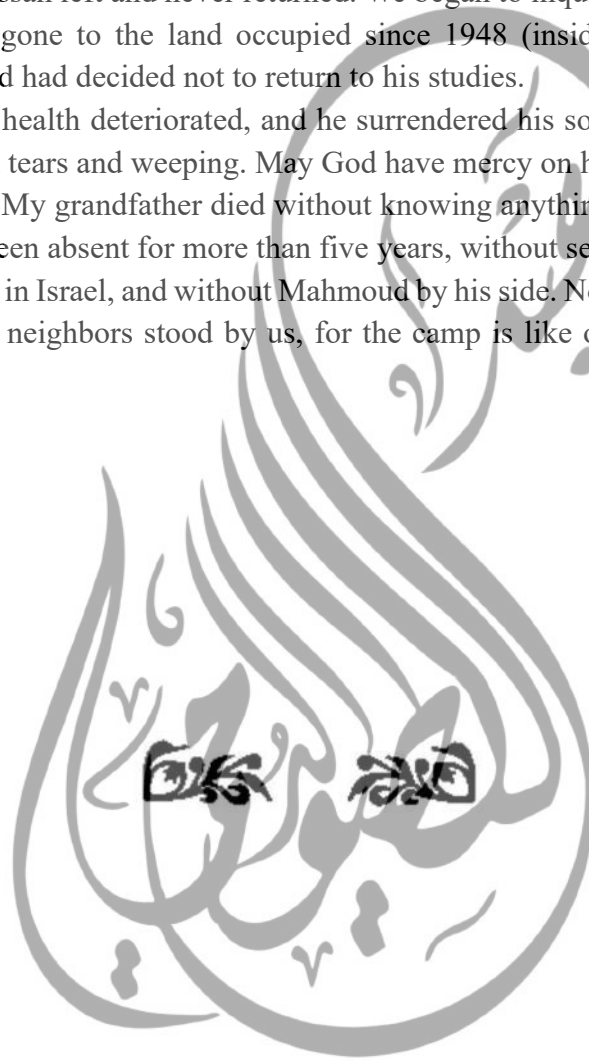


Ibrahim was kind, obedient, intelligent, and diligent in his studies, He went and untied his brother's bonds, but Hassan struck him while issuing threats and menaces. Then, Hassan rushed into our room to intimidate my mother, attempting to frighten her.

She shouted at him, "Wake up! Do you think you scare me? You're a worthless person, and the worthless scare no one. You'll never become a man."

Hassan growled, advanced toward my mother, and pushed her, causing her to fall to the ground, All of us, sons and daughters, attacked him, bringing him down, beating him, biting him, and pulling his hair. He got up, kicking, hitting, cursing, and swearing, then left the house. Hassan left and never returned. We began to inquire about him and were told that he had gone to the land occupied since 1948 (inside Israel), that he was working there, and had decided not to return to his studies.

My grandfather's health deteriorated, and he surrendered his soul to his Lord. We bid him farewell with tears and weeping. May God have mercy on him and admit him into His vast gardens. My grandfather died without knowing anything about the fate of my father, who had been absent for more than five years, without seeing his grandson who fled Gaza to work in Israel, and without Mahmoud by his side. Nonetheless, we fulfilled our duty, and the neighbors stood by us, for the camp is like one family in joys and sorrows.



## Chapter Eight

Every morning, at around seven o'clock, hundreds of boys and girls from the camp set out for their schools. From the seven-year-olds heading to first grade to the eighteen-year-olds studying for their high school exams, they walked the same familiar paths. Groups of boys followed by groups of girls, followed in turn by more boys—this was the morning routine.

Most children of the camp paid little attention to love affairs, for the unspoken rules of the neighborhood dictated that the daughters of one's neighbors should be treated like sisters. My mother constantly warned my brothers and sisters against any relationships with the opposite sex.

She would often caution my brothers not to glance at or interact with the girls next door, warning us all that if we dared violate others' honor, ours would not be spared.

Even those who thought themselves the cleverest of all would do well to remember this.

Such words were enough to deter us from entertaining any thought of following in the footsteps of certain boys and young men who lingered at the street corners, watching the girls as they passed to and from their schools, radiant as the full moon.

Some of these young men stood there simply to catch a glimpse of the girls, perhaps to call out to them with casual remarks—"Hey, beautiful! Won't you look our way?" or "Glory belongs to God alone!" Others waited in hopes of seeing the one they secretly loved, longing for a glance that would brighten their entire day.

Perhaps she might even accept a letter from him, one he had poured his heart into. Yes, the people of the camp, despite their hardships and struggles, loved and longed just like everyone else.

But there was no denying that the camp upheld its traditions with great vigilance. To approach a neighbor's daughter in anything other than a respectful manner was to challenge these deeply rooted customs.

Love and longing, therefore, were expressed with restraint and dignity, their flames often confined to the depths of the heart.

At most, a fleeting look of admiration, a gaze filled with reverence and yearning from afar, or an eagerness to help one's family that invited quiet speculation as to the true reason behind such devotion.

Some of the camp's young men were bolder in crossing those boundaries, allowing themselves to write and exchange love letters, to meet on their way to and from school—even if only by walking behind one another as if by chance.

At times, they would exchange a few words, each pretending to speak to their own friends.

Some girls permitted themselves a fleeting moment by the window at an agreed hour, just as their beloved happened to pass by, tossing a letter through the narrow opening. Many girls suffered beatings from their fathers, brothers, or even mothers when caught exchanging letters with young men, yet such stories remained rare in the camp during that early post-war period.

Meanwhile, the number of laborers leaving each morning to work inside the occupied territories of 1948 steadily increased.

The phenomenon grew, bringing with it other accompanying scenes. In the early hours of dawn, men set out, each carrying a small bag or satchel with the day's provisions, walking long distances to the labor pickup point.

There, a crowd of trucks, vans, and buses awaited, each driver calling out his destination—one to Jaffa, another to Ashdod, another to Tel Aviv.

Workers gathered, boarding the vehicles that would take them away.

Street vendors selling falafel, fava beans, or steaming sahleb found in these laborers a prime market.

On their way to their transport, the workers would fish a few coins from their pockets, buying a handful of falafel to quickly eat or stash in their bags before climbing into their vehicles.

Once inside, they surrendered to sleep, making up for the lost hour or two before arriving at their workplaces in the stolen homeland.

These laborers toiled in construction, agriculture, and sanitation—the backbreaking jobs the Jewish employers disdained.

Their supervisors stood over them, barking orders, scrutinizing their every move. At ten in the morning, they took a brief half-hour break to eat, perhaps brewing a cup of tea if they managed. Then, they resumed their grueling tasks. By three or four in the afternoon, their workday ended, and they searched for a ride back to Gaza or the West Bank.

Exhausted, they dozed off on the journey home, returning to their families drained by the day's labor.

They work on Fridays until two in the afternoon, as their Jewish employers prepare for the Sabbath, their weekly day of rest. Some of these laborers work on a daily basis, earning their wages at sunset, only to return the next morning to the gathering points where workers await. There, cars pull up, and contractors and Jewish employers step out in their shorts, scanning the crowd for willing hands. The workers surge forward, and each employer selects the ones who suit his needs, sealing the deal with a brief exchange over wages. Others, however, have secured more stable jobs, receiving their pay weekly, monthly, or even on a permanent basis.

As the relationship between Arab laborers and their Jewish employers deepened, and as the fatigue of daily travel took its toll, employers began seeking accommodations for their workers, places where they could stay throughout the week. The laborer bids his family farewell with the first light of Sunday, remaining at work until midday Friday, when he returns home with his pockets full of money and his basket or bag brimming with goods brought back from Israel.

Some workers rented houses in Qalqilya or Tulkarm, hoping to shorten the distance to the occupied territories. A few banded together to share a single room or a house for an entire week, sometimes even a whole month, saving on transportation costs and sparing themselves the exhaustion of daily travel. There, in the heart of the occupied land, they found themselves in a world utterly unlike their own, with customs and values foreign to those they had known.

Most laborers remained indifferent to this world, looking upon it with disdain and contempt. Yet, some reckless youths were drawn into its orbit, seduced by its temptations—they began drinking, frequenting dens of vice and indulgence. And in rare cases, one might chance upon a Jewish girl, their paths crossing in the randomness of life, until love, inexorable and heedless of all barriers, wove its threads around him, and he surrendered, living by the customs and values of her world.

With the daily influx of laborers, the demand for transportation grew. More vehicles took to the roads, ferrying workers to and from their jobs. Some managed to buy their own cars, turning them into shared taxis for their neighbors in exchange for a fare, sparing them the early morning trek to the labor pickup spots and the weary walk home at dusk. Slowly but surely, Peugeot cars began appearing in the streets, their presence growing ever more frequent. Some of these laborers even returned with chairs, sofas, and other pieces of furniture discarded by their Jewish employers who had replaced them with newer ones. These items found new homes—adorning their modest dwellings, gifted to friends and relatives, or sold in the bustling marketplace of secondhand goods, where everything has a value and every object carries a story.

Jewish merchants began flocking to Hebron and other nearby cities, especially Tulkarm and Qalqilya, to purchase their supplies. Some struck deals with blacksmiths, carpenters, and other craftsmen, commissioning a hundred doors, a thousand windows, or whatever they needed—finding what they sought at prices far lower than those in Israeli factories. Palestinian business owners, in turn, raised their prices, earning more, keeping their workshops busy, and providing jobs for others in their community.

Yet, despite the general improvement in economic conditions, the resistance never ceased. It ebbed and surged in waves, for it was never merely a matter of financial hardship but one of national belonging and duty—though hardship often fanned the flames of defiance. And so, the fedayeen operations continued: a grenade hurled here, gunfire echoing there, curfews imposed, arrests carried out, pedestrians detained for hours, a collaborator exposed and executed—man or woman, it made no difference.

The flood of thousands of Palestinian laborers into the Jewish state opened new possibilities for the resistance. Fighters began contemplating large-scale operations deep within the occupied territories of 1948, striking at the heart of cities, towns, villages, and settlements. A new door to resistance had swung open.

Abd al-Hafiz, the son of our neighbor Umm al-Abed, persuaded his mother that, for the sake of his younger siblings' future, he had to abandon his studies and seek work. His earnings would allow his brothers and sisters to continue their education, spare his mother the exhausting labor that drained her, and ensure a better life for them all. After much insistence, she reluctantly agreed.

And so, like thousands of others, Abd al-Hafiz set out each morning for work in Israel, returning home by nightfall. Within months, the family had managed to install a proper door for their house, replace the old tiled roof with corrugated metal sheets, and pave the floor with cement. Yet, as time passed, it became clear that Abd al-Hafiz had a purpose beyond securing a better life or his siblings' education.

We only discovered the truth after nearly two years. He had joined the ranks of the Popular Front, and his true aim in working in Israel was to plan and execute fedayeen operations inside the occupied territories of 1948.

Not long after securing his job and familiarizing himself with this new reality, he began—every now and then—slipping a grenade into his lunch bag and smuggling it into Jaffa. There, he would choose a target: a bus, a café, a nightclub. He would leave the grenade concealed in some hidden corner, then go about his workday as if nothing had happened. By nightfall, he would be back home. Moments later, an explosion would rip through the air, leaving behind injuries, destruction, and, at times, the dead.



For two years, Abdu al-Hafiz carried on with utmost caution, executing his missions with meticulous care. He succeeded in carrying out several operations, but the investigations conducted by the Shin Bet eventually cast heavy suspicion upon him. One night, a large force of occupation soldiers stormed the neighborhood, surrounding his house before dragging him away for interrogation.

What he endured there—suspension in painful positions, beatings, relentless torture—defies words. Yet, he denied everything, refuting every accusation they hurled at him. In the end, they had arrested a comrade of his, who, under duress, confessed that Abd al-Hafiz was affiliated with the Popular Front. When confronted with this, he admitted only that much—nothing more. For that, he was sentenced to a year and a half in prison. As the school year drew to a close and my brother Mahmoud's return from Egypt for his summer break approached, we would begin frequenting the Red Cross office, inquiring about the arrival dates of university students from Egypt. We would watch the announcement board, where the names of returning students and their scheduled arrival times were posted.

On the day of Mahmoud's return, we would all head to the passport office to wait for him. Buses would arrive, carrying students under the escort of military jeeps. They would step off, passports in hand, waiting in the reception hall. The moment we spotted him, we would rush forward—embracing him, kissing him, rejoicing in his presence. Then, together, we would make our way home.

Each year, we sat there, waiting for Mahmoud's arrival. When he finally emerged, he would leap toward us, showering us with kisses, asking about our well-being. He would kiss my mother's forehead and hand, while she, overwhelmed with pride, gazed at him with eyes glistening with unshed tears—tears of uncontainable joy for her son, her Bash Muhandis Mahmoud.

Despite our meager means, my mother would spare no effort in preparing a feast in his honor—a token of her love, a celebration of his return, and compensation for a year of longing and absence.

Mahmoud always brought us cotton garments from Egypt—soft to the touch, carrying the scent of something new. Until then, we had only worn clothes handed down by aid agencies or bought secondhand from the markets. But from the end of his very first year at university, my mother had already begun calling him al-Bash Muhandis—the Engineer.

On the corner of one of the streets, a group of young men spread out a black blanket—one of those they received from the agency—and sat upon it, playing cards. Every day, in the late afternoon, they would gather there, passing the time, for there were no other means of entertainment. Their game would continue until shortly after sunset when darkness settled in. Then, they would gather their cards, shake off the dust from their blanket, fold it neatly, and disperse to their homes—before the curfew took effect.

One evening, as Sheikh Ahmad—so they called him, though he was still a young man—was returning from the Maghrib prayer at the mosque, he passed by them as he always did, offering his greetings. But this time, instead of walking on, he veered toward them and sat down in their midst. The young men exchanged puzzled glances, their astonishment plain. Their game halted. The cards were gathered up. All attention was now fixed on the unexpected visitor.

Seated among them, Sheikh Ahmad spoke, his voice calm yet firm. "Allow me to speak with you about something important," he said. Their curiosity deepened, and one of them gestured for him to continue.

He began to speak with the tone of a father, drawing upon verses from the Quran and sayings of the Prophet. He warned them against wasting time in idle amusement and urged them toward devotion, toward fulfilling their obligations to God. He reminded them of the blessings they had been given and cautioned them against the great loss of the Hereafter—the torment of Hellfire. But he did not stop there. He wove his words into something larger, something unexpected: the future of Islam, the fate of their homeland. He spoke of Palestine, the land of the Night Journey and Ascension, and how its liberation was intertwined with faith, with righteous striving, with the purity of hearts and the steadfastness of believers.

The four young men sat in silence, captivated. Never before had they heard religion and patriotism intertwined in such a way. In the Palestinian landscape of late, one was either a religious figure, detached from the cause, or a nationalist fighter, severed from matters of faith. But here was something different, something that made sense. They found themselves drawn to it, nodding unconsciously as they listened.

Then one of them asked, "And what is it you ask of us, Sheikh?"

A faint smile played on Sheikh Ahmad's lips. "Tomorrow, at dawn, you will cleanse yourselves, purify your hearts, and perform ablution. Then, when the call to prayer rises, you will go to the mosque and pray."

The young men nodded, agreement clear in their gestures. Sheikh Ahmad stood, clasping their hands one by one, his grip firm and deliberate, as if sealing a pact. Then, he turned and walked away.

Behind him, the young men gathered their cards, shook out their blanket, folded it carefully, and dispersed. The night had deepened, and the curfew was near.

After the campaign to carve new roads through the camp, it became painfully clear that the occupation army's grip had tightened. Their armored patrols could now move with ease, keeping watch over every street and alleyway. It had become a simple matter for them to encircle any quarter where they suspected hostile activity, to raid it, to arrest or kill whoever fell under their suspicion. The swiftness of these patrols, their ability to appear suddenly at any corner of the camp, weighed heavily on the resistance fighters. A new warning system was needed—something quick, something unmistakable—so that the fedayeen could take cover, prepare themselves, and escape before it was too late.

And so, it was born.

Whenever a soldier appeared, whenever anyone—be it a child, a young girl, or even an elderly man or woman—spotted the occupation forces, they would call out in a loud voice: Bī'ū! (Sell!). And everyone who heard the word would echo it instantly, their voices rippling through the camp:

"Bī'ū! Bī'ū! Bī'ū wa trīḥ minū!"

The meaning was clear—a taunt demanding that the soldiers sell their weapons and rid themselves of them.

What had begun as a warning cry soon transformed into something more. It became a chant, a kind of defiant folk anthem. As the schoolchildren walked to and from their lessons, they would spot a passing patrol and, without hesitation, their voices would rise in unison:

"Bī'ū! Bī'ū! Bī'ū wa trīḥ minū! Wa-ṣ-ṣandal aḥsan minū!"

(Sell! Sell! Sell and be rid of it! Even sandals are better than your guns!)

They would keep chanting for as long as the soldiers remained in sight, their voices growing louder, bolder, filling the air with a rhythm of defiance. The soldiers never knew how to respond. They hesitated, uncertain, unsettled by this strange, mocking chorus.

For the fedayeen, the chant was more than defiance—it was a lifeline. The moment they heard it, they knew danger was near, and they braced themselves. It was mostly the children who carried this duty, but when no child was around and a warning was desperately needed, the adults took up the cry without hesitation.

Days passed swiftly, slipping through our fingers like grains of sand. We began counting down to Mahmoud's return from Egypt. He had completed his studies at the College of Engineering, and now we found ourselves making daily visits to the Red Cross office, searching for his name among the lists of those returning.

For days, we asked and waited. And then, at last, the lists of returnees were pinned to the bulletin board. Our eyes raced down the names—there it was. Mahmoud was in the third group.

We flew home, breathless with excitement, to bring our mother the news: her son, our engineer, was coming home.

And so, preparations for Mahmoud's homecoming began in earnest. The biggest task of all was my mother's request: she asked my brother Hassan to buy a large quantity of lime. We dug a pit in the middle of the courtyard, poured the lime into it, and doused it with water to let it cool. Once it was ready, we strained it and set to work, whitewashing the entire house with a soft hue of white tinged with a hint of blue. Meanwhile, my mother busied herself in the kitchen, preparing food and drinks—especially hilba and basbousa, the sweet treats we would share with family and friends who would come to celebrate with us.

On the day of Mahmoud's arrival, we dressed in our finest and set out to meet him outside the General Administration of Passports. The buses arrived, escorted by military vehicles, and disappeared into the compound. We waited, hearts pounding, alongside hundreds of other families, each scanning the faces of the returnees as they emerged one by one.

And then—there he was.

We flew toward him, running as fast as our feet could carry us. Our mother reached him first. He opened his arms wide, gathering us all into an embrace filled with love, his tears streaming freely. When he reached my mother, he fell upon her hands and kissed them, his voice thick with emotion. "I have returned, Mother. The days of hardship and struggle are over, God willing, never to return." She wept with joy, repeating over and over, Alhamdulillah... Alhamdulillah... Insha'Allah... Insha'Allah...

By the time we reached home, the entire neighborhood had gathered for what felt like a grand public celebration. The men embraced Mahmoud, their voices warm with congratulations, while the women surrounded my mother, their blessings punctuated by bursts of joyous ululation. The street, though wide, was packed with people pushing forward to enter the house, eager to share in our happiness. Inside, my mother and siblings rushed to serve sweets and drinks to our guests, while cries of Ya Bash Muhandis! rang through the air. Neighbors called out to Mahmoud, bombarding him with questions—about Egypt, about university life, about his health, about everything. As the sun dipped below the horizon and darkness began to settle, the curfew loomed near. Slowly, the neighbors took their leave, still murmuring words of blessing and congratulations as they departed for their homes. At last, we were alone—our family, gathered around Mahmoud, joined by our uncle Ibrahim's household, which had long since merged with ours as if we were one and the same.

And so, the talk of dreams and ambitions began.

Hassan would close his small stall and dedicate himself fully to his studies. Muhammad and I would leave our humble jobs at our uncle's factory. We would build a new room in the house. We would raise the ceiling of the two existing rooms, replace the worn-out tiles with sturdy asbestos sheets, and elevate the floors. We would pave the courtyard with cement.

All of it—one step at a time.

All of it—once Mahmoud found a job and received his first paycheck.



It was clear that Mahmoud would not leave the camp, nor would he leave the sector to work abroad. He was pleased to be back after completing his studies away from home and family. We spent two more days celebrating Mahmoud's return and graduation and in receiving the well-wishers.

On the third night, after curfew had set in for hours and we had gone to bed, we heard the engines of the patrol cars starting up again and moving away. But then, suddenly, we were startled by the voices of soldiers in our courtyard, their shouts pounding on the door, demanding that we come out. My mother and sisters hurriedly covered their heads and we stepped out, Mahmoud in the lead, to find dozens of soldiers occupying the yard, their rifles aimed at us from every direction.

My mother cried out, "What do you want? What is happening?" The officer spoke, directing his question at Mahmoud, "Are you Mahmoud?" "Yes," Mahmoud answered. "We need you for a short while at the Saraya." My mother screamed, "Why? What do you want from him? He just returned from Egypt yesterday!" The officer replied, "They need to ask him a few questions, and he will be back in the morning." Mahmoud asked to change his clothes, but they refused and ordered him to leave as he was. He stepped forward. My mother tried to follow, but they stopped her and pulled the door shut behind them. The engines roared, and the vehicles sped away, vanishing into the darkness.

That night, sleep eluded us. My mother wept and wailed, "She came hoping for joy but found no place for it!" Fatima and Hassan tried to calm her, assuring her that Mahmoud would return by morning, as the officer had promised. But she kept repeating, "If they only had a few questions, they would have waited until morning and summoned him properly, like they do with others!" Then she sobbed in anguish, "Oh, my son, my Mahmoud! What have you done? What have you done?"

At the first light of dawn, as soon as the curfew lifted, she dressed hastily and rushed to the Saraya with Hassan. When they arrived, soldiers at the gate barred her entry. She pleaded with them, trying to explain what had happened, desperate to see Mahmoud, but they either did not understand or pretended not to. They simply repeated, "Go away."

Realizing there was no use arguing, Hassan gently took her by the arm and led her to the opposite side of the street. "We will wait here," he said, "until Mahmoud comes out." She hesitated, unwilling to move farther from the gate, but eventually relented, sitting on the pavement, her eyes fixed on the entrance. Hour after hour passed.

Mahmoud did not come out.



Once, she tried to enter, but Hassan stopped her, attempting to convince her that they wouldn't let her in and would only humiliate her. At home, we remained on high alert, declaring a state of mourning, waiting for the return of my mother and Hassan, hoping they would bring Mahmoud with them. But the wait dragged on.

As sunset approached, my mother and Hassan returned, dragging their feet, sorrow etched upon their faces. My mother was in a state worse than I had ever seen her. Their condition spoke volumes, and none of us dared to utter a single word. Each of us retreated to our beds, the silence so profound we couldn't even hear our own breathing. Hassan, however, sat beside her, trying to console her, saying, "Tomorrow, I'll go to a lawyer and hire him to inquire about Mahmoud and follow up on his case. We'll also report his arrest to the Red Cross." My mother responded, "My feet will follow yours." He agreed.

At the break of dawn, they set out once more to carry out their mission. They hired a lawyer, reported the matter to the Red Cross, and understood well that there was nothing left for them—or for us—but to wait. It might take a month before any information emerged. There was nothing to do but wait—just wait.

The first days were heavy, black, unbearable. But it seemed we had developed an ability to adapt to every catastrophe, no matter how great. We only needed to endure the first hours, the first days—then, as with every past tragedy, it would become normal. The important thing now was that all our previous plans had either been canceled or postponed at best. Hassan had to continue working at the stall, while Mohammed and I had to keep going to my uncle's factory to clean and organize.

Every few days, my mother would take Hassan to follow up with the lawyer and the Red Cross, once or twice a week. After more than a month, the lawyer informed us that charges would be brought against Mahmoud and that he would be taken to court. But the matter seemed minor—it would be resolved within two or three weeks.

About two weeks later, we learned that Mahmoud had been taken to trial and that the judge had extended his detention for another two months. Another two weeks passed before we heard from the Red Cross that Mahmoud would be allowed visits at Gaza Central Prison—once a month, on the first Friday of each month, starting next month. Hassan had completed high school, and given the family's dire financial situation, traveling to Egypt or anywhere else for university was out of the question. He resigned himself to enrolling in the vocational school run by the UNRWA, where he was accepted into the machining and metalworking department. He was to begin his studies at the start of the academic year, a two-year program that would grant him an industrial diploma upon graduation.



## Chapter Nine

In Jordan, following the victory at Karameh, King Hussein emerged, declaring, “We are all fedayeen.” Thousands of young Palestinians, driven by the pride that accompanied the triumph, surged into Fatah offices across refugee communities in the West, eager to join the movement. The Palestinian revolution began to cement its foothold—not only in Jordan but across the Arab world. Its leaders, particularly Yasser Arafat, were received with great reverence in Arab capitals, none more so than in Cairo, where Gamal Abdel Nasser, the undisputed leader of the Arab nation, welcomed them with open arms.

Many Palestinian families found themselves split between the West Bank and refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, or Syria. This was not only the fate of those who had fled in 1948 but also of many who were scattered by the 1967 war, escaping the Israeli occupation in fear of brutal massacres.

One such family was that of Ahmad, a merchant from Hebron, whose store was a frequent gathering place for my aunt’s husband, Abdul Fattah. The two shared a strong business relationship and often engaged in long conversations. Abu Ahmad had four sons—one remained with him in Hebron, while the other three had fled to Jordan in 1967. Two of them joined the revolution there, while the third worked as a truck driver. Those who became fedayeen could never return to Hebron, for they risked immediate arrest by the occupying authorities. Ahmad, however, sometimes traveled back to visit his family. On such visits, he would sit with his father in the shop, where he often crossed paths with my aunt’s husband, and together they would discuss the conditions of Palestinians in Jordan.

Without a doubt, the Palestinian presence in Jordan was a source of pride for all Palestinians. Yet Ahmad harbored growing fears for the future. It was clear to him that the increasing strength of the Palestinian resistance was beginning to unsettle King Hussein. What concerned him even more was the reckless behavior of some fedayeen, who, in their defiance, showed little regard for public sentiment. Their actions, he feared, might one day provide justification for a conflict between the revolution and the king. Ahmad voiced his concerns on more than one occasion, though many around him sought to reassure themselves, convinced that open confrontation was impossible—that such a thing simply could not come to pass.

And suddenly, the news broke—the clashes had begun. What would come to be known as the events of Black September in 1970 had escalated into full-scale battles, their echoes reverberating across the region, triggering political maneuvers among Arab leaders.

Umm Ahmad had three sons in Jordan, all caught in the midst of the brutal fighting. Each had a wife and children, and all were in grave danger. She could neither sleep nor bring herself to eat, trembling with fear for them. Abu Ahmad tried to calm her, urging her to put her trust in God—nothing would happen except what had already been decreed. But she was a mother, and a mother's heart knows no peace in such moments. Faced with this torment, Abu Ahmad made his decision—he would travel to Jordan to check on their sons and their families.

"You're going alone?" she cried.

"Yes," he replied.

"What good would that do?" she protested. "My fear and worry would only grow!"

"What is the solution, then? What do you suggest?" he asked.

"We travel together," she said firmly.

He tried to dissuade her, but she would not be deterred. In the end, he arranged the necessary permits for both of them, and together they set off for Jordan—only to find themselves stepping into what felt like a war zone.

Reaching their son Said's home was fraught with peril. Even after they arrived, they found no peace. The situation was dire, and the gunfire never ceased. They had to barricade the windows with cabinets and furniture to shield themselves from stray bullets. They moved through the house hunched over at all times—if anyone lifted their head even slightly, the others would cry out, "Don't! Stay down, or you'll be hit!"

Abu Ahmad muttered now and then, "This is all because of you. We were safe where we were."

But Umm Ahmad would answer, "Here, among my sons and their children, even with all this danger, is still easier for me than waiting far away, powerless."

Sighing, he would shake his head. "Alright, alright... may God bring good news... O Lord, have mercy."

The battles of September, Jerash, and Ajloun came to an end, and the revolution moved to Lebanon. As calm returned, Abu Ahmad and his wife traveled back to Hebron. He resumed his days in his shop, recounting, with his own eyes' testimony, the horrors and terror he had witnessed, and giving thanks for his safety. Those gathered congratulated him on his return, and he once again gave thanks—for himself, for Umm Ahmad, for their sons and their families.

Not long after, the radio carried news that struck like a thunderbolt—Gamal Abdel Nasser was dead. It was a devastating blow to the Palestinian people, the vast majority of whom had seen in him the leader of the Arab nation, their hope and their champion. Across the homeland, in its camps, its cities, and its villages, the people poured into the streets in furious, grieving demonstrations.

At Al-Shati Camp, classes were suspended for several days. A hunger strike was declared. Shops remained closed, and demonstrations filled the streets. At the forefront marched teachers and intellectuals from the camp, chanting for Arab unity, extolling the virtues of the late president, and raising his portraits alongside banners adorned with slogans of Arab nationalism and prayers for Abdel Nasser's soul.

Nearly everyone in the camp joined the demonstrations, or at least the vast majority. Men wept, women wailed, their cries rising into the air. The procession, reaching the peak of its fervor, surged beyond the camp, spilling onto the city's main roads, making its way toward the city center and Omar Al-Mukhtar Street. We, the schoolchildren, joined—boys and girls, young and old—our voices echoing through the streets: Long live Arab unity... Palestine is Arab... With our souls, with our blood, we sacrifice for you, Gamal!

As soon as the protest reached Omar Al-Mukhtar Street, the main thoroughfare of Gaza City, a large contingent of occupation forces was already waiting. They opened fire above the heads of the demonstrators, aiming to scatter them, to instill fear, to halt their advance. The crowd responded by hurling stones. The soldiers then began shooting at their legs. One by one, the wounded fell, rushed to Dar Al-Shifa Hospital and to the UNRWA clinic, which had been providing medical care since the occupation began in 1967.

The occupation authorities had already begun implementing a series of measures designed to tighten their grip on the territory, suppress resistance, and choke off any acts of defiance. They conducted a census of the population, issued personal identification cards to all adults—listing their children within—and enforced the registration of newborns. To oversee these matters, they opened a department for passports and permits, tasked with administering civil affairs for the residents.

At the same time, they sought to establish lines of communication with the local mukhtars and community elders. The military governor would summon them from time to time, discussing with them the daily affairs of the people—though in reality, he used them as conduits to relay his own directives. And so, one could often see these mukhtars and dignitaries making their way to the governor's headquarters, draped in their traditional cloaks, their mustaches meticulously groomed. Inside, the governor usually received them with courtesy—unless, of course, there had been protests, attacks, or acts of resistance. Then, his demeanor would change. He would rage, his voice rising in fury, while they sat in silence. And if one of them dared to speak, he would begin with deference: Your Excellency, Governor... Your Honor, Governor... and so on.



These mukhtars continued to wield their official seals, which citizens relied upon for any formal transactions. If someone wished to travel abroad, obtain a permit to start a business, construct a building, or complete any bureaucratic process, they had no choice but to visit the mukhtar of their town. The mukhtar would stamp the necessary documents—often for a small fee.

Meanwhile, occupation patrols roamed the land, carrying military maps and moving according to their detailed layouts, striving to uncover every hidden corner of the region. They operated around the clock, day and night—on foot and in vehicles—traversing plains, valleys, and mountains, passing through cities, villages, and refugee camps. Squads of soldiers marched in rows—two, three, sometimes four lines deep—with several meters between each soldier. Their rifles were always at the ready, their heads turning from side to side. Those at the rear would frequently spin around in full circles, scanning for any potential threat from behind.

They would advance, then halt. The commanding officer would scrutinize the map in his hands before directing them forward once more. Often, they stopped young men or passersby, demanding identification to verify their identities. The officer might then pull a folded sheet of paper from his pocket—bearing a list of names and ID numbers of individuals wanted for arrest or interrogation. Every few days, or sometimes daily, a convoy of military jeeps—large and small—would appear, always led by a civilian vehicle bearing a yellow license plate. When dozens of jeeps followed in formation, it became clear to everyone that a raid was underway. A home, an orchard, or a hidden location was about to be stormed, and a wanted fedayeen fighter—or someone accused of aiding them—would soon be taken.

Other times, the convoy would be seen on its return journey. A captive would be inside—his hands bound to the jeep's metal frame, his head covered with a thick, military-green sack. Sometimes, we recognized the prisoner by his clothes; other times, he remained an anonymous silhouette, heading toward an unknown fate in the interrogation rooms.

Yet despite such relentless measures, the resistance persisted. Every few days, word would spread—someone had hurled a grenade at a patrol, wounding or killing soldiers. A fedayeen fighter had fired a burst from a Carl Gustav submachine gun at a passing military jeep or an infantry unit, striking his target. Weapons, sometimes concealed under clothing or hidden in burlap sacks, would be glimpsed as they passed through the streets. The people knew—without a doubt—that the armed struggle had not ceased.



All these manifestations gradually began to fade, and the movement of the fedayeen grew more and more clandestine. In the early years of the seventies, Unit 101 emerged—a force established by General Ariel Sharon and led by Major Meir Dagan. This unit, known for wearing red berets and popularly referred to as the Red Caps, was considered a special force trained with utmost rigor. It stormed through the alleys of refugee camps and the groves of citrus orchards, firing upon anyone suspected of movement, attacking, assaulting, and striking without restraint or law. It played a pivotal role in combating the resistance, eliminating many of its leaders and operatives. A typical unit consisted of about ten to twenty soldiers, all young men in the prime of their youth, clad in official military uniforms, armed with state-of-the-art weapons, and trained to perfection. Each wore a red fabric beret, and among them, several carried large radio communication devices strapped to their backs, with tall antennas rising above them, constantly relaying transmissions from command headquarters.

One day, one of these units pursued a fedayeen fighter who had been identified—somehow—by the grenade he held in his hand. The moment he was spotted, he sprinted through the camp's alleys, vanishing into the labyrinthine streets. The soldiers charged after him, their gunfire echoing as they ran. The radio operator immediately contacted command, and before long, they had pinpointed the area where the young man had taken refuge. They swiftly surrounded it, encircling the place as a bracelet clasps a wrist.

A call rang out, ordering all inhabitants to leave their homes—men and women, young and old alike. They were gathered along the roadside and forced to sit in a line while intelligence officers began interrogating them one by one. Meanwhile, soldiers stormed into the houses, overturning every object in search of the fugitive or any hidden shelter he might have taken refuge in.

Somehow, they managed to trace the house where the young man was hiding. Officers and intelligence personnel moved in and out, consulting among themselves. The house was upturned, its contents scattered in their relentless search, until at last, they uncovered the entrance to the hideout where he had concealed himself.

Through loudspeakers, they called out to him, demanding that he surrender.

But no one came out.

As they approached the entrance of the hideout, gunfire erupted from within, forcing them to retreat. A few soldiers from the unit stealthily advanced, planting explosives around the site before withdrawing once more. Moments later, a deafening explosion tore through the camp, its tremor shaking every corner. Soon after, a bulldozer arrived, its massive blade tearing through the remnants of the house, digging into the rubble to expose the shelter and whatever lay hidden within.

In time, they unearthed the bodies of four fedayeen fighters who had sought refuge there, now buried beneath the wreckage.

As the years passed, the presence of the Popular Liberation Forces dwindled, and the majority of the resistance fighters came under the banner of Fatah. In certain areas, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine held sway. Arrests became a daily occurrence, particularly in the aftermath of fedayeen operations—dozens were seized every day. And yet, as one man was taken away in the dead of night, another was set free. There, a woman wept until her eyes were raw, consumed by fear for her husband or son, snatched away just hours before. She clutched at uncertainty, unsure what to do. And there, another woman let out ululations of joy, her cries of celebration ringing through the streets at the return of a husband, a son—released after days, months, or even years spent in the suffocating darkness of interrogation chambers and prison cells. The arrests in Hebron had begun in the earliest days of the occupation. Senior Israeli officials had personally visited the home of the city's mayor and most prominent elder, Sheikh Muhammad Ali Al-Ja'bari. They expressed their respect and esteem for him, inquiring if he had any requests. He asked only that their soldiers refrain from violating the honor and property of the townspeople. They assured him it would be so—and, to a certain extent, their troops adhered to this promise.

But in the days that followed, vast tracts of land were seized—most of them belonging to the Ja'bari family, along with lands owned by other families. Soon after, the construction of the Kiryat Arba settlement began. As a result, the completion of Khalid ibn al-Walid Mosque, which stood beside the confiscated land, was brought to an abrupt halt. Further seizures followed: Usama ibn Munqidh School was taken over, along with the old bus depot in the heart of the city and the historic Daboya building. These sites, once bustling with life, became military encampments, gathering points for Israeli forces—outposts that, over time, evolved into settlements and military strongholds.

From these points, settlers launched their incursions toward the Ibrahimi Mosque, a site they had long considered sacred, a place they claimed as their own. Their ambition was clear—to take full control, to expel the Muslims, to claim it entirely for themselves.

The enemy's military maneuvers grew bolder with each passing day, their movements increasingly deliberate. Yet, through it all, they remained cautious, avoiding direct clashes with the townspeople, intent on fostering—or at the very least maintaining—a fragile, non-hostile relationship with them. Some among them were unsettled by occasional skirmishes between Arab boys and Jewish settlers. Among them were senior figures in the settlement project, such as...

Rabbi Levinger and others would approach the elders of the region, seeking reconciliation—precisely in accordance with Arab customs—emphasizing their commitment to good neighborly relations and the preservation of bonds of kinship and peaceful coexistence. They would request a 'truce' ('atwa'), assess the appropriate compensation, and even pay blood money if necessary. The essential goal was to ensure that the Arabs remained in a state of submission and appeasement.

Some areas of friction, where the embers of resistance still smoldered, lay in the nearby refugee camps—such as Dheisheh and Al-'Arrub, both situated along the main road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Whenever soldiers, military governors, officials, settlers, or tourists traveled along this route, they were at times targeted by fedayeen operations from these camps. In response, the wrath of the occupation would come crashing down upon the camp's residents. Curfews were imposed, men were rounded up, beaten, and detained for prolonged periods.

Yet, despite the occupation pressing upon all, a certain air of superiority persisted—particularly among the city dwellers of Hebron toward the camp refugees. The view of the muhajir—the displaced—remained unchanged throughout the years. The same occupation that had expelled them from their villages and towns now loomed over the entire population, whether they were refugees confined to their camps or citizens within their cities. Still, the condescension endured, extending even toward the villagers in the surrounding countryside, mirroring attitudes found across the homeland. The city folk regarded the villagers with a sense of disdain, dealing with them from a position of superiority—except in rare instances.

The villagers and their womenfolk labored in the fields—sowing, harvesting, and tending their livestock. They churned milk, crafted cheese and butter, and extracted ghee. Then, they would descend into the city, carrying baskets filled with figs, grapes, and all manner of fruits, or clay pots brimming with sour yogurt and golden butter, selling them in the city markets for the lowest of prices. In turn, they would purchase what they needed—clothes, shoes, soap—at the highest of costs, before returning to their villages with a handful of coins, beaming with contentment, feeling as though the world itself could not contain their joy.

One could see a boy, or a woman, clutching a basket of figs or a bundle of eggs, waiting at the heart of the village for the arrival of the bus in the early morning hours. The boy held his basket close, while the woman embraced a clay jar filled with milk or ghee. Then, the bus would set off, rattling along the unpaved dirt roads for miles until it reached the smooth, paved highways leading into the city. Upon arrival at the bustling marketplace, merchants eagerly claimed their wares, and soon the villagers would weave through the marketplace, marveling at the goods on display, buying whatever pleased them. And then, as the day waned, they would return to the bus station, waiting for the journey back to their villages. For some, the road home did not end at the village station. Many still had long distances to traverse on foot, making their way back to their homes, their burdens lightened, yet their spirits full.

His burden was heavy, and so he would wait for long hours, hoping for the passing of a relative or acquaintance who could help hoist the sack onto his back, her head, or their donkey's sturdy frame. Yet despite the toil, they remained content, even happy.

With the opening of employment opportunities for Palestinian laborers inside the territories occupied in 1948, these workers began to learn much—an immeasurable amount—about Jewish society, its customs, traditions, and religion. On Friday afternoons, the Jewish Sabbath would begin, stretching until some time after sunset the following day. Yet many among them did not strictly adhere to its restrictions in their personal lives or within their homes. However, in public life, the observance was firm—official institutions shut down, fires were neither kindled nor extinguished, and all electrical devices were left untouched. This observance was most absolute on their holiest day, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

In the days leading up to Yom Kippur of 1973—which coincided with the sixth of October—Palestinian laborers returned home, as the factories, businesses, and institutions had all closed their doors. They gathered outside their homes, speaking in hushed or animated tones, joking, sipping tea, discussing their work, their troubles, and the details of their lives. This was the way of things.

And so, on that fateful sixth of October, a group of workers sat in our neighborhood, engaged in their usual talk and laughter, when suddenly, a neighbor burst out of his home, clutching a radio in his hands, his voice sharp with urgency.

"War has broken out between the Arabs and Israel!" The men sprang to their feet in disbelief. "What are you saying? War? Between the Arabs and Israel? Which Arabs?" But the man only pointed furiously at the radio, his voice firm.

"Listen! Just listen!" The radio crackled, and then the voice of an Egyptian broadcaster roared like thunder, reading aloud the first military communiqué from the Egyptian Armed Forces. The announcement was clear, undeniable—Egyptian forces had launched an assault on the Sinai, crossing the waters of the Suez Canal and breaching the fortified *Bar Lev* Line. Many of the men blinked in stunned silence, exchanging glances, as if questioning their own senses. Could it be true? Were they truly hearing this?

Then, as the reports continued—confirming Syria's entry into the war, detailing Arab advances, recounting the downing of Israeli fighter jets by Egyptian and Syrian air defenses, and the destruction of what seemed like an endless number of Israeli tanks—their disbelief gave way to exhilaration. Cries of joy erupted, faces lit up with a long-dormant hope.

Dreams of victory, of return, of liberation, began to stir in every heart in the camp.

But then, like a hammer striking cold iron, the sharp voice of the occupation's loudspeakers shattered their euphoria.

"A curfew is now in effect. All residents must remain indoors until further notice."

And so, the people retreated into their homes. Yet this time, they did so not in resignation, but with the unwavering belief that this curfew would be the last.

"It is only a matter of days," they whispered to one another, "before the Arab armies arrive as liberators."

And in every household, families huddled around their radios, listening, waiting, daring to believe.





## Chapter Ten

The day after my brother Mahmoud arrived in Gaza from his studies in Egypt, another student returning from Egypt for the summer holiday was caught during a routine inspection. On him, they found a letter—one that contained a list of names. It was a roster of young Palestinian men who had been recruited into *Fatah* while in Egypt, set to begin organizing resistance operations in the Gaza Strip. Among the names on that list was Mahmoud's. And so, he was arrested and taken in for interrogation.

The interrogation division in Gaza's prison was known as "The Slaughterhouse." The name alone was enough to tell of the horrors that took place within its walls—of the torment, the cruelty, the skinning of a man's will until nothing remained but raw suffering. The building itself was simple: a long corridor ran through its center, about four meters wide and twenty meters long. On either side, doors led to rooms of varying sizes—rooms where interrogations took place.

In that long corridor, prisoners were made to sit on the floor or stand, their faces pressed against the walls. Thick cloth sacks were pulled over their heads, covering them down to their shoulders. Their hands were bound tightly behind their backs.

Soldiers patrolled the hallway, striking, kicking, slapping—never relenting. If one of the detainees so much as slumped or dared to drift into a moment's rest, they would be jolted awake by a sudden dousing of ice-cold water.

Every now and then, one of them would be seized and dragged into one of the side rooms. There, the sack would be ripped from his head, and before him would stand a group of interrogators—men who spoke Arabic, but with that unmistakable Hebrew accent.

They fired endless questions at him, their voices sharp, their blows sharper—kicks, punches, slaps—all in ceaseless rhythm.

Among them, there was always one who played a different role. He was the *friend*, the concerned confidant. With a show of authority, he would step forward, shoving the others aside as if rescuing the prisoner from their brutality.

"Leave him to me," he would say, his voice firm. "I'll speak with him. Beating won't get us anywhere. I know he wants to confess."

The others would pretend to resist, growling, lunging toward the detainee as if eager to resume their attack. But the friend would push them back, herding them out of the room. And then, the act would shift.

His voice would soften, his words coated in honey.

"Why endure this?" he would say. "We already know everything. They will not stop, not until you confess. So why suffer needlessly?"

He would speak in that gentle, coaxing tone, playing the part of the reasonable man. Sometimes, he would even offer a cigarette, lighting it with care, or bring a cup of tea, setting it down like a gesture of kindness.

If his persuasion worked, the prisoner would be asked to write down his confession.

And if not—if his will held firm—then the others would return.

And they would finish what they started.



The detainee is thrown onto his back, his hands shackled behind him with iron restraints, a cloth sack covering his face and head. One of them sits on his chest, suffocating him while pouring water over the sack. Another stands on his stomach. A third places a chair between his legs, forcing them apart, then sits upon it. A fourth presses down on his testicles. Two others each seize one of his feet.

And so it continues, in rounds—one ending, the next beginning after mere seconds. He is then thrown onto a long table in the same position, subjected to the same methods. His hands may once again be shackled behind his back, then tied to his neck or to a pipe affixed high on the wall, leaving him half-suspended, his fingertips barely brushing the ground. His head remains covered with one sack, or several. During this, his interrogators strike his stomach with fists, kick him across his body, drench him in cold water. At times, they turn on an electric fan, sending him into violent shivers, his body numbed by the creeping frost.

These and other tortures were inflicted upon Mahmoud during his interrogation in the (slaughterhouse) of Gaza prison, until his body withered, his frame wasted away, and he no longer recognized himself. Forty days passed like this—days in which sleep was rare, food scarcely tasted, and water never once touched his skin. When they feared he might die and sought to grant him brief reprieve, they cast him into one of the solitary cells—a narrow chamber no more than a meter and a half wide, two and a half meters long—where he found himself crammed with five or six other prisoners, all broken by relentless questioning, drained of sleep. They collapsed upon one another, sinking into a terrifying slumber from which they woke only at the hands of the jailers, who dragged them once more to the interrogators.

Weeks of Mahmoud's steadfast denial passed—denying any ties to organizations, to Fatah or others—until they confronted him with a list bearing his name alongside others. They claimed it had been found with a student who arrived after him from Egypt, that they had organized there, that they were tasked with structuring operations in the sector. Mahmoud insisted it was a fabrication, a trap set by dishonest men. And so, they resumed their old methods—beatings, torture, suspension. He realized then that they would never let him go.

He confessed that someone had recruited him into Fatah in Egypt, that they had told him they would contact him upon his return to Gaza. That was all. Mahmoud had thought, foolishly, that this would put an end to the ordeal. But instead, the interrogation began anew.

Have you trained on any weapon? What missions were you assigned to carry out? Who organized with you? Have you recruited others? And who are they?—thousands of other questions followed. And as he denied everything, the interrogation resumed with even greater intensity and cruelty. Mahmoud realized then that his first confession had been a mistake—that no matter what, the torment would persist. He had to stand by his statement, without further entangling himself in a prolonged prison sentence. And so, they continued torturing him, just as they did with the other detainees in the interrogation section, where the air was filled with nothing but the screams of prisoners and the relentless curses and insults of the interrogators, echoing day and night.

After about forty days, they came to terms with the fact that they would extract nothing more from him. He was moved down to the solitary cells, and weeks later, he was transferred to the regular prison. Entering one of the rooms in a prison ward, he was handed some clothes, blankets, two plastic bowls, and a spoon. Inside, he found nearly twenty prisoners, some of whom he recognized as fellow camp residents. They welcomed him with warmth and consolation, each introducing himself—his name, his hometown, his charge, and whatever else there was to share.

Yet, the one thought that gnawed at Mahmoud's heart, that left him restless, was the need to see my mother—to see us—to reassure us that he was still alive, that he was well, that he wouldn't be condemned to an endless sentence like so many others, who were taken and never seen again. From his very first moments there, he inquired about family visits. The others told him that for those from Gaza City, visits were scheduled for the first Friday of every month. He asked about the date and realized he would have to wait another two weeks.

My mother asked some of the neighbors who had sons in detention—especially our neighbor, Umm Al-Abd—whether we could bring food and clothes for Mahmoud, whether they would allow us to send anything inside. The answer was no. She also learned that only three visitors were permitted—either three adults or two adults and a child. The night before the visit, we deliberated at length over who would accompany my mother. Each of us wanted to go.

In the end, my mother decided: my sister Fatima, myself, and Mariam. Hassan, upset, protested with clear frustration, but my mother explained her fears—she worried he might get into an altercation with the soldiers or the prison guards. It was the first visit, she told him—we would go, assess the situation, and then decide. He agreed, albeit reluctantly.

On Friday morning, as the sun began to rise, we stood at the side entrance of the Saraya building, where Gaza Central Prison was housed. Arriving early, we found hundreds of families already waiting by the wall. A barrier of iron pipes had been set up to organize the queue, and we all sat in a designated waiting area.

A small hatch in the door opened, and one of the guards peered through before stepping outside with a register in hand. He began calling out names.

Each time a prisoner's name was called, their family would stand up, answering, "Yes," then move to the front of the iron barrier, lining up in anticipation of entry. After calling out thirty names, the guard would withdraw inside, and they would begin admitting people for inspection, separating men from women. Once the search was completed, the families would reunite and proceed to the visitation area.

We waited anxiously, hearts pounding, until my brother Mahmoud's name was finally called in the fifth group. We answered in unison, "Yes," and stood in line until the group was complete. Then, they began letting us in. Since we had no adult men with us, we all went through the women's inspection area, where female officers searched my mother, my sisters, and me. Afterward, we were led into a courtyard to wait while others were being searched.

We watched as the group before us emerged from their visit, then we were guided through dimly lit corridors, long and narrow, until we reached the visitation section—a concrete wall with small openings covered by iron mesh, separating us from the detainees.

The younger children rushed in first, while the adults walked more slowly. I ran with the children, each of us scanning the faces behind the barriers, searching for a father, a brother. And then—I saw him. Mahmoud. Sitting behind one of the grates.

I screamed, "Mama! It's Mahmoud! Mama, it's Mahmoud!"

The noise in the room swelled, voices overlapping, making it impossible for my mother to hear me. But she saw me standing at the grate and hurried forward, my sisters Fatima and Maryam close behind.

A flood of questions burst from my mother before Mahmoud could even take a breath—questions that came without pause, without waiting for answers. Was he alright? Had they beaten him? Had they fed him? How was his body? Had they crippled his legs, his hands? The words tumbled out between her sobs, relentless.

Mahmoud, his face calm, raised his hands to reassure her. "I'm fine, Mama, I swear. Look at me—I'm here, I'm whole, I'm well. How are you? How are my siblings?"

"How are you, Fatima? How are you, Maryam?"

Fatima wiped her tears and murmured, "I'm fine, brother, I'm fine."

Maryam whispered, "Alhamdulillah."

**My mother began asking him about his case and the trial. He assured her it was a simple matter, that the sentence, God willing, would be no more than a year or a year and a half.**

At that, my mother gasped so sharply it seemed her soul might tear free from her chest. "A year? A year and a half? Oh, woe is me!" she wailed. Mahmoud hurried to calm her, to ease her fears. She told him she had hired a lawyer for him.

The guards standing behind us and behind the prisoners on the other side suddenly clapped their hands and shouted, "Visit's over! Visit's over!" We managed a final exchange of farewells before the guards seized Mahmoud and the other detainees, pulling them away through the door, while pushing us, the families, out in the opposite direction.

And what did I take away from that visit? That I had seen Mahmoud. That he had asked after me, and I after him. And as he bid my mother farewell, he remembered me and said, "Goodbye, Ahmad."

The entire visit had been filled with my mother's questions, Mahmoud's reassurances, and talk of his case and sentencing. But most importantly, after that visit, we felt my mother's spirit begin to steady, as if she were finally reclaiming a small piece of herself. Mahmoud had been placed in Section (B) of Gaza Prison. The section consisted of eight rooms, their doors opening onto a long corridor, barely three meters wide. The rooms themselves ranged between fifteen and twenty-five square meters, each with several small windows and an iron-barred door. In one corner of each room was a toilet.

No fewer than twenty prisoners were crammed into each space, spreading their blankets across the floor to sleep. They lay pressed against one another on their sides, for there was no room to sleep on their backs. They could not turn over unless they rose to their feet, shifted their position, and lay down again on the opposite side. And if someone had to leave their spot—for the restroom, for instance—he would have to step over the sleeping bodies. Upon returning, he would often find his place had disappeared, claimed by those who had shifted in his absence.

At exactly six in the morning, a loudspeaker blared the announcement: roll call was about to begin. Lights flooded the cells, and the guards hammered on the doors to wake the prisoners. Every detainee was required to sit up, fold their belongings, arrange them neatly, and wait for inspection.

If someone failed to wake, and his cellmates did not rouse him in time, the guards would storm in, kicking him brutally until he was on his feet.

A large number of guards would enter, led by an officer, and the prisoners were forced to stand in two lines. The guards, wielding batons, wearing helmets, one of them carrying a tear gas launcher, counted them cell by cell before moving on to count the next section.



At last, the loudspeakers announced the end of roll call. Breakfast was brought in—usually two or three slices of bread, a small portion of butter, a bit of jam, and sometimes half a boiled egg. A cup of something that tasted and smelled vaguely like tea accompanied the meal.

The prisoners ate after taking turns using the restroom, one by one. At times, someone would be in desperate need, writhing in pain, clutching his stomach, pleading with the one inside to hurry, his condition worsening by the second.

The guards then moved from cell to cell, leading the prisoners out in pairs to the fura, the exercise yard. It was a confined space, enclosed by towering walls, its ceiling covered in barbed wire, no more than a hundred and twenty square meters in size.

The prisoners were forced to exit in a single file, hands behind their backs, heads bowed. Once in the yard, the guards stood in the center, wielding batons, watching. The prisoners had to march in a continuous circle. Anyone who spoke, lagged behind, or stepped ahead was struck—beaten with batons, kicked, slapped. They marched like this for an hour, sometimes less, before being sent back to their cells.

Inside, each prisoner was required to sit on his folded blanket. Gathering in small groups, sitting in circles, engaging in conversation or study—these were all strictly forbidden. If the guards caught them, they would storm the room, beating them savagely. Some would be dragged off to the punishment cells, the notorious snukot.

At midday, another roll call was conducted, after which lunch was served: a few slices of bread and a bowl of vegetable broth—sometimes with bits of carrot, sometimes nothing more than salted hot water. Occasionally, mashed potatoes, rice, or thin slices of eggplant were provided, but the portions were so meager they barely left a trace.

After eating, some prisoners washed the dishes while others leaned against the walls, their heavy eyelids battling the weariness of endless monotony. If a guard patrolling the corridor outside caught sight of anyone dozing off, he would bellow at them to stay awake. Sleep was a privilege reserved only for the night.

The hours dragged on, each one heavier than the last, until dinner was served—a meal so sparse it was nearly invisible on the plate.

Shortly before five, the prisoners ate, then sat in silence, waiting for sunset. An hour, sometimes an hour and a half after nightfall, another roll call was conducted, exactly as before. Only then did the guards turn off the lights, as the prisoners lay crammed together, bodies pressed against one another, preparing for sleep.

Yet even in the dark, rest was not truly granted. A guard always loomed, peering into the cells, his boots striking the ground in deliberate, heavy steps—as if he refused to allow them peace, even in the depths of night...



On Thursdays, the prisoners were taken to the showers in groups of four, led to the far end of the ward. Each man was granted five minutes to bathe—his only chance for the week. The water was rarely warm, and a single, coarse bar of soap had to suffice for everyone who entered, meaning a quarter of the ward's inmates shared the same bar. After the showers, the guard would toss a single razor blade into each cell—one blade for all to shave with...

Fridays were visiting days. Each week, families from different regions of the Strip were allowed entry. From early morning, those expecting visitors would prepare, waiting for the loudspeakers mounted on the ward's walls to call out the names, group by group. As names were announced, prisoners filed out of their cells, their doors unbolted by the guards. Gathered from all sections, they were herded into a waiting room and searched one by one. Then, seized firmly by the guards, they were led into the visitation area for a second round of inspection. Prisoners from each ward were kept apart. When they finally returned to their cells, their cellmates welcomed them back, congratulating them on the visit. "May God bless you," the visitors would respond. "May you have your turn soon."

Into this bleak and merciless reality, my brother Mahmoud arrived, imprisoned in Gaza's central jail—a place bursting at the seams with inmates from across the Strip. The prison administration allowed no semblance of organized communal life. They stripped the prisoners of even the most basic rights guaranteed by human rights conventions and the Geneva Accords. Any attempt at protest was met with ruthless beatings—violence beyond what any sane mind could fathom.

On court days, the guards came to inform Mahmoud and others that they were to be taken to trial. Within minutes, they were pulled from their cells and subjected to an invasive search before being shackled—iron cuffs clamped tightly around their wrists, arms bound behind their backs, their ankles restrained. Dragged forward, they were marched across the prison grounds to the military court housed at the far end of the compound. There, they were placed in a holding room, waiting for their names to be called.

One by one, they were ushered into the courtroom, locked inside the defendant's cage, soldiers standing watch. In the center of the hall stood a large table, behind it three chairs, and above them, the Israeli flag. When the judges—military officers in uniform—entered, a soldier barked, "Stand!" Everyone in the room had to rise, including the families seated on the opposite side, rifles trained upon them. The trial began. And as it did, the role of the defense attorney was reduced to nothing—closer to zero than anything else

Mahmoud stole glances through the ranks of soldiers, searching for my mother, my uncle, and my brother Hassan among the families seated across the hall. He strained to paint a reassuring smile upon his face, an attempt to console them from afar. My mother, in turn, struggled to return the gesture—her lips barely curving into a faint, drawn smile, burdened with worry and the weight of anxious anticipation. Court session after court session passed without resolution. Each time, the prisoners were marched back to their cells through the same grueling procedures, greeted by their fellow inmates with anxious inquiries. If one of them had been sentenced, the others rushed to console him, to remind him that freedom was near, that prison did not break men—that this was the price of belonging.

Life inside was unbearably harsh. The guards' reactions to even the slightest protest were more brutal than imagination could conceive. Many times, a prisoner's skull had been shattered simply for asking, "Is this food fit for human beings? Does it truly suffice for twenty men?" More than once, hands had been broken for so much as glancing toward another cell's door while marching in line to the yard. Eyes were left swollen and bruised simply because three or four prisoners had sat together in a corner of their cell, forming a small circle. Something had to be done to shatter this relentless cycle of abuse.

A handful of prisoners, Mahmoud among them, began discussing the matter—each seated in his place to avoid arousing suspicion. They sought a way to break free from this reality. It was clear to them all that force and violence would lead nowhere. They possessed nothing but their bare hands, while the guards wielded batons, shields, helmets, tear gas, and an unyielding cruelty devoid of the slightest trace of humanity. What, then, could be done? In the end, they reached a single conclusion: the only way to alter their reality was through an open-ended hunger strike. Through hunger, they would engage in a battle of will—a test of their endurance against the agony of starvation, a confrontation with death itself. By doing so, they would break the arrogance of their jailers, forcing them to alter the equation of oppression.

The decision was made. Coordination began. A prisoner assigned to distribute food was asked to steal a pen from the guards and procure some paper. After several attempts, he succeeded, hiding the pen and sheets for days. In a shadowed corner of the cell, away from the guards' line of sight as they patrolled the corridors, the first letters were carefully written—messages to be smuggled to other sections, calling for a unified strike. Every ward, every prisoner, would begin at the exact same moment.

On visitation day, some prisoners smuggled the letters past inspection. Wrapped in nylon, they were easy to conceal inside the mouth. In the waiting room, the letters were discreetly distributed among young men from other sections, each tucking one inside his mouth as they exchanged them with utmost caution. If a guard's movement was detected in the corridor, if he drew near, someone would clear his throat or stamp his foot lightly on the ground—a signal to hide the letters at once. Once a letter had made its way around a room, it was carefully folded again, awaiting the next mealtime when it would be passed on, read, and shared anew. Within two weeks, every prisoner had been informed and prepared for the strike.

On Sunday morning, after the routine headcount and the arrival of breakfast, the usual prisoner assigned to distribute food took his portion and stood at the door of the first cell, calling out: "Food, brothers?" The response came firm and unified: "We don't want it. We are on strike." The guard was taken aback, immediately summoning his superior. Ordered to move on to the next cell, he repeated, "Food, brothers?" "We don't want it. We are on strike." The third cell, the fourth, and so on—throughout the entire section. And then the next section. And the next.

The guards erupted in fury. The prison director and his officers stormed into the sections, accompanied by a large force armed with batons, shields, and tear gas. The director bellowed at a guard, "Open the door!" The first cell door swung open. "Bring the food," he commanded. A prisoner stepped forward, carrying a tray. The director began questioning them one by one. "Do you want to eat?" "No." He turned to the next prisoner. "Do you want to eat?" "No." The third, the fourth—on and on he went, moving through cells across the prison, yet not a single inmate agreed to accept food. They drank only water, with a few grains of salt.

Lunch came and went, untouched. Dinner remained unclaimed. The second day passed. Then the third. A week. Two weeks. The prisoners' bodies weakened; their limbs grew frail, their eyes sank deep into their sockets. Each day, or every few days, the director or one of his officers returned, searching for signs of collapse, for someone who had broken, for anyone ready to surrender and take a bite of food—but to no avail. It was clear now: the prisoners were steadfast, resolute. The matter had surely reached higher authorities. The director returned, questioning one prisoner after another about their demands, but each time he received the same reply: "I am not authorized to speak on this. Speak to the committee—Mahmoud Al-Saleh, Hassan Thabat, and Abdul Aziz Shaho." Enraged, the director roared, "There are no committees! We do not recognize any committees! You are nothing but criminals and saboteurs!"

A third week passed, and it became evident that the situation was escalating. The danger to the prisoners' lives was real, and there was no doubt that this would generate immense international pressure on Israel. The global media would not tolerate the image of Palestinians dying of hunger—nor could they allow such a display of defiance and dignity to take center stage. And so, negotiations began with the committee. They were summoned to the prison director's office. On the table, an array of the finest dishes was laid out. Opposite them sat the prison administration, led by the director. The three prisoners took their seats across from them, barely able to remain upright, their bodies drained of strength, yet they steeled themselves, summoning the last reserves of will from their exhausted frames.

The director invited them to eat, but they politely declined. "We are strikers, just like our brothers. We will be the last to eat—only if our demands are met." "What are your demands?" the director asked. "An end to beatings and physical abuse. The right to sit in our cells as we please. The right to sleep during the day. Freedom in the courtyard—to sit, walk, or gather as we wish. Proper mattresses for sleeping. Better food, in both quality and quantity. A doubling of cleaning supplies. Extended shower times—twice a week. The right to notebooks, pens, and books. And other demands." The administration took note of the list and promised a response at a later time. The three prisoners struggled to their feet, escorted by guards whose faces bore growing expressions of astonishment, day after day, at the sheer determination of these men—their will unbroken even in the face of death.

Two days later, the committee was summoned again. The director read out the administration's response: some demands were approved, others denied. The committee members rose at once, announcing their intent to leave. "This is not enough. The strike continues." The officers attempted to persuade them to stay, to negotiate further, but they refused. "We demand full compliance with our requests."

The following day, the committee was called once more. This time, most demands had been accepted. The committee gave initial approval to suspend the strike, but only on one condition: they must be allowed to tour the prison, inform the prisoners of the outcome, and hear their opinions. The request was denied. The committee declared the strike would continue and left.

Hours later, they were called back. This time, permission was granted—to visit the sections under the watchful escort of a prison officer. And so, they began their tour, moving from section to section, cell to cell, greeting the prisoners, informing them of the results, and securing their consent to end the strike. One by one, they covered every wing of the prison, until the message had reached them all.

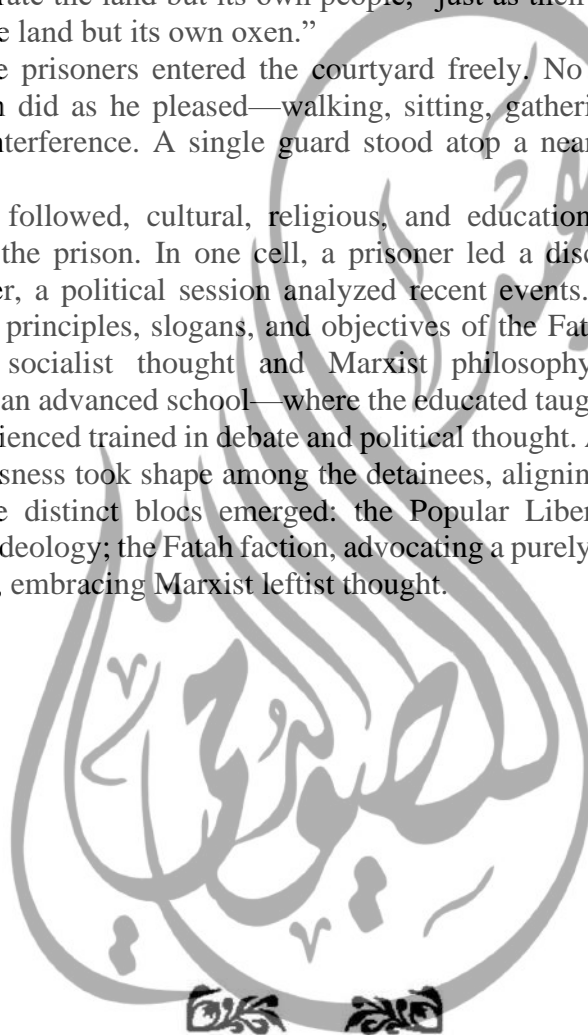


At that moment, the officers were certain that the strike had come to an end. The prisoners prepared to receive food—but for the first three days, they would consume only liquids. Solid and heavy foods had to be reintroduced gradually, for their stomachs and intestines, dormant for weeks, were unprepared for normal meals. They had to be restarted cautiously, as advised by one of the imprisoned doctors.

After the first meal, the prisoners in each cell gathered in a single circle. In Room (7), Section (B), Mahmoud addressed the group. He spoke of the victory they had achieved, declaring that when men resolve to fight and steel themselves for death, nothing can stand in their way—victory is inevitable. He spoke of the Palestinian revolution, born solely of men's will and readiness. Then, he echoed a slogan of the Fatah movement: "No one will liberate the land but its own people," just as their ancestors used to say, "No one plows the land but its own oxen."

The next day, the prisoners entered the courtyard freely. No guards patrolled with batons. Each man did as he pleased—walking, sitting, gathering in twos, threes, or fours—without interference. A single guard stood atop a nearby roof, observing in silence.

In the days that followed, cultural, religious, and educational gatherings became commonplace in the prison. In one cell, a prisoner led a discussion on Palestinian history; in another, a political session analyzed recent events. A third cell hosted a discussion on the principles, slogans, and objectives of the Fatah movement, while a fourth explored socialist thought and Marxist philosophy. The prison began transforming into an advanced school—where the educated taught those eager to learn, where the inexperienced trained in debate and political thought. A clear ideological and political consciousness took shape among the detainees, aligning with their respective affiliations. Three distinct blocs emerged: the Popular Liberation Forces, leaning towards Leninist ideology; the Fatah faction, advocating a purely nationalist vision; and the Popular Front, embracing Marxist leftist thought.



## Chapter Eleven

As the date of Mahmoud's release approached, my mother began making preparations to welcome him back in triumph. Once again, we whitewashed the house with lime, and she prepared fenugreek pudding, basbousa, and an assortment of other dishes. We resumed our conversations about the projects and aspirations we had discussed upon his return from Egypt.

On the day of his release, we all gathered in full anticipation at the gate of the Seraya. As midday approached, he emerged from the gate. The moment he saw us, he ran toward us, and we ran to him. We embraced him tightly, murmuring, *"Thank God for your safety, thank God for your safety."* My mother, as always, lagged behind. Mahmoud reached her, bending down to kiss her hands and forehead, while she tried to stop him, saying, *"No, Engineer, please."*

We set off for home, our heads held high. With every step, familiar faces turned, rushing to greet and embrace Mahmoud, exclaiming, *"Thank God for your safety, Engineer!"* As we reached the edge of our neighborhood, we found it waiting for us. Mahmoud was received as a returning hero, a conqueror freed from captivity. The celebrations continued for days, with visitors arriving to congratulate him.

No sooner had our joy over Mahmoud's return from prison settled than another celebration began—his employment at the agency. He started work at its headquarters as a building inspector and urban engineer on its various projects. It was clear that, after a long period of hardship, the gates of fortune had finally opened for us. A position at the agency came with an excellent salary.

Hardly had we finished rejoicing over Mahmoud's new job when yet another joy arrived—my sister Fatima's engagement to one of Mahmoud's colleagues. Before long, the wedding took place. On the night of Fatima's wedding, after she had moved to her husband's home and we returned from the celebration, we felt as if a pillar of the house had been torn away. Fatima had filled our home with her presence. I, more than anyone, felt as if my heart had been ripped from my chest and cast outside. But as the days passed, we grew accustomed to it—especially after knowing that she was happy in her new life.

Not long after, our neighbor, Abdul Hafiz—the son of Umm Al-Abed—was released from prison. He had been imprisoned on charges of affiliation with the Popular Front. The neighborhood welcomed him with a reception no less grand than the one we had held for my brother Mahmoud. His mother, Umm Al-Abed, had also prepared sweets in celebration of his release.

However, the way my brother Mahmoud welcomed Abdul Hafiz was quite strange. On one hand, it was extremely warm, as they had lived together in prison, enduring the strike and suffering side by side, which had forged a close friendship between them. On the other hand, it was clear that there was a sharp rivalry, as they quickly criticized each other, often interrupting the conversation when political and ideological issues arose.

Months into Mahmoud's job, my mother insisted on starting our project to build a new room fit for an engineer. She wanted a space for him to welcome his friends, colleagues, and the young men of the neighborhood.

We hired a builder, purchased the necessary materials, and constructed a spacious room with high walls, a roof made of asbestos, several large windows, an excellent wooden door, and a raised floor paved with cement.

Afterward, my mother insisted on buying a bed.

Although it was used, it was a leap toward modernity in our home. Mahmoud would sleep on it, and sometimes one of us would lie down for a while. We also bought a table and two chairs, and thus things began to develop noticeably in our house. The talk of Mahmoud's intentions to marry began to increase, and my mother started conversing with him about the girl he desired. Did he have someone specific in mind? What qualities did he want in his bride?

The resistance had begun to lose its fervor; many had been arrested, and many had been martyred. The world opened up to people, distracting them, in addition to the significant successes achieved by Israeli intelligence against the resistance, which had seized large quantities of weapons and ammunition. It seemed that their level of knowledge about the Palestinian reality had greatly increased, enabling them to contain and pressure the resistance effectively.

The Popular Liberation Forces began to weaken considerably, as it was primarily a military organization lacking the necessary organizational structure and external support. Its presence was confined to the Gaza Strip, without extending to the West Bank, and over time, it began to be overshadowed by Fatah and the Popular Front.

With the arrest and imprisonment of many young men, their prison sentences ended, and they were released.

Intellectual and political currents began to take shape, leading to intense intellectual and political discussions among these young men and their families in the closed circles they believed were far removed from scrutiny.

Israeli intelligence had grown ever more adept, and we began to hear, more clearly than before, of those who embraced Fatah's ideology and advocated its ideas, while others aligned themselves with the Popular Front, adopting its beliefs and ideology.

Abdel Hafiz often visited our home, gathering with others in my brother Mahmoud's room to engage in discussions on ideological matters. A staunch Marxist and socialist, he fervently championed his ideology, delving into philosophical debates about historical movement (dialectics), citing works by Marx, Lenin, or Engels. He spoke of the Soviet Union's unwavering support for our people's struggle and legitimate rights, as well as the backing we received from socialist nations for our cause. He insisted that we should leverage these alliances and the support they offered. Mahmoud, however, held a different perspective. He believed that our cause could not afford to be fragmented by ideological divisions—everyone was free to hold their own beliefs, but all efforts must be channeled into a unified national movement under the banner of Fatah, which was broad enough to encompass the religious and the secular, the communist, the Christian, and the Muslim alike. There was no room for ideological disputes.

Whenever they gathered—whether in our home, at Umm al-Abd's house, or on a street corner—these discussions would flare up, voices rising as each passionately defended his stance. At times, the debates grew so heated they resembled outright brawls, yet, in the end, they always concluded with cups of tea being served, and each would eventually return to his work and daily concerns.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Ahmad had begun inviting groups of young men to prayer, encouraging them to frequent the mosque. They came, performing their prayers, then staying for study circles where they read the Qur'an or delved into religious texts on the Prophet's biography, jurisprudence, or Hadith. Sheikh Ahmad would explain, interpret, and guide them, while they listened with eagerness and understanding. As they absorbed his teachings, they carried his message beyond the mosque, returning with new faces, and thus, the circle grew larger and stronger.

My brother Hassan was the kindest among us, the most selfless, always ready to sacrifice for others. He bore the burden of providing for our household and financing Mahmoud's education in Egypt, all while working at his vegetable stall and continuing his own studies. He later accepted enrollment in the industrial school of the UNRWA agency, despite his outstanding high school grades, which could have easily secured him a place in engineering or science had circumstances allowed.

Had he been given the right opportunity, he too could have pursued a career in engineering or the sciences. But the harsh realities of life left him with no choice. He accepted industrial studies with quiet resignation, all while continuing to shoulder the responsibilities of the vegetable stall. Now, he was nearing graduation from the metalworking and machining department of the industrial school.



While working at his vegetable stall, Hassan met Sheikh Ahmad, who had purchased household supplies from him several times. Observing Hassan's kindness and noble character, the sheikh invited him to prayer and encouraged him to frequent the mosque, reminding him of the afterlife and warning against disobeying God, straying from His commands, and being consumed by worldly greed.

He spoke of the path of faith and righteousness as the best and shortest road to happiness, victory in this world, and ultimate success in the hereafter. His words found their way into Hassan's heart. He promised the sheikh that he would start praying and visit the mosque. That very evening, Hassan performed his ablutions, prayed, and from then on, attended the mosque for prayer whenever he had the chance.

He usually went at sunset and remained there until he had performed the night prayer before returning home. This was entirely acceptable to our family, especially my mother, as prayer and mosque attendance were never matters of concern. Hassan was mature and responsible; there was nothing to worry about.

At times, he would join the discussions between my brother Mahmoud, our neighbor Abdel Hafiz, and the other young men. He was particularly harsh in his arguments against Abdel Hafiz, accusing him of atheism, disbelief, and lack of faith. However, Abdel Hafiz was clearly more adept at intellectual debates—his level of knowledge far surpassed Hassan's. His time in prison had sharpened his abilities, allowing him to challenge religious thought. He argued that religion was nothing more than an opiate for the masses, a tool of sedation. "Where are the devout?" he would ask. "What role have they played in the national struggle and the fight against occupation?"

Hassan would respond, but his rebuttals were weak. He often clashed with Mahmoud in these debates, insisting on the necessity of returning to religion and holding steadfast to it throughout the liberation struggle. He frequently cited a saying attributed to Umar ibn al-Khattab: The latter state of this nation will not be set right except by what set its early state right.

Mahmoud, however, always countered with strong responses: "Faith is beyond doubt and not up for dispute, but we are in the midst of a national liberation movement. We must not allow any ideological or religious differences to distract us from that." Hassan would fall silent, unable to find an answer. Then Mahmoud would press him further: "And what about the Christians among our people? What is their role in the struggle? Where do they stand? How would you treat them if we were to declare and embark upon this conflict?"

The next day, Hassan returned from the mosque carrying several books. One refuted and criticized Marxist thought and socialist theories, another examined the economic system in Islam, and a third explored matters of faith. He placed them beside him, flipping through the pages, searching for answers to the questions he had failed to address in the previous night's debate.

Mahmoud began commenting on the changes he noticed in Hassan. At times, he would sit with him, asking about the mosque, its activities, and his frequent visits there. He tried to advise Hassan to distance himself from that group, but when Hassan refused to heed his warnings, Mahmoud turned to our mother, attempting to use her influence to prevent Hassan from engaging with them.

Soon, a word began to surface frequently in our conversations—Ikhwanjiya. Mahmoud claimed that Sheikh Ahmad and the group attending the mosque's gatherings, exchanging religious books, were Ikhwanjiya—members of the Muslim Brotherhood. He expressed his fear to our mother that Hassan might become one of them, warning her that the Ikhwanjiya did not believe in Arab nationalism, that they opposed Gamal Abdel Nasser and had even attempted to assassinate him. He reminded her that governments and regimes were against them, that they were despised and persecuted. If Hassan were to become Ikhwanji, he would be putting himself in unnecessary danger. Our mother would call Hassan to sit with her, trying to understand what she had heard from Mahmoud, especially regarding the Ikhwanjiya. But Hassan would firmly deny any affiliation with the Brotherhood, insisting that no one at the mosque had ever spoken to him about them. He had never heard a single mention of the Brotherhood in his conversations with others there. All that happened at the mosque, he said, was prayer, the recitation and study of the Qur'an, and learning about the fundamentals of religion. "Is that wrong?" he would ask.

"No," she would reply, then caution him to be careful and not get involved in matters that bring trouble. He would reassure her, joke with her, and in the end, she would walk away content.

I often overheard these conversations—between Mahmoud and Hassan, between Mahmoud and our mother, or between Hassan and our mother. Mahmoud's arguments made more sense to my mind, yet Hassan's sincerity and the simplicity of his approach brought a sense of comfort and reassurance. Perhaps Hassan sensed this, for he began trying to influence me, encouraging me to pray and accompany him to the mosque. I prayed sometimes and neglected it at other times, but I did go with him on several occasions, attending the study circle held between the sunset and night prayers, led by Sheikh Ahmad.

I attended several sessions where he interpreted passages from the Qur'an, including Surahs Az-Zumar and Al-Muddathir. His words were moving and eloquent as he described scenes of divine justice, the torments of the afterlife, and its eternal bliss. He spoke of how the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ first received the divine command to bear the banner of the message, to proclaim it, and to endure its burdens.

Hassan graduated from the industrial school and immediately found a job at one of the workshops for blacksmithing, turning, and filing in the Zeitoun area of Gaza. The salary was reasonable, with a promise of an increase if he proved his skill and technical abilities. It was clear that we had entered the golden age of our lives after years of poverty and hardship.

At the time, I was on the verge of completing my preparatory studies. My cousin Ibrahim had just started high school, while my brother Mohammed was in his second year of the scientific section. Tahani had finished her secondary education and had registered to join the Teachers' Institute in Gaza, waiting for her results. It seemed as if life was smiling at us once again.

After years of absence, my cousin Hassan reappeared—but in an entirely different form. He had grown into a full-grown man, but he had let his beard and hair grow out. His clothes were strange and unsettling, resembling those of the Jews. A golden chain hung around his neck, and a thick gold bracelet encircled his wrist. He wore tattered cowboy jeans, frayed at the knees, and carried a pack of cigarettes in his hand. He seemed as if he had arrived from another planet.

He knocked on the door. I opened it but didn't recognize him at first. He ran his fingers through my hair, ruffling it as he said, "You're Ahmed." I recognized him by his voice. "You're Hassan?" I asked. "Yes," he replied. I screamed, "Mother! Mahmoud! It's Hassan! My cousin has come home!"

Everyone rushed out of their rooms toward the door. By then, Hassan had taken a few steps inside. Each one who emerged, running, froze in place as if struck by lightning, unsure of what to say. The first to break free from the shock was my brother Mahmoud. He stepped forward, greeted him, and embraced him. Then Ibrahim greeted him as well. Mahmoud took Hassan by the hand and led him to his room, with Ibrahim, Hassan, my brother Mohammed, and me following. My mother went to prepare tea.

We sat in the room, and Mohammed began questioning him—what had happened to him? How had things turned out this way? What was his story? Hassan told us he was living in Tel Aviv, working in the factory of his Jewish girlfriend's father. His situation was excellent, he said. He rented a fine apartment in Jaffa. Yet his tongue was heavy as he spoke Arabic, frequently inserting Hebrew words into his sentences.

My mother brought in the tea and placed it on the table. He asked her, "How are you, Aunt?" She answered, "Praise be to God." He said, "The important thing, Aunt, is that you've won in life. You left the camp, saw the world, lived, and finally had your freedom instead of the misery and deprivation of the camp."

My mother scoffed, "Ah, so you've seen the world with your Jewish girlfriend."

Hassan said, “Oh, and what’s wrong with a Jewish woman?!” Mahmoud interjected, “The important thing, Hassan, is—what now?” Hassan replied, “Nothing now, nothing later. I just came to greet you all and see if Ibrahim needed anything.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, and took out a thick bundle of banknotes. He counted a large sum, then extended his hand toward Ibrahim.

Ibrahim did not move. We all remained silent. Hassan said, “Take it, Ibrahim.” Ibrahim replied, “No, thank you. I want to live here with my uncle’s family like anyone else, and I lack nothing.” Hassan insisted, “Take it, I am your brother.” Ibrahim responded, “You are my brother when you return home, live with us, and leave the Jews and their way of life.” Hassan sighed. “Slow down, Ibrahim, slow down. Do you expect me to return to the camp? Why don’t you come with me instead?” Ibrahim recoiled. “God forbid.” Hassan shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

Mahmoud began reasoning with Hassan, trying to convince him to return home. He told him his house was still waiting for him, that he could rebuild and arrange it as he pleased, that they could find him a respectable job, and that they could marry him to the best woman. Hassan smiled the entire time, silently rejecting every offer. Then, after a lukewarm farewell, he left.

Meanwhile, my mother kept urging Mahmoud to marry. He argued the house was too small, but she insisted it was only temporary until we expanded. At the time, we had three rooms—the new one we had just built, plus the two old ones we had repaired. My mother, Tahani, and Maryam lived in one, while Hassan, Mohammed, Ibrahim, and I shared the other. Mahmoud could live with his wife in the new room.

“But what if we have guests?” Mahmoud asked. “They can sit in the boys’ room or in my room with the girls,” my mother replied. “Isn’t that how all camp families live? Besides, your uncle’s house is there. We can fix up one of its rooms to give us more space.” So, they agreed to renovate two rooms in my uncle’s house—one for Mahmoud and his future wife, the other for Hassan when he got married. The newly built room would remain as a guest reception area.

After the two rooms were completed, Mahmoud suggested to my mother that they postpone his wedding for a few more months so that he and Hassan could marry on the same day. That way, instead of two separate weddings, they would have just one, saving the cost of Hassan’s wedding. “Hassan is kind and selfless,” Mahmoud said. “He sacrificed his education for me and for this house.”



Let us make our joy a shared one. My mother was convinced by the idea and began to talk to Hassan to persuade him since the room was ready and the wedding would take place.

After days of attempts to persuade and pressure, Hassan also agreed. My mother started a lengthy conversation with each of them about what kind of girl they wanted, or what specifications they desired. She began to suggest this girl or that, visiting those homes to see the girls in their households, checking the cleanliness and orderliness of the homes, and the customs of the families, but she always returned dissatisfied with the level she found.

Tahani suggested to my mother to consider one of her classmates from the teachers' institute—a girl as radiant as the full moon, with good character, from a family of our own kind, humble and respectable people. My mother agreed with Tahani to visit that girl's home. They went, and my mother returned filled with joy and happiness, having found the suitable bride for Mahmoud. It was only left for her to like him, for the girl to agree, and for her family to approve. Who could refuse the esteemed engineer Mahmoud, after all? My mother spoke to Mahmoud, describing the girl, and he expressed initial approval, saying he would make a final decision after seeing her.

My mother went to visit Abu Muhammad Al-Saeed's house again, where she spoke to Umm Muhammad about our honor in proposing for their daughter "Widad" for Mahmoud. "Can we come for this formally?" Umm Muhammad replied, after quick consultations at home, "Welcome, welcome," and they agreed on a date to come after Friday afternoon.

On Friday, my uncle came to join the delegation, and Aunt Fatima attended as well. My mother, Mahmoud, Hassan, and Tahani prepared to go to the bride's house. As usual, the men sat in one room and the women in another, exchanging many phrases of welcome and pleasantries. Eventually, Mahmoud and Widad saw each other and expressed admiration for one another, approving of the match.

The celebrations began, and they were announced as engaged, agreeing to contract the marriage and hold the wedding in two months, by which time we would have completed the necessary arrangements, especially in finding a bride for Hassan, while Widad would have finished her diploma from the teachers' institute and obtained her certificate.

My mother continued the search for a suitable bride for Hassan. Day after day, she would go out to inspect one of the girls. She didn't like this one because her hair was curly, nor that one because her nose was long, nor this one because her nose was big, and not that one because she was disheveled, as her home wasn't tidy, nor this one because her house wasn't clean enough. After every exploratory round, she would return to present her report to Hassan, accompanied by Tahani.

After much effort, Hassan confronted her with a question: "Why do you exhaust yourself, Mama?" She turned to him angrily, reproaching, "And why shouldn't I exhaust myself? You're not being helpful, Hassan!" He laughed and replied, "Don't get me wrong, Mama. I mean, the bride is already here, close by, right under your nose." She looked at him in astonishment, asking, "Who? What do you mean?" He said, "Soad, the daughter of Umm Al-Abd, our neighbor." My mother smiled and teased him, asking, "Really, you liked her, Sheikh Hassan?" A look of embarrassment crossed Hassan's face as he said, "Honestly, Mama, you know me. I've never looked at her since we grew up, but the girl is beautiful, respectable, and humble like us. As the saying goes: from the clay of your land to your mates." My mother asked seriously, "Do you really want her?" "Yes, for sure."

My mother called Tahani and informed her of the matter. Tahani looked at her in astonishment, asking, "Do you really want her?" He replied, "Yes." Tahani said, "It's true she is beautiful and respectable and comes from a respectable family. How did we not notice her before?" Hassan replied, "That's the way of the world; gold can be right in your hands, and you won't see it while you're looking elsewhere!" My mother hurried to say, "Tomorrow morning, I'll officially propose to her for you, God willing."

Indeed, from the early morning hours, my mother approached Umm Al-Abd and, without preamble, told her she was proposing Soad for Hassan. Umm Al-Abd requested some time until noon to see what her daughter and her brothers thought. In the afternoon, my mother returned to Umm Al-Abd's house to find out her answer, and we knew the answer when we heard their joyous ululations together, of course, the neighbors came out from nearby homes to congratulate.

Preparations began for the wedding celebration in full swing, buying furniture for the newlyweds and preparing the clothing for each of the couple over about a month. My mother hardly sat at home, visiting Umm Al-Abd's house and then Abu Muhammad Al-Saeed's house, going to the city center to buy clothes and jewelry for the couple until everything was ready, and the time for the marriage contract and wedding came.

Mohammad, my cousin Ibrahim, and I had to prepare many things. We rented several straw chairs and transported them on a cart, placing them in front of the door. We brought trays of baklava, bought a quantity of meat, and two sacks of rice. We gathered a large number of trays from the neighbors, writing the name of each family on their respective tray to avoid mixing them up. My mother oversaw a number of her neighbors who came to help her prepare the food. We set up the wedding stage (the loge), borrowing several tables, tying them together, and securing them against the wall. We covered them with carpets and mats and placed two double bamboo chairs we borrowed from the neighbors on top, covering them with prayer rugs. We searched for a long electrical cord to connect to one of the distant neighbors' houses, as electricity was only available in a few homes of those who were well-off. We had rented a string of colored lamps, which we hung above the wedding platform. Everything was ready by the afternoon as the guests began to arrive.

The women sat inside the house while the men gathered under the tent we set up in the street. The sound of women's singing and ululations never ceased. Then we began serving food—trays of yellow rice with pieces of red meat. I, Mahmoud, and Ibrahim stood with pieces of soap and clay water pitchers in our hands, with cotton towels draped over our shoulders. When a guest had eaten enough, they would come to us, and one of us would hand them a piece of soap and pour water over their hands. After they washed their hands and mouths, congratulating and blessing us, we handed them the towel to dry their hands, and then they would go to the baklava tray to enjoy the dessert. After the meal, many of the guests, the relatives of the bride and groom, returned to their homes to await our departure for the marriage registration and the escorting of the newlyweds to their new home. The closest relatives and friends remained with us, and the women gathered, starting to walk while singing and ululating to a new home made of wool, under which were white covers, and each wore a bow tie. The women continued singing folk songs, accompanied by the drum, until they approached Abu Muhammad's house, where they began singing the famous folk song:

"Amine, Lufiten, ya Banat... Aidar Abu Mahmoud, Lufina, ya Leila, We asked him about the lineage... He welcomed us, respecting, ya Leila..."

When they reached the door, their ululations erupted from inside the house. The men entered one of the rooms where the sheikh had come to perform the marriage contract as is customary. After that, the bride was prepared, and the men exited to wait at the door, where the bride would soon emerge.

Her father held her by one arm while one of her brothers held her by the other, and he handed her over to my brother Mahmoud, as the ululations grew louder, and the procession set off back to the house.

The bride was ushered into the house, where several women remained with her, while others sang and ululated. The procession set off once more to cover the few meters to the second bride's house, following the same procedures. Soad's brothers held her arms and handed her to Hassan, who led her towards the house amid the ululations and songs. The two brides were led into the same room to prepare for the procession. My mother asked Mahmoud and Hassan to go up to the wedding platform and sit in their chairs, waiting for their brides to join them for the traditional dance. Mahmoud had no problem with this, but Hassan firmly rejected it, saying, "How can I sit, Mom, in a place where women will dance in front of me? That is forbidden..." My mother was taken aback and began to plead with him, stating, "This is our joyous day that I have awaited my whole life!" Mahmoud tried to convince Hassan not to spoil the celebration, but Hassan steadfastly refused.

The conversation went on for a while, and eventually, Fatima suggested a compromise: Mahmoud and Hassan could sit on the platform for half an hour while their brides joined them. During that time, the women would sing and ululate without dancing. Then, after half an hour, the grooms would leave, and the brides would share the same seat, allowing the women to dance freely. Mahmoud agreed to this, and Hassan ultimately conceded. They climbed onto the platform and sat down, and then the brides entered, each taking a seat beside her groom, while the women began to sing and ululate.

Tears streamed down my mother's face continuously, while Fatima sat to her right and Tahani to her left, trying to comfort her. "Why cry? This is the day of joy we have long awaited!" she said, wiping her tears only to have them flow again as she whispered, "If only your father were here today..." This caused Fatima and Tahani to shed tears as well, softly murmuring, "Why open this wound, Mother, when it has healed long ago?" The brides went down to change their white dresses into another color, and the grooms descended to leave, taking one of the chairs with them and moving the other to the center of the platform. Mahmoud nudged Hassan in the side, saying, "Oh, dear sheikh, isn't it true that one gets married every day? I can't believe you're the one who married me off. Go, may God reward you!" Hassan smiled and replied, "Get out, get out! Let the women enjoy themselves."



Behind them, the voices of the women singing and ululating rose without interruption, urging my mother to join the gathering and dance. They also compelled Um al-Abd and Um Muhammad to join in, and they danced without knowing how to comprehend the tears streaming down their faces amid this overwhelming joy. Yet, such is the nature of the camp: every joy reopens old wounds and brings back memories anew.



## Chapter Twelve

My aunt's husband had completed his prison sentence and returned to resume his business activities and manage the family's land affairs. Her son, Abdul Rahim, began to walk on the ground while repeating his first words.

My aunt's husband frequented the same shops he used to visit in Hebron, where he had strong business ties. They sat in the same gatherings, and conversations resumed around the fire, accompanied by sips of tea. The men asked him about prison, how they treated him, how they tortured him, and how they interrogated him. He spoke humbly, trying to ease their fears and apprehensions about the occupation and prison, affirming that while it was indeed difficult, it was possible and bearable. He expressed that it refines the spirit, strengthens the self, and makes a person feel their strength and greatness. The men nodded in disbelief, exchanging puzzled looks, and perhaps one of them remarked after my aunt's husband left, "Look at this fool; he ruined his life and scattered his family, claiming it's possible and bearable! What nonsense!"

His brother, Abdul Rahman, was in his third year of secondary school (Tawjihi) at Tariq ibn Ziyad Secondary School in Hebron. He was known for his diligence, commitment, character, faith, and close relationships with many young people in the city and surrounding villages. During this period, a group of religious youths affiliated with the Islamic movement began to emerge at Tariq ibn Ziyad Secondary School. Some teachers at the school had previously graduated from the Jordanian University and had joined the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood during their studies. Upon their return to Hebron and their work in its schools, they began to spread Islamic thought in the city, finding fertile ground among the high school students.

At the same time, the College of Sharia was opened in the city, overseen by the mayor. The youth gathering at the college automatically gave rise to political and intellectual currents, the most prominent of which was the Muslim Brotherhood, influenced by the teachers in the college and the Islamic and Sharia studies offered there.

A group of youth at the college formed a nucleus for the Muslim Brotherhood's activities, and they began to expand their efforts into the secondary schools, where their efforts aligned with those of the teachers at Tariq ibn Ziyad School.

Where a group of students began to coalesce around the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, the name of the Brotherhood in the city of Hebron was not accompanied by the loud music that often followed it in the Gaza Strip or northern West Bank. There, the name of the Brotherhood was almost a curse or insult. However, in Hebron, the Brotherhood had a long history. The idea of the Brotherhood was embraced by well-known families in the city, respected for their wealth and honor, making it easy to announce the name without embarrassment.

At Tariq ibn Ziyad School, Abdul Rahman met another group of young people from the city and neighboring villages. Influenced by university students from the College of Sharia and some teachers, they formed an open framework to study and adopt the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood, embracing the study of Islam and contemporary Islamic thought.

One day, a group of these colleagues came to the village of Surif to visit Abdul Rahman. As one of the activities used by the Brotherhood for acquaintance, bonding, and education, a group of about ten students gathered on the hillside to play, chat about religion, and discuss politics. My aunt, at Abdul Rahman's request, prepared lunch for them. Abdul Rahman had slaughtered four chickens that morning, and she began preparing musakhan.

At noon, my aunt's husband returned from his shop. When Abdul Rahman was delayed in bringing the food himself, he decided to go to the field to deliver it to them. He greeted them and called out to Abdul Rahman that he had brought the food, to which Abdul Fattah responded gratefully, asking why he had tired himself when he intended to come to pick it up. He explained that it was an opportunity to get to know the youth better. Abdul Fattah replied, "No, no, it's no trouble."

He sat with them, sharing lunch and getting to know them, joining in their fun and happiness, and engaging in their conversations, trying to evoke their national sentiments to gauge their opinions, ideas, and readiness. He asked, "What do you think about national work and its current level in the country?" One of the young men replied, "The problem is that our people still lack the essential components for national work and resistance, and therefore the level of readiness and sacrifice remains low."

Abdul Fattah discussed this, surprised: "How can you say that, and on what basis do you support this claim?" The young man answered, "A cause as significant as the Islamic issue, the issue of Al-Aqsa Mosque—the first qibla and the third holiest site—requires many sacrifices and devotion, yet the level of national work is still far simpler than required. The people's readiness is still a million times less than what is needed."

Abdel-Fattah argued once more, saying, “But haven’t you heard of the guerrilla operations in all the occupied territories—Gaza, the north and center of the West Bank, Jerusalem, Hebron, and the villages?”

The young man interrupted him, “Yes, I have heard. But all of that is far too little, far less than what is needed! Don’t you see, man, how the Jews roam freely in Hebron without anyone confronting them, except rarely? How tourists come to visit the shrine while Jews wander and revel in the Ibrahimi Mosque? How they come to trade in Hebron, frequenting its blacksmith and carpentry workshops, while our people, our very own, deal with them as if they were not an occupying force, as if they were not usurpers of our land and sacred places?”

Abdel-Rahman interjected, “No doubt, national sentiment alone is not enough to manage the struggle, and it is necessary—”

Abdel-Fattah cut him off, “Brother, our people have defended their land throughout history and have never surrendered, and—”

The young man interrupted, “Let me tell you a story—something that happened to me after the Israeli occupation of Hebron. I was still a child then. I saw a Jew walking alone down a street in Hebron, and the sight infuriated me. So I picked up a stone from the ground and hurled it at him, then fled, hiding behind the apple trees in a plot of our land. I sat there for a while, thinking the Jew must have left. But then, I heard one of the neighbors’ sons calling, ‘Jamal, Jamal... come out, he’s gone.’

I stepped out from behind the trees—only to find the Jew waiting, concealed behind the corner of a house. He emerged, pointing a pistol at my head, trying to terrify me so I wouldn’t do it again. I understood then what had happened: after I had thrown the stone, he had knocked on the neighbors’ door and threatened them—if they didn’t bring me to him, he would ruin their home and imprison their sons. And so, one of their boys played the role, delivering me into his hands like that.”

Abdel-Fattah interjected, “This happens, this happens... But the people are good, and our people are well. I tell you, our people are well—even those people are good. They’re kind-hearted but helpless, afraid for their livelihoods. Their willingness to sacrifice is limited. There must be a long process of—”

Abdel-Fattah cut him off again, “Man, there’s no need for any process. Duty demands that each person play their part. But why burden ourselves with this talk? Why should I trouble your heads with my words? I should leave you to enjoy your day.”

He rose, dusting off his clothes as he said, “Welcome, young men, welcome.” Then, standing upright, he bid them, “Peace be upon you,” shaking off the dust from his garments before striding away.

The young men burst into laughter, jesting and playing among the olive trees.



My brother Muhammad and my cousin Ibrahim were deeply influenced by my brother Hassan and his devotion to religion. Gradually, they began praying regularly and accompanying him to the mosque. I was not like them. Sometimes I would pray, other times I would neglect my prayers. Occasionally, I would join them at the mosque, performing the prayer with them in congregation.

At times, we would stay after prayer, sitting in one of those study circles they held. Someone would begin speaking on a religious topic—interpreting a verse from the Qur'an, explaining a hadith, reading from a book and elaborating on its meanings, or recounting an episode from the Prophet's biography. Sometimes, after the Maghrib prayer, when I happened to pray with them at the mosque, they would sit together and recite supplications they called *al-Ma'thurat*, chanting them in unison. I did not know the words as they did, so I would move my lips along with them, pretending to recite from memory.

Mahmoud was deeply displeased with Muhammad and Ibrahim's growing religiosity, just as he had been troubled before by Hassan's piety. He often sat with them all together or took each one aside, trying to dissuade them from going to the mosque, from sitting there, from taking part in its activities. He warned them that those in charge were *Ikhwanjia*—Muslim Brotherhood members. "Sheikh Ahmad is *Ikhwanji*," he would say, "and the Brotherhood is against Abdel Nasser, against Arab unity. They don't recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization. They claim the martyrs of the Palestinian revolution are nothing but fools who died for nothing, not real martyrs. They don't take part in the resistance or armed struggle."

The three of them—if they were together—or the one he was addressing alone, would look at him in bewilderment. "What are you talking about?" they would say. "I go to the mosque, I sit in the discussions, I listen to what is said. None of what you're claiming is true."

Mahmoud's voice would rise, his tone sharpening. "But I know them! They won't say those things to you now. Right now, they talk to you about religion, about Islam, about the Prophet, about prayer. But later, they'll start introducing the real subjects."

One of them would then sigh in exasperation and say, "Come on, man, cut it out. Do you think we're children?"

In all the times I went to the mosque, sat in those study circles, listened to the discussions, I never once heard anyone bring up politics. No one mentioned Palestine, the resistance, the occupation, the history of the Palestinian cause. Not the PLO, not Fatah, not the martyrs—nothing. They spoke only of purely religious matters.

Did those topics come up in gatherings I did not attend? I do not know. But I was like all the young men in the camp at that time—I held deep respect and admiration for Abu Ammar, Yasser Arafat, who had become the symbol of the Palestinian revolution. I saw him as my leader, my commander. Many times, we raised his picture in demonstrations, chanting at the top of our lungs, “With our soul, with our blood, we sacrifice for you, Abu Ammar!” And we meant it, every word, from the depths of our hearts, with all sincerity and conviction.

Yet I noticed that my brother Hassan was not like me or the rest of the youth in the camp. When Abu Ammar’s name was mentioned, I never saw him react as we did, never sensed any emotion stir within him, as if it were just any other name spoken before him. Still, I never once heard him voice opposition to Arafat or the Palestine Liberation Organization.

When the subject of martyrs arose—when someone said, “*So-and-so* is a martyr,” or “*So-and-so* was martyred,”—he would sometimes remark that only God knows who is truly a martyr and who is not, for such matters belong to the realm of intentions and hearts. His bluntness grew sharper when the fallen belonged to the Popular Front. “*And who’s* to say he is a martyr?” he would ask. “He might not even have believed in God—he could have been an atheist. How, then, could he be a martyr...?”

At such moments, Mahmoud would flare up, shouting, “Who are you, and who are all your sheikhs, to decide who is a martyr and who is not? You sit comfortably in your homes, among your women, issuing fatwas about those who carry their souls in their hands and fight for their homeland!”

Hassan would mutter something indistinct, then stand up abruptly, tense and irate, and leave. If Muhammad and Ibrahim were there, they would follow him shortly after, and the gathering would dissolve in disarray.

The arguments grew even fiercer when Abdel-Hafiz was present. He would launch into an attack on the sheikhs and on religion itself, going so far as to claim that the Brotherhood were mere agents, receiving salaries from Saudi Arabia. Heated ideological debates would ensue, and Hassan would lash back in anger, accusing him of atheism and godlessness, branding them as lackeys of the Soviet Union—the very first to recognize the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

Much of what Hassan said, his arguments and reasoning, resonated with me, stirring something deep within my soul. Yet, I could not comprehend his stance on certain issues. His weakness was glaringly apparent when they debated the role of Islamists in carrying the national cause, in armed resistance against the occupation, and their stance on the martyrs who fell for the homeland.

Likewise, their vague stance on the Palestine Liberation Organization remained unclear. Hassan, Muhammad, and Ibrahim themselves seemed to struggle with these questions, unable to convincingly defend their position. It was as if they didn't fully understand where they stood on these matters. Perhaps they had turned to Sheikh Ahmad for guidance, and he had told them that he would address such issues in the upcoming study sessions at the mosque.

A few days later, I sensed that they wanted me to accompany them to the mosque for the Maghrib prayer, as these study circles were usually held between Maghrib and Isha. So I went with them. We prayed behind Sheikh Hamed, who had grown old, his voice barely audible. The mosque was packed with young men, adults, and children—nothing like how it had been when I used to come here as a child with my grandfather, may God have mercy on him.

After the prayer, some people left the mosque, but a large group of young men—around fifty—remained, forming a circle.

Sheikh Ahmad sat before them and began his talk. He praised God, sent blessings upon His Messenger, and then spoke of man's role on earth and his servitude to God. He gave a striking example, recounting the story of Rabi' ibn 'Amir, the envoy of Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas to Rustam, the Persian commander, on the eve of the Battle of al-Qadisiyyah. When Rustam asked him why the Arabs had come to wage war against the Persians, Rabi' answered: "We have come to deliver people from the worship of other people to the worship of the Lord of all people, from the injustice of religions to the justice of Islam, and from the narrowness of this world to the vastness of this world and the Hereafter."

The sheikh elaborated at length on this idea, explaining that, given our people's struggle for existence under occupation, it was difficult for them to grasp this message. Yet, he insisted, this alone was the true path to liberation and salvation—even if the people could not yet see it, and might even resist it.

He likened this to how the Prophet (PBUH) had called the people of Mecca and the Arabs to Islam, offering them dignity and honor, yet they failed to realize it. Instead, they fought and opposed him. But in the end, it became clear that their strength and honor lay in Islam—and so it had been, and so it would always be. Our honor was in our own hands.

Then he began discussing the Islamic definition of martyrdom, saying that a martyr is one who fights so that the word of God may be supreme—for this is the path of God. He emphasized that this was the true, religious meaning of martyrdom, whereas what people commonly referred to as "martyrs" was something else entirely.

He spoke at length about concepts related to the nature of the Islamic community that represents the Muslims. His words seemed to carry an implicit reservation about the Palestine Liberation Organization's claim to be the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. He never stated this outright, but the implication was clear.

Sheikh Hamed arrived and called the Isha prayer. We rose for the prayer, and he appointed Sheikh Ahmad to lead. As he recited, he chose verses from the opening of Surah Al-Isra, repeating certain words and phrases, as if continuing his lesson from before the prayer—about “Our servants, endowed with great might.”

I realized that the sheikh was deliberately avoiding any explicit mention of the struggle against the occupation. Instead, he hinted at it cautiously, wary of drawing the attention of the authorities, who might pursue him, restrict his movement, or prevent him from spreading his message.

Hassan, Muhammad, and Ibrahim left the mosque with a sense of satisfaction, expressing their admiration for the sheikh’s words as we walked back to Idar. They spoke with conviction, deeply impressed by his speech. I, however, could not understand what they found so remarkable. The sheikh’s words had been eloquent and moving, yet they offered no clear answers to the very questions that Mahmoud and Abdel Hafiz had repeatedly raised in their debates with Hassan.

Life in the camp had begun to change noticeably. Conditions were improving, as more and more households now had one or even two family members working in Israel, earning what was considered a substantial income compared to the hardships of the past—whether in Gaza itself or in Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

People’s circumstances were clearly improving. Radios had become a common feature in nearly every home, and many now owned televisions. A growing number of households had connected to the electricity grid, their homes now lit by electric bulbs. Some even had refrigerators and gas stoves, while most had access to running water.

In our own home, we had a good radio and were connected to both the electricity and water networks. Yet we had not been fortunate enough to acquire a television, a refrigerator, or a gas stove. Still, compared to many families that remained in dire straits, our situation was far better.

What was most striking, however, was the sheer population growth in the refugee camps over the two decades since the Nakba of ‘48. The number of residents had multiplied at an astonishing rate. Homes had become too cramped for their inhabitants. Many of those who had been children at the time, or who were born after the catastrophe, had grown into men, married, and had children of their own.

Now, nearly every household contained at least one, if not more, married sons living within its already overcrowded walls. The camp’s homes had transformed into something resembling tightly packed chicken crates.

At this time, discussions began circulating about housing projects planned by the Housing Department under the military administration. The proposal was that anyone wishing to expand their home could register with the department, pay a nominal fee, and, in exchange for demolishing their current refugee dwelling, receive a housing unit. This would grant each married man within a family a single room in the newly established residential neighborhoods.



This matter sparked intense debate among the camp's residents. No gathering, visit, or casual conversation passed without the topic being raised, splitting people into supporters and opponents.

The supporters argued for pragmatism—after all, how much longer could they continue living in sardine-can conditions? Homes could no longer accommodate the ever-growing families, and with no solution to the refugee crisis in sight, purchasing private land and building on it was simply beyond their financial reach.

The opponents, however, feared that emptying the refugee camps would erase their very cause. This, they believed, was precisely what the occupation sought—to resettle refugees in these new neighborhoods, thereby dissolving their identity and ending their struggle.

The debate raged on, but since these projects remained mere proposals, yet to be implemented, neither side could claim victory.

Before my brothers Mahmoud and Hassan got married, I had no idea that something called cosmetics even existed. My mother, like the other women of the camp, never used such things. On joyous occasions, the most they did was remove the fine hairs from their faces and lightly shape their eyebrows—yet even with this simplicity, they looked stunningly beautiful.

Who among them would even think of buying beauty products when she struggled to put food on the table, when her children tasted meat only on rare and grand occasions, or when they recognized the names of fruits not from experience but from the biology textbooks at school?

When a young woman married, it became evident that the older women used some beauty products to adorn her. But still, I never fully grasped what cosmetics were until after Mahmoud and Hassan's weddings.

Afterward, whenever I entered their rooms, I would notice bottles and containers neatly arranged on the shelves of the *dresser*—a wooden piece with a large mirror at its center, placed in the bedroom. It became clear to me that these were cosmetics, though they seemed to serve no purpose beyond the wedding day and the occasional family wedding celebration.

At that time, not a single woman walked through the streets of the camp with her face adorned in makeup. True, many women did not cover their heads, while others did, but the concept of cosmetics had not yet taken root, even as economic conditions visibly improved.

Perhaps some women had started experimenting with them, but if so, it remained a quiet and rare indulgence.

The girls of the camp were untouched by cosmetics or any kind of beauty enhancements, even the simplest ones like hair removal or eyebrow shaping. And yet, they were often radiant, like full moons. What made most of them even more beautiful was the depth of their modesty. If you asked one of them a question, her eyes would remain fixed on the ground. And if, by chance, her gaze met that of a young man, she would immediately lower it, her cheeks flushing with a deep crimson—an innocence that only heightened her beauty.

Khalil, one of our neighbors, had begun to fall for a girl in the camp after their eyes met one fateful time. He felt something stir within him—an affection that grew stronger by the day. He was convinced that she, too, felt the same. He would wait for her every morning as she left for school and again in the afternoon when she returned home. He never dared to approach her, never exchanged a single word with her. His greatest reward was the fleeting moment when she lifted her gaze from afar, their eyes meeting for an instant before she cast hers downward again. That was enough for him—it reassured him that she shared his feelings. And with that silent understanding, he continued to dream of the day he could formally ask for her hand, once he had finished his studies, found a job, and saved enough to build a home and afford the expenses of marriage.

Some young men in the camp exchanged letters with the girls they admired, and a few of the girls responded. But for the most part, the camp's youth adhered strictly to the unspoken rules of distance and restraint. My mother's strict upbringing and high moral expectations ensured that we stayed far from such matters. Yet, it seemed that some young men and women had begun to test the boundaries—venturing into these forbidden territories as if they were nothing more than a game.

One day, as I was returning home from the beach, I turned the corner of our house and saw my cousin Ibrahim coming back from the mosque. Just then, one of the more playful girls from the neighborhood was sitting outside her home.

When she saw Ibrahim walking with his head down, following the guidance of the mosque preachers and my mother's constant instructions, she smirked and called out in a teasing voice:

“Oh, it's his holiness! Our very own sheikh! Come now, bless us with your presence, O virtuous one! You, who dwell up high—won't you ever glance down at us below?”

I glanced at Ibrahim. His face had turned a fiery shade of red, his embarrassment so intense it seemed to burn through his skin. He quickened his pace, his steps suddenly three times their normal speed, as if fleeing from a life sentence.

That moment—her playful words, his mortified reaction—became a private joke between us, one I would use to tease and threaten him with: a secret I could expose to his mother, my aunt, should he ever try to cross me.

The victory of 1973, though it did not bring any tangible relief to us as Palestinians, was a strategic turning point in our collective emotions. True, we did not witness Israel vanish, nor did it withdraw from Palestine. We did not return to our towns, our cities, or our villages from which our people had been expelled in 1948. Not even the lands occupied in 1967—the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights, or Sinai—were liberated. In practical terms, all that had transpired was the advance of the Egyptian army, its crossing of the Suez Canal, and the breaching of the Bar Lev Line. Yet, we were satiated, fulfilled to the very core, by Israel's defeat.

That was how we understood it at the time, how we believed, how we embraced the idea with every fiber of our minds and hearts: that the myth of Israel, of its invincible army, had crumbled before the greatness and will of the Arab soldier who had waged a reasonable battle—whether on the Egyptian front or the Syrian one. Our heads soared, nearly grazing the sky in pride and honor.

But those emotions began to shift, gradually, in the face of a new tone we started hearing from Egyptian President Sadat—his willingness for peace with Israel. The shock we felt upon hearing him declare his readiness to visit the Israeli Knesset was immense. And then, the catastrophe struck, rendering us utterly speechless as we listened to the radio covering Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, his speech before the Israeli government and the Knesset members. We did not own a television set at home, so we never saw the images, but the radio coverage was enough to shake us to the core—so much so that we struggled to grasp whether this was reality or mere illusion. It seemed as though the entire Arab world had been struck by the same shock, or at least most of it, given the level of contradictions and conflicts that erupted among the regimes—divisions so severe, their consequences far-reaching. And naturally, as Palestinians, our entire being leaned toward the opposition, toward the voices that resisted and condemned Sadat and the Camp David Accords. We longed to hear the opposition broadcasts, especially that particular station transmitting from Baghdad.

The most significant event for us, on the family level, was that Egyptian universities had shut their doors to Palestinian students—a direct consequence of the deep rift between Sadat and the Palestine Liberation Organization, which fiercely opposed peace with Israel. This opposition was explicit, undeniable, and had culminated in the assassination of the renowned journalist Al-Siba'i by Palestinians for that very reason. The Egyptian political response was swift: a decision to curtail relations with Palestinians, which included barring high school graduates from Gaza from enrolling in Egyptian universities, as had been the case before.

That year, my brother Muhammad completed his high school education. He was supposed to continue his studies at an Egyptian university, and at the time, our financial situation could not have been more favorable for such an opportunity. But with that door now firmly shut, Muhammad found himself at a crossroads—where would he go? After much deliberation, he chose to enroll at Birzeit University in the West Bank, near Ramallah. He traveled there, submitted his application, and was accepted into the Faculty of Science. With the start of the new academic year, he settled into university life, sharing an apartment in Ramallah with fellow students. Once a month, he would return home for a few days before setting off again for Ramallah.

Armed resistance in the occupied territories—and within the lands seized in 1948—had not ceased entirely, but it had dwindled considerably. The national struggle had begun to take on new forms, shifting toward political activism, union organizing, and mass mobilization. The Israeli authorities had permitted municipal elections in the West Bank, and across the region, political factions coalesced to contest them.

In Hebron, representatives of the Fatah movement—led by Fahd al-Qawasmi—formed an alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood and other groups against Sheikh al-Ja'bari, who had held the mayoral seat since the Jordanian administration of the West Bank and throughout the years of Israeli occupation. Realizing that his chances of victory were slim, Sheikh al-Ja'bari withdrew, paving the way for the Fatah-Brotherhood coalition to claim victory. The new municipal council became a tapestry of political and ideological diversity. Similar patterns emerged across the West Bank, where nationalist figures secured key positions—among them Bassam al-Shak'a, who was elected mayor of Nablus.

At the same time, professional unions began to take shape: engineers' associations, medical societies, and bar associations emerged in various West Bank cities, each holding regular elections to choose its leadership. The contests were largely fought between leftist factions and Fatah, with the Islamic movement—initially aligned with Fatah against the left—gradually stepping forward to contest elections on its own. A similar dynamic played out on university campuses, including al-Najah National University in Nablus, Birzeit University near Ramallah, and Hebron University, which had begun as a college of Islamic law before evolving into a full-fledged institution.

It was during this period, in the late 1970s—following the closure of Egyptian universities to students from Gaza—that a group of prominent figures in Gaza City convened, determined to establish a university in the Gaza Strip. They embarked on their efforts, reaching out to the Israeli authorities in the hope of securing approval. Their request, however, was met with outright rejection.



However, it was not difficult to reach such an agreement, as a university was opened in the evening at the Azhar Institute in Gaza, serving as an extension of the institute. Gradually, it expanded and transformed into a university, even though it never received recognition from the occupying authorities and suffered continuously from siege and harassment.

These prominent figures maintained their communications with the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization abroad to gain support for opening the university, and they sought the assistance of well-known individuals in Palestine and beyond to mobilize financial support from Arab countries. With the implementation of the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel, Israel began efforts to beautify its image in the territories occupied in 1967 as a prelude to the self-rule envisaged in the agreements. It established what was called the Civil Administration, tasked with managing the regions on behalf of the military leadership as a preparatory phase for the anticipated self-rule.

The Civil Administration was merely a new name for military rule, and the changes brought about were not clearly distinct or valuable. However, there was a tangible shift towards allowing some controlled political expressions, as previously noted.

During this period, Islamists became active and submitted requests to establish institutions and associations in accordance with Ottoman law, which were permitted, such as Islamic associations, Muslim Youth Associations, and charitable organizations, along with clubs, kindergartens, and medical clinics. Through these efforts, they began to provide services to the community and disseminate their ideas among the populace. My sister Tahani graduated from the Teacher Training Institute during this time and later secured a position as a teacher at the UN Relief and Works Agency primary school in the camp. After a while, a kind young man proposed to her, and they married. She was happy in her marriage and completely satisfied.

## Chapter Thirteen

The academic year came to an end, and the students of Tariq Ibn Ziyad School in Hebron sat for their final exams. Once the results were announced, high school graduates began exploring their future prospects. Some opted to study at the Faculty of Sharia at Hebron University, while others sought opportunities at universities in Saudi Arabia or Jordan.

My aunt's husband still dreamed of studying at the University of Jordan, but he was aware that the train had left the station and that his commitments had grown too great to allow for a return to study. He saw his brother Abdul Rahman's graduation from high school as an opportunity to fulfill that dream through him.

He talked to him about studying at the University of Jordan, and Abdul Rahman agreed, especially since he was keen on the Faculty of Sharia. His friend Jamal shared the same desire, and their conversation took place on the hillside in the village of Surif.

In fact, both were accepted into the Faculty of Sharia at the University of Jordan. Just before the academic year began, they traveled to Amman, where they rented an apartment in the Al-Muhajireen neighborhood, a working-class area that housed some Palestinian residents. University life was an entirely new world for Abdul Rahman and Jamal, one that starkly contrasted with the lives they had led in Surif and Hebron, or their shared experiences at Tariq Ibn Ziyad School.

The intellectual life, political conflicts, social openness, and the level of influence wielded by active individuals in student life were all remarkably different from what they had known before. At the Faculty of Sharia, the commitment of female students to wearing the hijab was commendable; however, in general, life at the university was much more liberal compared to the conservative community of Hebron, particularly in the surrounding villages like Surif.

But Abdul Rahman and Jamal had already made up their minds about their life direction during their years at Tariq Ibn Ziyad School in Hebron, where they had openly aligned themselves with the Islamic current and adopted the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood. Here, at the Faculty of Sharia at the University of Jordan in Amman, several prominent figures from the Brotherhood were among the faculty members, holding PhDs in Sharia. It was here that Jamal and his colleague met individuals experienced in advocacy and community work, surpassing the limits of their dreams. They immersed themselves in student activities, facing the accompanying ideological and political struggles within the university's corridors and open spaces.

At the University of Jordan, a decision had been made to abolish student unions, but this did not hinder the peak of student engagement in various activities. Students found an outlet in elections held for what were termed associations. Jamal ran for the Heritage Revival Association at the Faculty of Sharia and won among the candidates aligned with the Islamic current. The association began managing various aspects of student activities in cultural, political, and educational fields, organizing trips to archaeological and historical sites, as well as pilgrimage trips for Hajj and Umrah. One member of the association proposed staging a play titled "The World and a Tyrant" by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi. The association discussed the idea, decided to adopt it, and put in the necessary efforts to make it a success. A budget was allocated, and a television director was hired. Training sessions and rehearsals were conducted repeatedly, and when the performance began, the play achieved remarkable success, astonishing many professors and instructors with its outstanding level.

During this time, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had significant repercussions on student activities at the university. The Islamists began to emphasize discussions about the revolution in Afghanistan and the mujahideen, clearly adopting the revolution there and considering themselves an extension of it. Numerous conversations arose among the Islamic youth about the necessity of traveling to Afghanistan to support the mujahideen and the Muslim people there. The Heritage Revival Association even donated five thousand dinars from the proceeds of the play "The World and a Tyrant," which amounted to approximately fifteen thousand dinars.

The Jewish settlement movement intensified and escalated throughout the West Bank. Wherever you turned, you found land being confiscated, settlements being established, and Jewish settlers inhabiting the land, treating it as if it were their own. This situation provoked the local population and prompted the National Guidance Committee to begin organizing campaigns of demonstrations, marches, and media work against the settlements.

As tensions rose, incidents of stone-throwing and Molotov cocktail attacks increased, with some refugee camps in the West Bank, especially the Dheisheh camp near Bethlehem, playing a significant role. The roads from Jerusalem to Hebron were congested with the movement of settlers.

Amid this tension, a secretive extremist Jewish group of settlers began forming, plotting to assassinate several active national figures from the Guidance Committee, assisted by explosives officers within the civil administration. They managed to gather information about several personalities and planted explosive devices in their cars or garages.

That morning, the devices began to explode, injuring some individuals, while the occupation forces pretended to have discovered and dismantled the remaining devices. These events inflamed the occupied territories, raising the level of tension regarding popular activities to unprecedented heights. However, it was clear that the level of armed resistance had significantly decreased. One of the focal points of these activities was Birzeit University, near Ramallah, which emerged as a clear center for national action during these events.

In this atmosphere, my brother Muhammad arrived in Ramallah after being accepted into the Faculty of Science at Birzeit University, entering a completely new world compared to the conservative and closed camp life, and the Gaza Strip in general. At Birzeit University at that time, there was not a single girl wearing a headscarf; all were adorned and made up, unashamed to talk and joke with boys, even disappearing behind the sprawling olive trees. It was a completely open society, much like any Western community. For Muhammad, it was extremely difficult to integrate into this new life, firstly because he had never encountered anything like it in the Gaza Strip or the Beach Camp, and secondly, because his upbringing, the path he had chosen for himself, and the religious rules he decided to adhere to made it nearly impossible for him to live in this environment.



As for the clashes with the occupying forces during the demonstrations that erupted from time to time in response to every new development on the Palestinian scene, they were not difficult for him to handle. Anyone who grew up in Al-Shati Camp and lived through the armed resistance in Gaza would find such events simple and easy compared to what he had seen and witnessed.

All the houses in the town of Birzeit had already been rented by older students, leaving no space for him. Thus, he was forced, along with a few other young men, to rent a place in Ramallah. This meant a daily journey between Ramallah and Birzeit—a trip that was neither long nor costly, yet required him to spend most of his time away from his study room, his comfort, and his meals, waiting for the next lecture.

In that house, Mohammed encountered a number of contradictions and matters that did not suit him. He was the only one among the six young men living there who was religiously committed. Some of his housemates held starkly different ideological views—one of them was an outspoken Marxist, unhesitant to declare his beliefs. At that time, Marxism was one of the most prominent currents at the university, so this young man did not shy away from mocking Mohammed, his worship, and his faith. This often plunged the house into a state of tension and estrangement.

Another young man seemed entirely uninterested in his studies. His sole concern was discussing women—their beauty, their relationships, and their transgressions—as well as boasting of his own exploits in this domain. He would spend hours writing love letters, crafting three or four at once to different girls, then proceed to read them aloud, unconcerned with his countless grammatical and stylistic errors. He paid no heed to those around him, who were studying and pleading with him to stop.

Their financial situation had improved significantly, so Mohammed had no monetary concerns. Still, he tried to economize as much as possible for the sake of the household. That did not prevent him, however, from occasionally dining at the university cafeteria, especially on days when his schedule demanded long hours on campus, waiting between lectures.

On days like these, Mohammed faced the challenge of performing his prayers—Dhuhr, Asr, and sometimes even Maghrib. The university had no mosque, forcing him to withdraw to a secluded spot outside the campus, near an olive tree, to pray. Before long, however, he learned that there was a mosque in town, despite the overwhelming Christian majority of its residents. He began frequenting it whenever his schedule allowed, and to his surprise, he found dozens of other university students there—young men who, like him, were committed to their faith and observant of their prayers.

Among this group of devout young men, a deep sense of harmony and camaraderie quickly developed, a bond strengthened by the hostile and alienating atmosphere that surrounded any form of religious devotion.

After returning to Ramallah from his university classes, Mohammed would sometimes stroll through the city's quiet, near-deserted streets at night. He would hear the call to Isha prayer from a nearby mosque, follow its sound, and perform his prayer there.

As he continued attending the mosque for Isha and occasionally Maghrib, and later for Friday prayers, he gradually got to know a number of Islamic students and youth in the area. They were forming the nucleus of the Islamic Bloc at Birzeit University—a close-knit group that moved together, prayed together in the nearby mosque, and gathered around the same table at the university cafeteria, drinking tea and discussing their studies, campus affairs, and Islamic activities. At another table sat members of Fatah's student wing, forming their own bloc. Elsewhere, students from the Progressive Student Action Front, the student arm of the Popular Front, held their own gatherings.

Each table belonged to a different student faction, meeting to strategize and recruit unaffiliated students to their cause. They compiled lists of students in each faculty, categorizing them based on their known ideological and political inclinations, identifying the independents, and then assigning members to reach out and establish connections, persuading them to join—or at the very least, to lend their support in the upcoming elections. A significant portion of Birzeit University's student body was female, and any student group seeking influence had to engage with them; otherwise, success would be out of reach. Leftist factions had no difficulty in this regard—many of their most active members were women. For the Islamic Bloc, however, significant barriers stood in the way of working with female students.

Some female students had Islamic inclinations and supported the Islamic Bloc, yet they were neither activists nor engaged in any substantial activity. All members of the Bloc, including Muhammad, were convinced of the necessity of opening channels of communication with the girls, inviting them to join or at least support the movement. However, Muhammad, who came from the Shati Camp and was raised on the strict principles my mother would repeat over and over until we had all memorized them by heart, was too weak for such a task. If, by chance, one of his female classmates approached him to ask a question about a lecture, a book, or any purely academic matter, his face would flush red, sweat would bead on his forehead, and his gaze would drop to the ground. His answers would be brief, a simple "yes" or "no," or a few extra letters beyond that, before he would hastily withdraw.

Everyone was preparing for the elections. Every bloc, every political group—everyone was talking to everyone else. Debates here, discussions there, about the history of the cause, its present, its future, the role of each faction, their objections, the clash of ideas, doctrines, and ideologies. The university grounds were overflowing with posters, slogans, and banners, each party striving for the best possible results.

When the votes were counted, the leftist bloc secured the highest results. The margins between Fatah and the left were close, but it was the left that ultimately formed the student union, having won the largest share. As for the Islamic Bloc, it achieved what no one had expected, despite being the smallest force in size.

Muhammad was accustomed to returning to the house in the Shati Camp roughly once a month. He would arrive on Thursday evening, stay with us through Friday, and then leave for Ramallah on Saturday morning to resume his studies and student activities.

Jamal and Abdul Rahman had completed their final exams at the Faculty of Sharia at the University of Jordan. They did not wait for the results to be announced but instead packed their belongings and returned immediately to the West Bank. Jamal's mother was anxious—she longed to see her son settle down with a wife after his university graduation. She never missed an opportunity to speak to him about marriage whenever they were alone together.

Jamal, however, had different aspirations. He wished to continue his academic journey and obtain a master's degree. His plan was to travel to Pakistan to pursue his studies there, where he could, in addition to furthering his education, contribute in some small way to the Afghan cause—at least on a moral level—by being present in a neighboring land.

Under the pressure of his mother, the idea became more acceptable. What was the harm in marriage, where there was no contradiction between the two matters—his journey to obtain his degree from the university—during a gathering of many graduates in one of the halls, he allowed himself to glance right and left, searching for someone who might be his future wife.

In one corner, a girl sat like a piece of the full moon, her gaze lowered, wrapped in her Islamic attire, which only enhanced her modesty and beauty. It was as if his heart whispered to him that the goal had been achieved. But just then, a small child came toddling toward her. She embraced him and kissed him. Jamal turned his head away, saying to himself, *Astaghfirullah*—this is her child; she must be married.

He sat, waiting for his paperwork to be completed. As he lowered his head in thought, a woman's voice addressed him: "Aren't you Jamal?" He lifted his gaze slightly and replied, "Yes. What is it?" He immediately realized that she was the same woman he had noticed moments earlier.

"I am Intisar, your classmate from college," she said. "My uncle, Haj Hassan, spoke to my family about wanting to propose to you on my behalf. We have heard only good things about you. But now, my cousin is asking for my hand—he is not religious, and I do not want him..." She fell silent, too shy to continue.

At that moment, he allowed himself to raise his gaze fully. Before him stood a rare pearl, draped in dignity and modesty. He quickly lowered his head again, his face flushing as he murmured, "May God grant what is best."

When he returned to his family, friends, and acquaintances, he was met with disappointment. He learned that she did not possess a personal identity card in the West Bank. This meant that if he decided to return and marry her, she would not be able to stay in the West Bank. Many had married women without Israeli-issued identity cards, only for their lives to turn into a nightmare. The decision was clear—he had to abandon the idea of marrying her.

When he applied for a travel permit to Pakistan, the Jordanian security authorities denied his request. His file marked him as a known activist with the Muslim Brotherhood at the university. With no other option, he returned to settle in Hebron and began working there.

A colleague pointed him toward a young woman who had also graduated from the University of Jordan, from the Faculty of Science. His mother went to meet her and her family, and she returned filled with joy. She decided to arrange a visit so that he could meet the girl at her family's home.



As he entered the room, the weight of shyness bowed his head, so he lowered it. He took a seat on one of the chairs in the room, attempting to start a conversation—when suddenly, another girl appeared, along with the woman who had entered earlier, whom he had assumed to be the mother of the one he intended to propose to. It was she who introduced herself. She began speaking, trying to break the boundless ice of modesty. And by God's decree, fate was sealed, and she became his life's companion.

Many graduates from Islamic colleges, particularly Islamists, typically found employment at the Islamic Charitable Society in Hebron, which ran numerous educational, developmental, and social institutions. Jamal took a teaching position at the Model Secondary School of the Alumni Association. It was evident that the school, in one way or another, was affiliated with the Palestine Liberation Organization, just like several other educational institutions, including the Polytechnic Institute and the Research Center. At the school, he taught Islamic culture to twelfth-grade students.

Working in this school, surrounded by a large staff of teachers and university graduates from various political and ideological backgrounds in Palestinian society, made the place feel like a political forum. Current affairs were constantly debated, each person presenting their perspective and engaging in discussions with others. Jamal was often seen as a representative of his ideological current, held responsible for why the Palestinian resistance had been expelled from Jordan.

"Why did the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan not join the Palestinian resistance to overthrow King Hussein's rule?" they would ask. Jamal would respond: "This is a matter that the Islamists had decided from the outset. They never have been, and never will be, a tool for instability, nor will they drag the region—or any part of it—into a state of uncertainty or entangle themselves in actions that provoke public opinion against them."

In one of the alleys of Jabalia refugee camp in Gaza, a young man in the prime of his youth walked, wearing a jacket—despite the weather not being cold enough to warrant suspicion. A black keffiyeh was draped over his head, partially obscuring his features. He kept his hands tucked into his jacket pockets, trying to appear as if he were merely waiting for a friend. A military jeep approached. As it reached the alley, he heard a faint, fragmented signal from his comrade, who had been watching the target. He pulled his hand from his pocket, gripping a grenade. He yanked the pin and hurled it at the jeep before turning to run. But there was no explosion. The soldiers halted their vehicle, opening fire as they pursued him. Yet, he managed to escape. Incidents like these were well known to many leading figures in the resistance factions, particularly Fatah, which had taken the lead in such operations—events that increasingly fueled their growing concerns.

In one of the meetings with some of those close to my brother Mahmoud, they expressed their concerns. Mahmoud asked, "Does what is happening indicate that those supplying these groups with weapons intend for this to occur? Isn't this a form of aborting the resistance effort? Do we not have the right to see the fingerprints of the Israeli intelligence agency, the Shin Bet, in this? Are they not the ones providing our cells with these faulty weapons?" There was a consensus among those present that the matter warranted an investigation and follow-up to uncover the hidden truths by contacting anyone related to the situation, especially the young detainees in prison, to gather any information they might possess.



During this period, the civil war in Lebanon had erupted, intensifying its weight and causing Palestinians in Lebanon to become both affected and affecting. News of the war from Lebanon reverberated throughout the occupied territories; there was hardly a home or family untouched by its impact. The Palestinian people had been scattered twice: first by the Nakba of 1948 and then by the Naksa of 1967, which led to the division of many families. Half of some families found themselves in the camps of the West Bank, while the other half was in Lebanon; some were in the Gaza camps, and others in the camps of Jordan, not to mention those who had left or been displaced over the years for various reasons, such as work, and were now unable to return.

We did not have known relatives in Lebanon at that time, but many of our neighbors had sons, brothers, or first-degree relatives there. These neighbors lived on edge as they followed the news, passing it along from time to time. Some women had sons who joined the revolution and traveled to Lebanon, remaining there. Their anxiety was overwhelming as they listened to the news, desperately trying to learn even the slightest detail about their children. The problem was that there were no means of communication at that time, and traveling to Lebanon was costly and complicated. Those wishing to travel had to cross through Jordan, as there were no relations between Israel and Lebanon, and above all, there were the potential problems with the occupation's intelligence services that travelers could face.

One of our neighbors had two sons involved in the revolution in Lebanon. This woman was nearly driven to madness, if not having lost her mind during that period. She would remain lost in thought, her face pale, and began to refuse food, eating only rarely, causing her body to wither. Nightmares haunted her in both sleep and wakefulness, predicting a grim fate for her sons. The women of the neighborhood tried to comfort her in every possible way to preserve what little strength she had left to continue living with some sense of reality and to convince her to eat even a morsel of food.

As the war dragged on, one morning the camp awoke to the news of her death without ever knowing the fate of her sons. Meanwhile, my cousin Ibrahim graduated from high school and found himself faced with the choice of enrolling in one of the universities in the West Bank—success or Birzeit specifically—or studying at the Islamic University, which had just opened its first year with about twenty students.

That year, there was talk of admitting only a few dozen students and of opening an Arabic language college alongside the existing colleges of Sharia and Usul al-Din. The prospects for this fledgling university were anything but clear, and any reasonable person at the time would have predicted its inevitable failure. It had no buildings of its own—its students attended classes in the Azhar secondary school building in the afternoons. It lacked an academic faculty, relying instead on a handful of scholars from the Azhar school. It had no real budget, no resources—none of the fundamental requirements of a university, even at the most basic level.

As soon as Ibrahim completed his studies and his exam results were announced, his exceptional performance became evident—he had scored an impressive 91% in the scientific stream. That day, my mother spoke with my brother Mahmoud about Ibrahim's university education, suggesting that he enroll with Muhammad at Birzeit University. That evening, when we had all gathered at home, Muhammad called Ibrahim aside and sat with him in his room. He urged him to travel to Ramallah in the coming days and register at Birzeit.

Ibrahim hesitated, uncertain about enrolling at Birzeit. Sensing fear and doubt in his brother's voice, Mahmoud asked, "Then where do you want to study?"

Ibrahim, still unsure, replied, "I might register at the Islamic University."

Mahmoud stared at him in surprise. "The Islamic University? You mean the one they just opened at Azhar?"

Ibrahim murmured, "Maybe... maybe..."

At that moment, my mother entered the room, having overheard their conversation. "What's wrong with you, Ibrahim?" she said. "It's as if you don't want to study at Birzeit because of the costs. My son, you and your cousins are like brothers. What is enough for one is enough for both. Our livelihood is in God's hands, and we are doing well, thank God..."

It was clear that she had understood what lay deep within Ibrahim's heart, though he tried to hide it, mumbling with tears welling in his eyes, "God bless you, Auntie... but I don't want to leave Gaza."

Mahmoud reached into his pocket, pulled out a wad of Jordanian banknotes, and handed them to Ibrahim. "This is for your first semester fees, registration, travel expenses, and a little extra for pocket money. Let's go register at Birzeit."

Ibrahim refused to take the money, pushing Mahmoud's hand away. My mother shouted, "Take it now! Think it over and register wherever you like. We want you to study at Birzeit with Muhammad, but the choice is yours in the end... Take it, take it."

Ibrahim finally reached out and accepted the money, his head bowed. Yet it was clear that his mind was already made up—he would register at the Islamic University. Any simple calculation confirmed that its costs were less than half of what Birzeit or any other university required.



He did not want to burden the family further. Besides, staying in Gaza allowed him to work occasionally, earning some money to ease the financial strain on the household. And so, he headed to the Al-Azhar School building, where he registered at the Islamic University and was accepted into the Arabic Language program.

When he returned with the news, he told me first, pulling out the remaining amount from his pocket to hand it back to my mother, too embarrassed to do it himself. But I refused to take it from him, saying, “What does this have to do with me? Why drag me into your business with the government? Go to her yourself and sort it out.” He insisted, so I walked with him to the kitchen, where my mother was preparing food. I said, “Congratulate Ibrahim—he has been accepted into the Islamic University, College of Arabic Language.” My mother turned to him, and before she could say a word, he quickly added, “God bless you. This is the leftover money.” Her eyes filled with admiration and respect. She took the money, then handed him five dinars, saying, “Keep this; you’ll need it.” He tried to refuse, but she insisted, forcing him to take it. He accepted it, his face burning with embarrassment, mumbling, “God bless you, Aunt. May your kindness never end.”

At that time, the Islamic University was little more than an aspiration, and some students enrolled out of necessity, as they had no other options. The university operated from the Al-Azhar Religious Institute on Thalathini Street in Gaza. After the institute’s morning students finished their classes and left for their homes, Islamic University students arrived—about twenty who had completed their first year in the Colleges of Sharia and Fundamentals of Religion, along with a limited number of new students in these same fields and in Arabic Language.

Each group entered a classroom in the institute, where one of the institute’s scholars would teach them a subject from their specialization. When one sheikh finished, another took his place, and so it continued—four or five consecutive lectures, just like in secondary school, with no noticeable difference.

Into this academic atmosphere, Ibrahim stepped, with no sense of being in a university or experiencing campus life like what Mahmoud had described from Egypt or what Muhammad had shared about Birzeit. But he knew he had no right to impose even a single extra penny on the family, and his dignity would not allow him to take any other path.

At the same time, he knew he could return to working at the vegetable stall in the market, especially since his university classes were in the evening, allowing him to work efficiently in the morning. However, he was well aware that merely mentioning this to my mother or Mahmoud would unleash a storm upon his head. So, he began contemplating another way to earn a living—one that would not alarm my mother or provoke Mahmoud's emotions.

One of his friends from the mosque worked in construction. He refused to take jobs in the occupied territories of '48 and was content to work within the sector, despite the meager wages and the scarcity of opportunities. Ibrahim agreed with him that whenever he found work, he would be willing to join as an assistant until noon. His friend found this arrangement acceptable. Ibrahim then presented the matter to us, framing it as a desire to learn the trade of construction alongside his friend rather than a pursuit of income. Given how he portrayed it, the family had no objections.

On the days they found work in someone's home, he would leave early in the morning, dressed for labor. If the worksite was nearby, he would return home afterward to change before heading to university. If it was far, he would take his clothes and books with him. At noon, if circumstances allowed, he would change before going to class; otherwise, he would attend lectures in his work attire, sometimes unable to change at all. Many weeks, they even worked on Fridays, pausing only to go to the mosque for Friday prayers before resuming their tasks in the afternoon. Yet, he was content. Over time, Ibrahim had begun covering his own expenses and needs. Eventually, he bought a bicycle to ease his movement between home, work, and university, saving both effort and money.

Life in the occupied territories was beginning to develop noticeably. Political and ideological blocs were growing more pronounced within various professional unions. In the Engineers' Association, three major factions had formed into distinct groups: Fatah, the leftists, and the Islamists. My brother Mahmoud was an active Fatah member in the association. He and his colleagues coordinated their efforts to secure the largest possible number of engineers' votes in hopes of winning the administrative board elections—just as their counterparts from the other two factions did. The same was happening in the Medical Association and the Lawyers' Syndicate.

Competition within these associations and unions was at its peak. Each faction assembled teams of activists who would visit colleagues at their homes and workplaces, striving to persuade them to participate in the elections and vote exclusively in their favor.

At times, two factions would forge an alliance against the third, seeking to wrest control of the board from it. Since the leftists had been the pioneers in union activism and were more adept at organizing themselves, Fatah frequently allied with the Islamists in an effort to overpower them.

The most striking example of this dynamic was the elections of the Red Crescent Society in Gaza. The leftists held a strong and entrenched position in the association, compelling Fatah and the Islamists to unite in an attempt to secure victory and unseat them. This struggle escalated into clashes, prompting the Islamists to mobilize large gatherings at the Islamic University in the sector, where their presence had grown significantly in recent times.

My brother Mahmoud played his part in the Engineers' Association elections. The Fatah members, intent on securing the largest number of engineers' votes to win, met every two or three days to review the names of engineers, assess their outreach efforts, and evaluate the strategies of opposing factions. Then, they would set out to consolidate further support. On election day, they deployed several cars to transport hesitant engineers to the polling stations. Similar efforts were made in the Medical Association, the Engineers' Syndicate, and other professional unions.

It was evident that the Islamists were focusing their efforts on university students in particular, as well as high school students more generally. Across all universities and institutes in the occupied territories of the West Bank, youth activities—cultural, athletic, and social—were designed to gather students, organize them, and shape their ideological and doctrinal convictions.

Sheikh Ahmed personally oversaw student activities in Gaza. He regularly invited a group of active students from the Islamic University to meet with him, where he would inquire about student affairs and request their attendance once a week. They, in turn, brought along other like-minded youths. Together, they would discuss matters of Islamic activism on campus, election preparations, strategies for engaging with ordinary students, and methods of winning them over to the Islamist cause.

Once the elections were held and victory was secured, they began directing efforts toward high schools, preparing the students who would later join the Islamic University or other universities, ensuring they were ready to align with the Islamic blocs and take on the responsibilities of Islamic activism.

Ibrahim was one of the most active students at the university during that time. Sheikh Ahmed relied heavily on him and several other students. He was one of the Islamic bloc's candidates in the student union elections, which they won. His days were consumed by his work—earning a few coins in the morning, studying in the afternoon, and dedicating his evenings to Islamic activism. Ibrahim was a flame of relentless energy and movement. At night, when he returned home, he would have his dinner before sitting down to read either his academic books or other texts. Rarely did he fall asleep in a conventional manner—more often than not, sleep would overcome him with a book still in his hand. I would then take it from his chest, place it beside him, and cover him with a blanket, my admiration and respect for him growing ever deeper. His dedication only strengthened my resolve and enthusiasm for my studies in my third year of high school.

Meanwhile, Mohammad was making excellent progress in his studies at the Faculty of Science at Birzeit University. Living in Ramallah proved unsuitable, so he sought a new residence in Birzeit itself. After much difficulty, he finally found accommodation with a group of young men from the Islamic bloc. Their dwelling—three rooms tucked beneath one of the luxurious houses on the opposite side of the street—became his new home, shared with five of his peers.

This house was nothing like the one he had lived in back in Ramallah. Mohammad's housemates were all devout young men from the Islamic bloc. Since the beginning of the academic year, the house had transformed into a quasi-headquarters for the bloc's activities. It became a hub for members, a place where they gathered, planned their student initiatives, and conducted their meetings.

Mohammad played a pivotal role in leading the movement, which inevitably required him to coordinate with female students who supported the bloc. Some of these students had begun wearing the hijab—a development that marked a near-strategic shift at Birzeit University, where veiled women had been a rarity. He would always summon them in groups, usually two or three at a time. They would stand conversing in one of the university's corridors or sit in the cafeteria, their gazes lowered. The men, too, would keep their eyes averted as they spoke, offering guidance on how the female students should organize their efforts within the university, explaining their role in the broader movement.



Student activism in universities was never confined to a single campus. This was the nature of all student movements and frameworks—every student bloc at one university sought, almost instinctively, to connect with its counterparts at other universities and institutes. The Fatah-affiliated students at Birzeit University, for instance, maintained contact with their peers at An-Najah University and beyond.

Likewise, members of the Islamic bloc frequently exchanged visits. It was common for a delegation from An-Najah University to visit their fellow members at Birzeit, or vice versa. These encounters served as opportunities to share experiences, offer advice, and coordinate joint activities. Despite its small size, the Islamic University—still in its early days, with limited student activism—began carving out its role in this dynamic network. On numerous occasions, Mohammad and Ibrahim crossed paths in joint events that had been organized.

Activists from Birzeit University often traveled to An-Najah National University in the city of Nablus. The level of openness there was lower than at Birzeit, yet it was still exponentially greater than that of Gaza, where conservatism reigned to an extraordinary degree—even before the rise of Islamic activism. Perhaps this environment was one of the factors that fueled the movement's widespread expansion in Gaza, surpassing that of other regions.

Hebron University fell somewhere between Nablus and Gaza in terms of its social conservatism. It was less rigid than Gaza but more so than An-Najah. The movements of student activists remained largely unmonitored, facing little interference from the occupation's intelligence services. While there may have been some level of surveillance, it was not overt. This allowed students to operate freely, engaging in their activities without restrictions, particularly since their actions were usually limited to ideological disputes and internal rivalries between different student factions—matters that had little direct impact on the occupation.

However, during national events or in times of heightened tension, when the occupation forces had intelligence suggesting possible disturbances on university campuses, they would prevent students from reaching their institutions. They set up roadblocks, turning students away, or cordoned off campuses with heavy military presence, trapping students inside. In such instances, protests would spill into nearby areas, sometimes leading to confrontations between students and soldiers. Stones would be hurled, nationalist chants and slogans would echo through the air. In response, the soldiers would fire tear gas canisters or shoot bullets over students' heads—sometimes at their legs. Raids and arrests often followed in the wake of these clashes.

Some students were detained for a short while, others imprisoned for slightly longer periods—yet life would always resume its course.

At Al-Karmel Secondary School, where I studied, members of the Islamic bloc, under the supervision of my cousin Ibrahim, organized a trip to Jerusalem and several other historical and scenic sites across Palestine. Registration was opened for those interested, with a set fee for participation.

One of the organizers approached me, inviting me to join. I hesitated, telling him I would think it over and give him an answer later. That evening at home, Ibrahim urged me to sign up, insisting that I shouldn't miss such an opportunity—to leave the confines of the Gaza Strip, to visit the West Bank, Jerusalem, and the lands occupied in 1948, to see our homeland with my own eyes. Then he asked, "If the fee is an issue, I can cover it for you."

I smiled, assuring him that money was not the problem; I could afford the cost. My hesitation stemmed from the principle of participating in such excursions. He pressed me further, and in the end, I promised him I would go.

The following day, I registered and paid the fee to the bloc's representative at school. On Friday morning, we gathered at the school gate before dawn, each of us carrying a small bag with food for the two-day journey. I knew that Ibrahim would be joining us—he was, in truth, the trip's real supervisor.

As the bus set off, he recited the Traveler's Prayer, and we all repeated after him:

"In the name of Allah shall be its course and its anchorage. Praise be to Him who has made this subservient to us, for we could never have done so on our own, and to our Lord we shall surely return. O Allah, we ask of You in this journey righteousness and piety, and deeds that are pleasing to You."

With every landmark we passed—ruins of villages, traces of towns erased in war, remnants of homes deliberately destroyed by the occupiers to erase the Arab identity of the land—Ibrahim, or another young man alongside him, would stand and explain:

"This was once such-and-such a place. These are the ruins of Asqalan. This sycamore tree stands at the heart of Hamama village. Here lie the remains of the mosque in Asdud's park, and beyond are the remnants of its school and homes."

Our first stop was atop a beautiful hill, crowned by an old Christian monastery. We stepped off the bus as Ibrahim began his account of the site—now known as Latrun Monastery. He spoke of the great Battle of Emmaus, fought on these very grounds, where Abu Ubaidah ibn al-Jarrah led the Muslim army in the conquest of Palestine.

Ibrahim bent down as he recounted the details of the battle—the sheer number of the Prophet’s companions who had fallen as martyrs here. He grasped a handful of the reddish earth and said, “This very soil bears witness, for it has been mixed with the blood of the companions of the Messenger of Allah (PBUH).” His eyes shimmered with unshed tears. A profound silence fell over the group—only the warbling of a bird and the rustling of leaves in the wind could be heard. Then he continued, “This soil is ours. This land is ours. The companions of the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) sanctified it with their pure blood, and it must once again be sanctified by the blood of the followers of the Messenger (PBUH), so that it may be freed.”

I was stunned by what I heard—especially coming from Ibrahim, who was practically mute at home, particularly in my mother’s presence. Yet here, he shone as a masterful orator, eloquently expounding his ideas. His knowledge of the places we passed was vast, and with each revelation, my respect and admiration for him grew.

The bus resumed its journey, covering more ground. A companion of Ibrahim’s pointed toward the foothills of a mountain, saying, “There, on that slope, lies the village of Deir Yassin.” He then began recounting the infamous massacre that befell the village—a name forever etched in history as a symbol of the brutal oppression inflicted upon the people of Palestine.

Before long, we reached Jerusalem, then the walls of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Old City. We walked through the ancient streets, lined with market stalls brimming with all manner of traditional goods. Everything one could imagine was for sale, though wooden artifacts stood out—popular souvenirs for the tourists who roamed the alleys, having come from all corners of the world.

At every turn, Israeli border guards stood watch, rifles slung over their shoulders, their keen eyes tracking every movement.

As we approached one of Al-Aqsa’s gates, we found a large detachment of border police stationed there, scrutinizing each visitor’s identification, sometimes recording the numbers. After registering ours, we stepped inside. Over the loudspeakers, the voice of a sheikh reverberated through the sacred space, reciting verses from the Holy Qur’an.

The Dome of the Rock, with its vibrant colors, crowned the elevated hill, accessible via stone steps. As we approached the gate of Al-Aqsa Mosque, a sense of reverence and awe washed over me as I took my first steps inside, holding my shoes in my hand. We paused to perform the two units of prayer to greet the mosque, then sat in anticipation of the Friday sermon. The preacher ascended the pulpit and delivered an ordinary sermon that felt familiar, lacking anything new or distinctive compared to the sermons I had heard from the sheikhs in Gaza. Afterward, we stood to pray the Friday prayer and its Sunnah, and soon the congregation began to disperse.

We regrouped and climbed the steps to the Mosque of the Dome of the Rock. Ibrahim started to explain to us about the mosque and the stone from which the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) ascended to the heavens during the Night Journey and Ascension. He explained that the Isra (the Night Journey) was from Mecca to Jerusalem and that the Mi'raj (Ascension) was from Jerusalem to the Lote Tree of the Utmost Boundary in the heavens. He emphasized that Jerusalem was the essential station on earth in this journey toward the heavens.

It was possible for the Prophet (PBUH) to ascend directly to the heavens from Mecca, but the wisdom of God necessitated passing through Jerusalem to illustrate to Muslims the special significance of Jerusalem in their faith, religion, and path to heaven. He reiterated, time and again, "From here in Jerusalem, the Prophet (PBUH) ascended to the heavens." A shiver ran through my body, and a wave of goosebumps covered me, which I could not hide from those standing beside me, who shared the same feeling. We were in the Gaza camps, visiting Jerusalem for the first time. Previously, it had been just a name with some minimal impact in our minds. Now we stood in this sacred place, surrounded by occupation soldiers who allowed some to enter while preventing others. Here we were, the Muslim and Arab nations, with all their millions, wealth, and armies, standing helpless in liberating it from these wretched, vile gangs.

From that moment, we began to understand that the conflict had another dimension beyond what we had previously perceived. The issue was not merely about land and a people displaced from it, but rather a battle of belief and religion, a struggle for civilization, history, and existence. Ibrahim and those who organized this trip succeeded in instilling this meaning deeply within us. Amidst these reflections, we heard Ibrahim's voice announcing that we should now head back to the bus to travel to Hebron, where we would visit the Ibrahimi Mosque. The voice echoed, and we walked towards the gate, feeling as if our feet were being pulled from the ground, for the awe of the place and its sanctity stirred emotions within us, making it hard to leave willingly, as we wished to remain here.



All along the way to the bus, Ibrahim's words still echoed in my ears—his account of Salah al-Din's pulpit, which he had prepared years before liberating Jerusalem, placing it before him as both a motive and a driving force, spurring him toward the city's freedom from the Crusaders. And how, in 1968, Jewish hands had set it ablaze. I found myself wondering: Is there a Salah al-Din for this age?

The bus set off toward Hebron, passing first through Beit Jala, then Bethlehem, and then Dheisheh Camp. We recognized the camp by the density of its clustered, simple buildings. Ibrahim identified it as Dheisheh, then gestured toward the other side, where a tent had been pitched in an open field, guarded by dozens of soldiers. "Here," he said, "Rabbi Moshe Levinger, one of the most prominent settlers in Hebron, is staging a sit-in. He protests the occupation forces' failure to protect settlers as they travel to Hebron, where they are pelted, night and day, by the stones of the camp's youth." We then passed by Al-Arroub Camp, and in due time, we arrived in the city of Hebron.

As we entered the heart of the old city, we found it resembling nothing less than a military barracks. Hundreds of soldiers were stationed here and there, dozens of military vehicles maneuvered through strategic points, and barbed wire encircled numerous locations and buildings.

Since the mid-1970s, Jewish settlers—under the protection, sponsorship, and full backing of the occupation forces—had begun seizing various buildings and sites in the old city. They expelled residents and took their homes, while scores of soldiers guarded them. Then came the renovations, the construction, the systematic reshaping of the area's Arab identity. Each day, they took over a new building, a fresh site, while the soldiers shielded and empowered them.

The bus brought us at last to the sacred Ibrahimi Mosque. A vast number of soldiers were stationed in the area, inspecting the identification of every Arab visitor, stopping them while Jewish and foreign tourists moved about freely, ascending the long stone stairway unhindered. We proceeded down a narrow corridor, flanked by an expansive prayer area laid out before us, before stepping into a side courtyard that led to the mosque's main sanctuary. At its far end were two more prayer halls. We saw tombs draped in green cloth, inscribed with names steeped in history—Ibrahim, Isaac, Sarah, and Joseph (peace be upon them). We performed the Maghrib prayer and wandered through the mosque, absorbing the richness of our faith and heritage etched into its walls.

As we departed, we lingered at the doors where vendors sold sweets—delicate pieces of malban, sheets of apricot qamar al-din, raisins, and dried figs. Then, boarding the bus once more, we set off toward Gaza.

Everyone began reciting the evening supplications: “We have reached the evening, and to Allah belongs all sovereignty and praise... and we are not of the polytheists.” The collective prayer echoed from our throats, each of us sinking into our seat, yet the words we repeated carried a depth unfamiliar to us before. When the names of Muhammad (PBUH) and our father Ibrahim (Peace be upon him) were mentioned, their presence after this journey—through these sacred places—gave the words a meaning wholly different from what we had known.

From this day on, I resolved to remain steadfast in my prayers, never to abandon them. And now, I had to begin preparing earnestly for my final high school exams (Tawjihi). Only two and a half months remained, and I needed to secure decent grades.



## Chapter Fifteen

The first half of the ninth decade of the tenth century of the millennium bore witness to great changes on the Palestinian stage, as well as profound shifts in our morals and behaviors.

I completed my high school studies and decided to enroll at the Islamic University of Gaza—despite my brother Mahmoud's objections. "What? You call that a university? It's not even fit to be a high school!" he scoffed. Hassan, however, supported my decision, and Ibrahim agreed as well. My mother, yielding to my insistence, silenced Mahmoud, telling him to leave the matter to me, as it was my choice alone. Reluctantly, he held his tongue, though his silence seethed with unspoken anger and disapproval.

I registered at the Islamic University and was accepted into the Faculty of Science. I could hardly wait for the new academic year to begin, especially with news that the university was undergoing remarkable developments. That year, it would welcome five hundred students, elect a president holding a doctoral degree, and recruit several PhD holders as faculty members. Plans were even in place to construct a dedicated campus building.

Throughout the summer break, Ibrahim remained steadfast in his work in construction alongside his friend. He earned a decent sum and, more than that, became a skilled builder in his own right. Learning the trade from his companion, he evolved into a professional. They became business partners, hiring an assistant laborer, taking on medium-sized contracts, and securing independent projects. It was clear that Ibrahim's self-reliance was forging him into a man of his own making.

Meanwhile, my brothers, Mahmoud and Hassan, were both blessed with newborns, as was my sister Fatimah. Hassan's work also flourished—he resolved to open his own metalworking and lathe workshop. He rented a space and began acquiring the necessary machinery. Money was no longer an obstacle. As for Mohammed, he was excelling in his chemistry studies at Birzeit University, finishing each semester with top honors. The university had waived his tuition fees due to his academic distinction, leaving him responsible only for his daily living expenses.

As the academic year commenced, we began attending classes in the same building as Al-Azhar's religious institute. Much of what we had heard about the university's growth was now taking shape before our eyes—the number of admitted students was as expected, a PhD holder had assumed the presidency, and several other distinguished professors had joined the faculty.

They had begun completing the construction of a long-planned building, one intended exclusively for the university.

All these developments were clear signs that the institution was evolving into a true university. The promising changes reassured us as students about the future. Yet, despite these advancements, we still attended classes in the institute's rooms during the afternoons—male students using the section designated for Al-Azhar's boys, while female students attended in their respective quarters.

The year of our admission was considered a preparatory year, during which we studied subjects equivalent to the general secondary curriculum, alongside students from Al-Azhar's high school. The coursework was predominantly theoretical, consisting mainly of religious studies taught by scholars, with only a few introductory scientific subjects. Consequently, the academic rigor and workload felt relatively light, allowing us to spend much of the year indulging in leisurely pursuits and engaging in the ideological debates that unfolded among students of different affiliations.

It was evident that the students aligned with the Islamic movement were the most numerous, the best organized, and the most effective in presenting their ideas and fostering connections with their peers. The Fatah-affiliated students were less influential but made continuous efforts to strengthen their presence and improve their capabilities. As for the leftist students, they were a small, nearly invisible minority—an insular group whose activity remained minimal and largely unnoticed.

A month into the academic year, the university buzzed with increasing activity as students prepared for the upcoming elections for the Student Union. Simultaneously, a parallel election was underway for the Women's Student Committee. Activists from various factions intensified their efforts to engage with new students, introducing them to their ideologies and attempting to win them over.

The small cafeteria hall became a lively arena, filled with students debating across tables, promoting their ideas, and critiquing their rivals. Within days, tensions surfaced among members of the Islamic bloc, as many had begun operating independently of their former leader—the same figure at the center of past conflicts surrounding the Red Crescent elections.

Soon, word spread that he had officially split from the group and would run in the elections with his own separate list, while the rest of the bloc would present an opposing slate. Meanwhile, nationalist forces—including Fatah and the leftist organizations—were beginning to unite in preparation for the contest.



A third list entered the race, escalating the intensity of discussions. Flyers were distributed, slogans were plastered across the walls, and members of the National Bloc took to pasting numerous images of Abu Ammar on every available surface.

Each slate prepared a list featuring its eleven candidates, complete with its name and emblem, and began distributing them to supporters. Ibrahim emerged as one of the most active members of the Islamic Bloc. Though I did not consider myself part of it, nor an ardent supporter, I found myself left with no real choice but to cast my vote for my cousin and his slate. The deep bond we shared and my personal admiration for him made it impossible for me to do otherwise—even though I had a certain inclination toward Fatah, drawn by its symbolic stature and its role in armed resistance and guerilla operations.

Election day was a first-time voting experience for me and many others. We stood in a long line, each holding our identification cards, presenting them to the verification committee before being granted access to the polling station. Once inside, we received a ballot, had our names crossed off the voter list, and proceeded to a designated table where we selected our candidates. After marking our choices, we folded our ballots and placed them into the box under the watchful eyes of university staff and designated representatives from each competing list. Ibrahim, too, was present, overseeing the process on behalf of his slate.

Upon exiting the voting hall, I noticed a commotion on one side of the courtyard. Curiosity led me to investigate, and I soon discovered that Fatah activists were claiming that members of the Islamic Bloc had torn up images of Abu Ammar and trampled them underfoot. The accusation undoubtedly left a negative impression on some voters, possibly even swaying their decision at the last moment.

Once voting concluded, the counting process began. Rumors about preliminary results quickly spread—some favoring the Islamic Bloc, others suggesting a different outcome. I remained on campus, waiting with Ibrahim for the final results. Around eleven o'clock that night, the Dean of Student Affairs finally emerged and announced the outcome: the Islamic Bloc had secured a decisive victory, with a significant lead over the Independent List, which had surpassed the National Bloc.

That night, Ibrahim and I walked home together. He was brimming with joy, while my mother, waiting anxiously for our return, was filled with concern. As soon as we arrived, I recalled the incident at the polling station and asked Ibrahim, "Is it true that one of your activists tore up Abu Ammar's pictures and stepped on them?"

He firmly denied it, assuring me that they had immediately investigated the matter and found no evidence to support the claim. According to him, it was likely a last-minute electoral maneuver by National Bloc activists to sway voters away from the Islamic Bloc at the final hour.

For my part, I believed Ibrahim.

Without a doubt, I knew he was always truthful, and I had never witnessed him lie. However, I couldn't be certain about the honesty of those whom Ibrahim had questioned.

Despite the eruption of civil war in Lebanon, in which the Palestinian resistance played a crucial role, the presence of Palestinian fighters in Lebanon remained strong, constantly troubling the Israelis. The resistance fighters occasionally launched a number of Katyusha rockets at the Israeli settlements in occupied northern Palestine, particularly targeting Kiryat Shmona. The Israeli government, led by Menachem Begin and his Defense Minister, Ariel Sharon, seized the opportunity presented by the assassination of an Israeli figure in Europe to mobilize their army along the Lebanese border and initiate an invasion of Lebanon.

Some expected the invasion to cover only a few kilometers to halt the Katyusha launches; it appeared that Begin shared this belief. However, Sharon pushed the Israeli army deep into Lebanese territory, ultimately besieging Beirut. Faced with the fears of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) leadership regarding the Israeli army's encroachment into Beirut and the surrounding Palestinian camps—aiming to eradicate the resistance and annihilate tens of thousands of civilians in such a war—the decision was made for the resistance to evacuate Lebanon through various intermediaries. Thus, the PLO leadership and all armed Palestinian fighters exited Lebanon, leaving the refugee camps and civilian populations vulnerable and unprotected amidst a lack of coordination or agreements with the Lebanese Phalangists and the Israeli army.

The Sabra and Shatila massacre ensued, claiming the lives of hundreds of Palestinian refugees—men, women, and children—marking one of the most heinous crimes against humanity in those brutal events. As news spread through media channels, the situation in the occupied territories exploded. This period was exceptionally harsh and difficult; there was hardly a home in the camps that did not have sons, fathers, or close relatives in the Lebanese camps. The refugees were forced to endure sorrow and anguish once, twice, thrice, and even more, accompanied by heartbreaking human stories—mothers unaware of their children's fates, sons oblivious to their fathers' whereabouts, or wives left in the dark about their husbands' conditions.

The protest at the university erupted like a tempest, loud and unrelenting. In that moment, all affiliations, all disputes, dissolved into the roar of defiance. We clashed with the occupation forces as they passed along Thalathini Street beside the university. Stones rained down in torrents, endless and unyielding, yet their bullets did not cease, nor did the choking clouds of tear gas. Cries of pain echoed in the chaos. Many students fell, wounded, and were hurried to Dar Al-Shifa Hospital, their blood staining the pavement.

In Hebron, the settlements swelled with each passing day, a creeping tide of occupation. Every Saturday, another home was taken, its doors flung open to strangers as its rightful owners were cast into the street. The army stood by, shields raised for the settlers, their protection unwavering. The city's breath grew heavy with rage, its people suffocated by injustice.

Elsewhere, in the shadows of this siege, three young men gathered—Fatah fighters, bound by a silent oath. They moved with purpose, with fire in their veins, plotting an act that would shake the ground beneath the occupiers' feet. The city was a maze of watchful eyes, of endless suspicion, yet they slipped through it, unnoticed. Weapons passed through cautious hands—a few rifles, sparse ammunition, grenades that fit like fate in their grasp. They scouted the streets, whispering excuses for their presence, their eyes ever searching for the perfect moment, the perfect target.

And then, they found it—the Daboya stronghold, where settlers and soldiers intertwined, a symbol of the occupation's weight. Under the cover of night, they crept toward the cemetery that loomed above it, breath shallow, steps light as wind. They took their positions, fingers poised on the edge of destiny. Then, like a storm breaking free, they struck. Grenades soared, shattering the silence. Gunfire crackled through the air, swift and merciless. Screams rose from the depths of the building, desperate and unhinged. For long moments, the soldiers did not fire back—caught in a chaos they had not foreseen.

Then came the reinforcements, boots pounding against stone, weapons raised. The dead and wounded were carried away, their numbers lost in conflicting whispers, but one truth remained—many had fallen. The city awoke to the iron grip of a curfew, its streets torn apart by vengeful hands. They searched, they questioned, they destroyed, grasping at ghosts. Days bled into nights, and when the curfew was finally lifted, Hebron was no longer the same.

At the Ibrahimi Mosque, where settlers once came as fleeting visitors, they now carved out spaces of permanence. Sections were claimed, walls were drawn, and where prayers had once risen freely, the echoes of footsteps now marked a slow, relentless theft. Only on Fridays did the settlers retreat, leaving behind a place forever altered, forever stolen.

In the Yousufiya Hall, they arranged their seats and set their candelabra aglow. Dozens of soldiers stood watch, their presence unbroken, guarding these spaces, the devout Jews, and the sacred artifacts of their worship, nestled deep within the mosque. Roads were erased, homes confiscated, and the noose around the people's necks tightened further. The occupation's forces spread like a suffocating shadow, roaming the streets, scrutinizing identity cards, rifling through belongings at every corner, every narrow alley. Life itself became a slow-burning torment, and the air grew thick with the stifling weight of oppression, pressing down upon the chests of those who had long endured.

Jamal still made his way to the Ibrahimi Mosque, his steps unwavering despite the storm that raged around him. No hardship, no decree, no iron fist should stand between a soul and its prayer. He knew it in his heart—this was their attempt to break them, to uproot them from what was theirs. "As long as a single pulse beats within us, we will never forsake our mosque," he would say, his voice firm with conviction. And so, his mother, with a heart weighted by both love and fear, and his wife, torn between worry and silent faith, surrendered to the only refuge left to them: prayer for his safety, prayer for his return.

At the University Alumni Association School, where he taught among a throng of educators loyal to the Fatah movement, the air often crackled with debate. Time and again, they would lash out—at him, at the Islamists, at those they accused of standing idle, of failing to take up arms in the struggle against the occupation. But Jamal only met them with a quiet smile, answering not with anger, but with certainty: their battle was not one of mere weapons, but of the soul. "If our people are to fight a true and unyielding war," he argued, "they must first be armed with faith. Only when they return to their religion will this struggle take on its fullest meaning, rising to the level it demands. When a man understands that his suffering in this world is but a step toward reward in the next, he does not merely endure—he embraces. He does not hesitate—he charges forward, carrying his cause as he would his own beating heart. And in that, there is no burden, no blame, only purpose."

It was not long before the settlers, too, had begun to move in the shadows, weaving their plans in whispered secrecy. A group had formed, its purpose clear, its intent sharpened like a blade: to strike against the Arabs of Hebron and beyond. These settlers were not mere civilians; they bore weapons, stockpiled explosives, and carried within them the cold precision of soldiers—for most had once donned the uniform of Israel's most elite combat units. Behind them, cloaked in robes of piety, stood the most extreme of rabbis, lending them the shield of religious decree, whispering in their ears that there was virtue in the spilling of Arab blood, that homes could be torn stone from stone, that places of worship could crumble into dust—and that in all this, there was righteousness.



In the early morning hours, as the students of Hebron University gathered within the campus, a white Peugeot 4 suddenly came to a halt. Three armed men emerged, and in a chilling instant, they unleashed a storm of automatic gunfire upon the crowd. Within mere moments, the car sped away, vanishing into the distance, leaving behind a scene of horror—dozens of students, young men and women, collapsed in pools of their own blood. Among them lay the fallen, their souls departing before help could reach them. A long time passed before the occupation forces arrived, their intelligence officers feigning concern, pretending to investigate the massacre. They questioned students, stopped passersby, their voices laced with a hollow performance of authority. But the people muttered under their breath, their disbelief palpable—What do they want? Do they truly think we believe this was not their doing? That this horror was not of their own making?

That same group of settlers had secured a house in the heart of Jerusalem's Old City. There, they stockpiled advanced explosives and underwent rigorous training under the supervision of retired officers among them. Their goal was clear, their intent terrifying—to blow up Al-Aqsa Mosque, burying it and all within beneath the rubble, erasing every trace of its Islamic heritage.

The plot reached the ears of security officials. The matter was studied carefully, and it was decided that the timing was not yet right for such a cataclysmic act. And so, for now, the extremists were restrained—arrested and imprisoned, but only temporarily. Despite the blood they had already spilled, despite the grave conspiracies they wove, their punishment was but a pause, a delay, nothing more.

Not long after, an extremist religious group calling itself The Temple Mount Faithful declared its intent to storm Al-Aqsa's sacred courtyard, laying the first stone of their so-called temple upon its ruins. They did not hide their threats—if necessary, they would seize it by force. Their audacity had precedent; not long ago, a lone fanatic had stormed the mosque, opening fire upon the Muslim guards and worshippers, killing many in cold blood.

News of the impending assault spread like wildfire, reaching every corner, every ear. By midday, the warning had reached the Islamic University. Without hesitation, members of the student council gathered in the main square, with Ibrahim standing at the forefront. A rally was held, voices rising in fury and determination, declaring the dangers that loomed over Al-Aqsa. A decision was made—whoever wished to march to Jerusalem would do so.

For many, the journey was impossible without informing their families. Others, however, did not hesitate. They handed their bags and books to their friends, entrusting them with a simple message—"Take these home. Tell my family I have gone to Jerusalem." Ibrahim and I were among those who did the same.



The bus set off toward Jerusalem, carrying us along with one of the university teachers, Sheikh Yunus. We wished the bus could take flight, carrying us swiftly to Jerusalem so that we might offer our bodies as a shield to protect Al-Aqsa Mosque. Throughout the journey, the Sheikh spoke to us about the sanctity of this sacred land and the great virtue of striving in its defense, until our emotions, already aflame, burned even brighter.

Upon reaching Al-Aqsa Mosque, we found a vast gathering of men, women, and children—an unorganized but determined crowd. We were about sixty in number, and we assembled in one corner of the mosque, forming a leadership with Ibrahim at its head. The Sheikh was our guide and mentor. We divided into several groups, each entrusted with guarding one of the gates where the aggressors were expected to enter. We had nothing to defend ourselves with except our bare hands, whatever sticks we could find, and stones. We took our positions, having been instructed not to abandon them under any circumstance, fearing that the assailants might strike from multiple directions. The disorganized masses would inevitably rush toward the first gate from which news of an attack would emerge.

Each team was further divided into two groups to ensure prayers were performed at their appointed times—one group would pray while the other remained on guard. Once the first group finished, they would resume their positions, allowing the second group to pray before returning to their posts. As night fell and the situation seemed likely to persist, it was agreed that the first group would sleep during the first half of the night, then return to their stations, allowing the second group to rest for the remainder of the night. The leadership team continued to issue directives to all groups, ensuring coordinated efforts.

Those who remained on guard through the biting cold of the night were soon met with aid from local residents, who hurried to bring woolen blankets, offering each of us one to wrap around ourselves. We settled beside the mosque's stone walls and pillars, keeping watch, while our minds wandered through the profound history of this sacred place. We whispered among ourselves, giving thanks that we had been granted the honor of standing in scholarly vigil at Al-Aqsa, ready to defend it with our very bodies against any wicked aggressor.

We recalled the miraculous Night Journey and Ascension of the Messenger of Allah (PBUH), and we remembered the great Salah al-Din. Our eyes welled with tears, and the sound of quiet sobbing filled the night air. At midnight, the second group replaced us—we handed them the blankets for warmth and the stones for defense. Then we made our way to the courtyard of Al-Aqsa, spreading some mats beneath us while using others as covers. When the call to Fajr prayer rang out, we rose, performed our ablutions, and prayed with the congregation.

One of Al-Aqsa's guards had noticed the level of discipline and readiness among us. Leaning in, he whispered to Ibrahim that there were hundreds of iron pipes—scaffolding poles used in construction—stored nearby. "Take them," he said, "use them if you must."

By sunrise, another bus had arrived, bringing more students from the university. Our numbers now exceeded a hundred, each armed with a metal pipe—a weapon far superior to bare hands or stones. Everyone took their positions once more, while waves of people continued pouring into the mosque.

Every now and then, rumors would spread that the attackers were coming through the Moroccan Gate, and the crowd would surge in that direction. Yet we, the students, held our ground, unmoved. We soon noticed another large group of young men—more disciplined than the general masses. They, too, had taken note of us, and after observing Ibrahim, they seemed to recognize him as our leader. Some of them approached him, introduced themselves, and revealed their origins—they were devout youth from our brethren in the occupied lands of 1948, mostly from the town of Umm al-Fahm. Without hesitation, they joined us, merging seamlessly into our ranks.

What set them apart most was their extraordinary kindness and an almost unimaginable readiness for sacrifice. It was not long before one of them broke into a song, a heartfelt chant of devotion—ballads woven with honor and purity, pledging life and soul for the sake of Al-Aqsa. We could not hold back our tears; they flowed freely down our faces, and our grips tightened around the metal pipes in our hands.

The day set by the so-called "Temple Faithful" passed, and yet they dared not approach Al-Aqsa. We remained for an extra day, ensuring absolute safety. Only when we were certain that the threat had faded did we finally decide to depart. After performing the noon prayer at Al-Aqsa, we gathered in a circle at the heart of the mosque's courtyard. Sheikh Younis sat among us, speaking of our mission—our expedition in the path of God, in the defense of our sacred Al-Aqsa. We had not encountered the enemy, nor had any of us attained martyrdom.

Then, he raised his hands and began to pray, his voice trembling with devotion, pleading for God to protect our beloved Al-Aqsa from their treachery and to grant us the honor of martyrdom and the virtue of striving in His cause. His supplications stretched long, and we echoed after him, "Ameen... Ameen..." Until, at last, sobs erupted among us, and tears streamed down every face.

The bus carried us back to Gaza, but the silence upon us was unshakable.

Our journey to Al-Aqsa, and our meeting with our brothers from the Palestinian communities inside, reminded us of another fragment of our scattered people. It was the first time we had encountered the Arab citizens of the occupied territories so closely. Before, I had only heard bits and pieces about them. But in this brief encounter, I truly came to know them. They had, in no time, broken into my heart and settled deep within it, with their noble character, their kindness, and their light-hearted spirit.

Above all, their resilience throughout the years of occupation remained unshaken. Despite all efforts to strip them of their Arab identity, their Islamic faith, and their Palestinian roots, they stood firmer than anyone who had not met them, seen their spirit, or witnessed their readiness could ever imagine.

My brother, Muhammad, had the chance to meet some young men from the interior during his visit to Hebron University. As was customary for activists in various political factions, Muhammad and his colleagues would tour different universities across the West Bank and Gaza Strip, connecting with like-minded activists, coordinating efforts, and unifying their stance.

During one such visit to Hebron University, a fellow activist invited them to a student's home for lunch. There, they were warmly received with exceptional hospitality. The hosts had prepared a meal, and as they sat together, Muhammad learned that they were young men from the '48 territories—hailing from Umm al-Fahm, Kafr Qasim, and other towns. It was immediately evident that these young men possessed kind souls, a deep sense of faith, and an unshakable commitment to their religion and their people. The years spent under occupation had only strengthened their adherence to their faith and their cause.

Muhammad graduated from the Faculty of Science with distinction, which earned him immediate acceptance as a teaching assistant in the Chemistry Department at Birzeit University. My mother had long awaited his graduation, hoping for his return to settle in Gaza. However, with his new appointment, it became clear that he would spend most of his time in the West Bank. This, in itself, was a dilemma—his continued absence in Ramallah weighed heavily on my mother. Yet, paradoxically, it also solved another issue: upon his return as a graduate, he would need a new room, and there simply was no space for that in the house. When the family discussed his living arrangements in Ramallah, he affirmed that, at least for the first year, he would continue living in a shared apartment with the same students, just as he had during his studies.

One day, after our vigil at Al-Aqsa Mosque, while we were gathered at home with the family, I happened to mention that event. The words slipped from my lips before I could stop them, and there was no turning back—despite Ibrahim's sharp glance in my direction. Mahmoud seized the opportunity to launch an attack on Ibrahim and Muhammad Mohsen, both of whom were members of the Islamic movement. He criticized them for abstaining from armed resistance, limiting themselves to political and grassroots activism. "This moment," he declared, "places your leadership under scrutiny. By invoking religion, they are stifling the immense potential of young people, preventing them from engaging in the resistance".

Muhammad, well-versed in political debates through his years of student activism, responded with a calm confidence that filled the room with a sense of quiet authority. "Listening to you," he began, his voice steady and measured, "one might think your guns never fall silent, that your operations will drive the Jews away in mere hours. But tell me, isn't it true that for years now, there has been no real armed resistance? What we witness are feeble attempts that barely take shape before they are crushed—am I wrong, Engineer?"

His words hung in the air, challenging the assumptions of those around him. The next evening, as we gathered for Maghrib prayer at the mosque, the atmosphere was charged with anticipation. The young men settled into their usual study circle, eager to engage in discussion. Sheikh Ahmad was preparing to speak, his presence commanding respect, when Muhammad raised his voice respectfully, drawing attention to his earnest inquiry.

"Sheikh Ahmad," he said, his tone imbued with respect, "if I may, there is a question that lingers in every discussion we have: What is the role of Islamists in the national struggle? In resistance?"

Sheikh Ahmad smiled warmly, scanning the faces around him, his gaze thoughtful and reflective. He understood the weight of Muhammad's question, aware that it resonated deeply with the concerns of the youth.

"We are in a stage of education and preparation," he said, his voice steady and firm. He then elaborated on the importance of nurturing individuals, emphasizing the vital role of shaping minds and souls. He made it clear that no great cause could thrive without this foundational work. After he had made his point, he returned to his intended discourse, but the seeds of his words lingered in the minds of those present.

The words "education and preparation" became a refrain, echoing across the years and resonating in our daily lives. In our home, those words found a place in conversations, in Umm al-Abd's house as her son Abdul Hafiz listened intently, and in university debates where the question of Islamists and armed resistance would arise repeatedly.

The answer remained unchanged:

"We are in a phase of education and preparation."

And always, those who spoke these words would invoke the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), recalling how he spent years cultivating faith, establishing a community, and nurturing his followers before ever raising a sword in battle.

One night, we returned home late, the night air thick with tension, to find our mother restless, anxiety etched across her face. Her worry was palpable. A policeman had come earlier, delivering a summons for Ibrahim. He was to report to the intelligence headquarters at dawn, with a warning—he must not be late.

Yet Ibrahim remained unshaken, his demeanor calm and collected. He reassured our mother with a quiet certainty that belied the gravity of the situation, telling her this was merely routine. "Many young men receive these summonses," he said with a reassuring smile, "they answer a few questions, and then they are released soon after." His confidence served as a balm for our mother's frayed nerves, a reminder of the resilience that coursed through our family and our community.

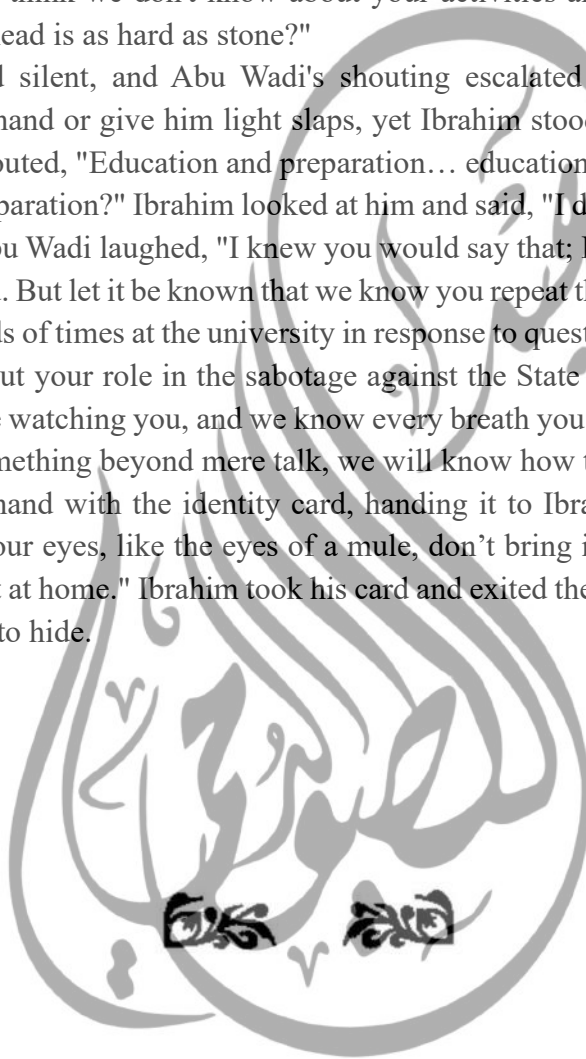


The next day, Ibrahim went for that interview, where he was detained along with several others in a small kiosk for several long hours until the afternoon. Afterward, they took him to the office of the intelligence officer for our area, whom I called Abu Wadi. He began to ask Ibrahim ordinary social questions about his family, relatives, residence, and studies. Ibrahim responded with short and very concise answers, while Abu Wadi tried to entice him to elaborate, but Ibrahim adhered to a policy of brevity.

After a short while, the questions shifted to his student activities at the university, but all he could muster were simple yes or no answers. Abu Wadi was provoked and shouted, "Do you think we don't know about your activities and connections? Don't you realize your head is as hard as stone?"

Ibrahim remained silent, and Abu Wadi's shouting escalated as he began to push Ibrahim with his hand or give him light slaps, yet Ibrahim stood still, his face turning red. Abu Wadi shouted, "Education and preparation... education and preparation! Why education and preparation?" Ibrahim looked at him and said, "I don't know what you're talking about." Abu Wadi laughed, "I knew you would say that; I don't expect anything different from you. But let it be known that we know you repeat these words, that you've said them hundreds of times at the university in response to questions from the National Bloc students about your role in the sabotage against the State of Israel. And let it be known that we are watching you, and we know every breath you take. The moment you think of doing something beyond mere talk, we will know how to put you in prison."

He extended his hand with the identity card, handing it to Ibrahim, saying, "All this hatred that fills your eyes, like the eyes of a mule, don't bring it with you when I call you again; leave it at home." Ibrahim took his card and exited the room, smiling a smile that was not easy to hide.





## Chapter Sixteen

My aunt Fathiya was blessed with a daughter named "Muna." Despite the newborn's beauty, lively spirit, and charm, she never occupied my aunt's thoughts away from her son Abdul Rahim, who had begun to crawl and talk. They started preparing him for school with the onset of the new academic year. Abdul Rahim was a dark-skinned, handsome child, yet he had a sharp sense of humor. If someone angered him, he would frown and remain sulky until he managed to vent his frustration, often retaliating by hitting the one who upset him. He was greatly attached to his uncle Abdul Rahman, who married after completing his university studies and had a daughter named "Ruqayyah."

Uncle Abdul Rahman loved him dearly, and whenever he had the chance, he would take his little hand after his mother got him ready to go out with his uncle. They would leave the house either to the mountains or for a stroll in the quiet village evening, away from the sunset, where he would buy him treats from a nearby shop. He often took him to the mosque for the Maghrib prayer, where Abdul Rahim stood next to his uncle, imitating him in prayer. If his uncle prolonged his prostration during a voluntary prayer, Abdul Rahim would raise his head to check his uncle's position. Once he saw him prostrating, he would return to his own prostration. Then they would sit together in the mosque with several young men who frequented it, discussing a jurisprudential issue, a historical matter, or an event from the life of the Prophet. Abdul Rahim would sit cross-legged, bowing his head slightly, then raising his gaze to the speakers, resting his head between his hands as he supported them on his knees.

His uncle often took him to Hebron to visit his friend and colleague Jamal, where they would sit in the house, exchanging conversation as others joined them to discuss religious, political, and various other issues. Sometimes they would go to one of the mosques in Hebron or visit friends at their homes.

Political awareness in the occupied territories had clearly developed, especially in youth gathering centers, particularly in universities, institutes, and high schools. The competition among political forces and political thought had gradually begun to escalate, as each force attempted to secure as many positions as possible in its favor. For example, in universities, every faction tried to rally students to its side to ensure victory in the elections for the student council.

During this competitive process, small and limited confrontations frequently occurred, resolved quickly and easily. However, as the Islamic movement began to compete vigorously in all arenas, a heightened sensitivity arose among the national movement, led by Fatah. The national movement, which represents the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) with its various factions, considers itself the legitimate extension of the organization, recognized as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. This recognition has been upheld by the Palestinian populace for decades, acknowledged by the Arab League, Arab states, and even the United Nations and other international bodies.

For decades, this was how things transpired, until suddenly the Islamic movement emerged in the occupied territories, growing significantly and competing for many positions against representatives of the PLO factions, winning in many instances or achieving good percentages in others. This was a deeply concerning development, exacerbated by two additional factors. First, this assembly did not bear any practical responsibility in the armed struggle against the occupation, and second, it did not recognize the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Although its leaders and figures did not explicitly declare this, they simultaneously refrained from making a clear acknowledgment of this reality. When questioned about it, their responses were diplomatic, neither a firm "no" nor a definitive "yes."

As the strength of this movement grew across the occupied territories, particularly in Gaza and specifically within the Islamic University, the Islamic movement achieved nearly complete control over the student body by winning student council elections with a very high percentage, securing its candidates over those of the national orientation, as well as triumphing among the female students in the women's council elections against candidates from the national movement.

With this growth, concerns escalated, prompting more serious attempts to rebalance the equation. It seemed that instructions had come from leadership abroad to work diligently to settle matters, and all circles began to mobilize. This led to sharp tensions in many areas, which repeatedly escalated into confrontations starting in the universities and spilling into the streets and alleys of the regions and camps. These encounters often began with assaults by one side on members of the other, prompting retaliatory actions, resulting in a chain of attacks that caused physical harm and necessitated medical treatment in many cases.

In this atmosphere, everyone began to align themselves with their groups and organizations, each one defending their faction, even if only verbally. This immediately reflected in our home. My brother Mahmoud was a Fatah supporter, while my brothers Hassan and Muhammad and my cousin Ibrahim belonged to the Islamic movement, and our neighbor and relative (Hassan's wife's brother from the Popular Front) added to the mix. Any spark that could ignite conflicts or confrontations of this kind would directly affect our household and its relationships, where discussions would intensify and turn into shouting matches: "You did this!" "No, you did!" "Who do you think you are to do that?" My mother would stand by, trying to mediate and reconcile, or at least prevent matters from escalating to physical blows. I usually stood with her, while Mahmoud's wife supported him and Hassan's wife stood with her husband. The situation would end with everyone retreating to their rooms, deliberately avoiding one another, visibly expressing their irritation and anger.

Due to Ibrahim's presence at the university and his leadership role in the Islamic bloc, he was held in unusually high regard—almost reverently—by many, including my brother Mahmoud. However, being at the university and close to Ibrahim, I could observe this dynamic clearly. I feared for his safety, concerned that someone might attack him, so I tried to stay close to him whenever I could. Circumstances allowed me to do so only during lectures, as he sometimes vanished from sight, mingling with the bloc's activists. I would keep my distance, sensing that they were discussing private matters they wouldn't want me to overhear.

It seemed that information about Ibrahim's role was reaching Mahmoud through Fatah student activists, who regarded Ibrahim as one of their leaders. I could see the irritation and resentment on Mahmoud's face toward Ibrahim, who he felt he could neither approach nor even speak to, lest he upset him. This was a red line for my mother; Ibrahim's displeasure with any of us would mean chaos—this had been ingrained in us ever since his mother left him.

At times, Mahmoud would attempt to engage Ibrahim in conversation, straining to control his nerves to avoid conflict. My mother would then intervene, unleashing her wrath on him, as Mahmoud began to argue that things weren't unfolding as they should and that what he was doing was wrong. This insinuated that he held Ibrahim and his group responsible for the tensions and clashes occurring around them.

Ibrahim smiled and said, "You're trying to shift the blame onto us. We didn't initiate the clashes; you are unwilling to acknowledge our existence as a popular force and a political and social movement that differs from yours." Mahmoud retorted, "You are the ones leaning toward violence, using sticks, chains, and knives. You refuse to recognize the Palestinian Liberation Organization and fail to take responsibility for the armed struggle, all while you assault representatives of the national movement, and the occupation watches you."

Ibrahim looked at him reproachfully and questioned, "Is this an accusation of us being collaborators, as if we are the offspring of the occupation?" Mahmoud attempted to justify himself, saying, "I'm not accusing you, Ibrahim; I'm not accusing you. But perhaps your leaders have personal agendas." Ibrahim responded, "Look, we did not start any conflict. Each time, we defended ourselves. The root of the problem is your unwillingness to recognize our existence as a competing force, as if the realm of Palestinian activism and control over institutions, associations, and unions were solely yours. You must acknowledge that there is a competing force that disagrees with you on many viewpoints and positions."

At that moment, my mother intervened, having noticed the conversation and monitoring its developments without them realizing. She urged them to stop this talk and not to bring the street problems into our home as internal disputes.

On one occasion, the military governor sent a notification requesting Ibrahim and several other activists from various factions to appear at his office. When Ibrahim arrived, he found a gathering of about ten activists. The governor began calling them into his office one by one. When it was Ibrahim's turn, he started discussing with him, holding him responsible for the ongoing events. Ibrahim objected to the approach, clarifying that he had no connection to the clashes. The governor then switched to a patronizing tone, questioning how, as a people under occupation, they sought independence while fighting amongst themselves. "You are a people unworthy of life; you, you..."

Ibrahim found himself in a predicament: if he did not respond, it would feel like a sharp slap, and if he did respond, it would seem as though he was affirming the current situation or admitting he was part of it. He thought for a moment and said, "First, I want to affirm that I have no connection to what is happening, but I believe you know that all peoples living under occupation or those with sovereignty and institutions, as is the case with our people, experience disagreements and clashes. This has happened to you repeatedly, both in the past and the present, most recently with the actions of the Haganah against the IDF."



The ruler was taken aback, unable to conceal his astonishment. He asked, "How did you know this?"

Ibrahim replied, "It is written in books."

The ruler attempted to shift the matter back to Ibrahim, saying, "I take pride in the fact that someone like you considers the Jewish people a model and an example."

Ibrahim responded, "I did not mention it as a model or an example, but merely as a historical precedent. And I assure you once again that I have no connection to what is happening."

With each passing day, Ibrahim grew in my eyes—rising in stature and respect. He had been orphaned at an early age, his father martyred when he was only four. His mother left him when he was still a child, and he was raised among us. Despite his youth and the harsh conditions of life under occupation, he became a self-made man—a true leader.

I would watch him move across the university courtyard, speaking with one person, directing another, issuing orders and instructions, orchestrating affairs as he saw fit. Then, I would see him as a thinker, a skilled debater. And beyond all this, he carried himself with the modesty of a maiden in her chamber; the blood would rush to his face, turning his cheeks red, as if they might burst with emotion.

The occupation forbade any construction on the university grounds, an attempt to confine it and tighten its grip. But there was no choice but to impose a new reality. The number of students had exceeded fifteen hundred, and the faculty and administrative staff had grown so significantly that no one—neither students nor observers—doubted that the university had passed the stage of uncertainty and was now on its way to becoming an officially recognized institution.

It became a battle against the occupation, which sought to crush us in every way—even in education. And so, we found ourselves erecting tents and palm-frond canopies for our studies, with Ibrahim standing over us, supervising the work with tireless dedication. He instilled in the students a spirit of determination and defiance, so that each of us arrived at the university not merely with academic ambition, but with a deep sense of national duty. The name "Tent University" gradually became synonymous with the Islamic University—a title we bore with pride. The occupation could not stand against a people determined to pursue knowledge, and eventually, it had no choice but to accept the reality we had forged. It was our duty, then, to press forward.

Then, suddenly, without warning, several trucks entered the university, coming to a halt before unloading vast amounts of building materials. In that moment, Ibrahim transformed from a student and activist into a contractor, throwing himself into the work with a group of dedicated students, while hundreds of us joined in. Together, we built classrooms from bricks and roofed them with asbestos.

Thus, the reality was imposed upon the occupation. Several classrooms were completed and ready for study, followed by another set, and then a third. It soon became clear that we no longer had any need for palm-frond shelters and tents. With each passing achievement, Ibrahim grew even greater in my eyes and dearer to my heart—his stature and nobility ever rising.

Ibrahim excelled in his studies, actively participated in student affairs, and held a distinguished position as a leader among his peers. On top of all that, he worked in construction, earning enough to cover his expenses. But his efforts did not stop there.

One evening, as we sat at home, he turned to my mother and said, "I want to suggest something, but I don't want you to be upset with me."

She smiled and replied, "You know I never get upset with you, and I trust that you wouldn't say anything to make me so."

He hesitated for a moment, then said, "But this time, it seems I just might. I ask for your forgiveness in advance."

My mother looked at him in surprise. "What is it, Ibrahim?" she asked.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a bundle of money. "I want to contribute to the household expenses," he said. "I'm a man now, and I earn more than enough. It's only right that I share in the costs. You have already—"

Before he could finish, my mother interrupted him with a sharp cry. "What's gotten into you? Have you lost your mind?"

Ibrahim muttered, "Auntie, I'm only trying to—"

But she cut him off again. "No! None of this nonsense. If you have extra money, give it to me, and I'll save it for you. You may need it tomorrow or the day after. In any case, we'll certainly need it when we marry you off after you graduate."

Then, her voice softened with warmth as she added, "Every time you have an extra coin, bring it to me. I'll keep it safe for you. You will need it one day, Ibrahim. You will need it."

The rejection did not sit well with him. So, every few days, he would return home carrying a bag filled with groceries, fruit, vegetables, or sweets—his own way of contributing. My mother would look at him with admiration and affection, murmuring, "Oh, Ibrahim, what am I to do with you? May God bless you."

Armed resistance had dwindled significantly. A saying had begun to spread: *'Every time a Jew dies, something happens,'* a phrase used to emphasize how rare such occurrences had become. Not only had casualties among the enemy decreased, but all forms of resistance had diminished. Military alerts were infrequent, patrols in the streets had been reduced, and night curfews were now rarely imposed. In many areas, people were even allowed to gather on the seashore after dark.

Buses filled with Jewish visitors began to arrive in various areas, particularly in the heart of Gaza City on Saturdays, seeking leisure and shopping, attracted by the low prices. This influx had a profoundly negative effect on the conservative atmosphere of the town, as dozens of buses unloaded women and girls, many of them dressed in ways that challenged local customs and values.

The intelligence officers, who acted as regional supervisors, began cruising the streets in their Subaru cars, stopping at any hour, day or night. They would pull over, call out to a passerby, demand to see their identity card, and initiate an interrogation—without guards, without hesitation, and without fear. If an officer noticed anything suspicious in an alley, he would leap from his vehicle, chasing after his target instead of relying on the cumbersome forces that had once struggled to breach the camp. The situation had deteriorated to a point where an officer might shout at a young man he had stopped, slap him, or kick him, then drive away, instructing the youth to follow him to his office. Woe to the young man who dared to refuse.

The flow of workers into the occupied territories became boundless, unregulated. Many of these laborers and craftsmen formed friendships with their Jewish employers, relationships that extended beyond the workplace into the social realm. If a worker requested a week off to marry, his employer would ask about the date, often promising to visit with his wife and a gift. It was common to see an Israeli car with a yellow license plate pull into the camp, the driver inquiring in either Hebrew or broken Arabic about the house of such-and-such groom. They would receive directions, park in front of the house, and step out—he and his wife, dressed according to our standards as provocatively—as they brought gifts, knocked on the door, and entered for an hour or more before departing, without anyone raising an objection.

The intelligence services of the occupation had begun to methodically infiltrate the camp. No one opposed them, no one protested. The officer responsible for the area would send out dozens of summonses, compelling young men and men to come to his office. They would sit in the holding cell for long hours, awaiting their turn. One by one, they would be called in, facing threats, intimidation, or coercion, while he played his cards skillfully, sometimes even offering condolences for their losses. His aim was clear: to recruit those he could. Occasionally, he succeeded in ensnaring the weak-willed, those wishing to travel abroad for study, to visit relatives, or for work. Anyone seeking a building permit, wanting to open a workshop or a store—everyone had to pass through the office of the intelligence officer, where negotiations began, as he offered simplified services in exchange for the smallest of favors.

If he found a willingness for initial collaboration, he understood that this could evolve into both cooperation and betrayal. Matters did not stop there; instead, it escalated to the point where several informants became notorious, strutting around with guns at their sides, entering the intelligence office at will, and bullying and assaulting people. It had reached a stage where some individuals, when in need of a permit or authorization that the intelligence officer refused, would turn to one of these well-known informants, seeking their intervention for help. In return, the informant would demand a commission for his services.

One of our neighbors had gone to study in Turkey, completing six years in medical school, with just one year of internship left. He was prevented from traveling and had repeatedly approached the intelligence officer, who denied him a travel permit each time until he had worn his feet out from walking.

Advised by a well-meaning friend, he sought out one of the informants for assistance. Upon asking for help, this informant demanded a commission of five hundred Jordanian dinars—a substantial amount. When the young man argued that the sum was exorbitant, the informant replied mockingly, “I am an agent for the Jews. If you could, you would kill me; therefore, I must drain your blood before that happens.”

Some had opened offices to issue permits and handle transactions that could only be accomplished with the intelligence's permission. They began to earn commissions from these dealings, amassing wealth and driving luxurious cars. It became evident that the occupation's intelligence, through its informants, had started promoting the trade and use of hashish, drugs, and alcohol. They viewed this as a means to destroy the people and extinguish any spirit of resistance, while their informants saw it as a shortcut to quick profits and a pathway to prominence. The informants began to spread corruption and vice, disseminating lewd images, magazines, and pornographic videos among the youth.

The informed activists from various organizations could only observe this dark, sordid reality. Not only were they unable to take any action against these phenomena, but they also found themselves constantly under the surveillance of these informants. Since my brother Mahmoud and my cousin Ibrahim were known activists, they attracted the informant's scrutiny at the main entrance of our house. Little did those suspicious individuals know that our house had another door—formerly my uncle's. Mahmoud and Ibrahim would quietly exit through the back door, while the suspicious ones believed they were still inside.



All the young men in the camp knew many stories about women, and how that woman or girl had fallen into collaboration and ended up working with the intelligence as a means of seducing young men into sex first. Then they would be photographed in disgraceful and humiliating situations, after which the intelligence would begin to blackmail and threaten them, attempting to recruit them to cooperate with them.

Certain stories became well-known about hair salons, photography studios, or other establishments owned by collaborators, which had turned into dens of moral degradation as a precursor to security compromise. These stories were particularly exposed after several incidents of suicide among young girls, where each of them wrote a letter to their families stating that they had been deceived when they went to a certain salon, where they were given a sedative in a glass of lemonade. When they awoke, they found that the agents had violated them and photographed them in scandalous positions, threatening them to cooperate with the intelligence or face exposure, leading them to prefer death and suicide.

Many of these stories became known by the names of the girls who committed suicide, the names of the salons, and those who engaged in those disgraceful practices. It became clear that the occupying intelligence, through its collaborators, was systematically engaging in organized corruption to destroy the people and eliminate any hope for a future of liberation or resistance. Each day, their methods in this field evolved, to the extent that one of the offices belonging to a well-known collaborator announced the registration for a tourist trip inside the Green Line to popular tourist areas such as Al-Fashkha, Baniyas, or Ein Gedi. When the trip took off, dozens of naive young men were accompanied by several known prostitutes who worked with the occupying intelligence. During the trip, in those tourist areas, attempts were made to entrap those young men in scenes and situations that were recorded, thus threatening them with exposure or informing their families of what had transpired if they did not agree to cooperate with the intelligence.

One of the young men from the camp had gone on one of these trips and became entangled during it, as they had taken pictures of him in compromising situations. The intelligence officer in charge of the camp summoned him to his office and offered him a chance to cooperate, which he refused. The officer then showed him those pictures and threatened to publish them in the camp, thus ruining his reputation. The young man insisted on refusing, and Abu Wadi told him, "I will give you a week to think it over, and after a week, I will call you again. If you do not agree to help me, you will see how I will expose you."

The young man left in a panic, feeling that he had fallen into a trap. If he refused to cooperate, he would be exposed in the camp, and his reputation would be shattered. If he agreed to cooperate, he would become even more entangled, forced to betray his family and his country. Finally, he turned to one of his friends, asking him for an escape. His friend found himself in a dilemma, as he had no experience in such matters. So, the troubled young man and his friend went to Mahmoud, hoping he could help, and explained the situation.

Mahmoud scolded the young man, asking how he could go on such trips! How could he even approach the collaborators? How could he get himself into such a predicament? He ultimately made it clear that his problem was already solved. Since he had dared to mention it to his friend, and since he had the approval to come to him, the knot was untied. The intelligence usually does not publish such photos; instead, it threatens naive young men with them. Their fear of public exposure is what often coerces them into agreeing to cooperate. He assured him that if he were indeed called by the intelligence officer again, he should clarify that he was not afraid of the scandal and that he could publish the photos, even offering to take a thousand copies to distribute himself in the camp.

The young man was summoned days later and did exactly as Mahmoud had advised. Abu Wadi became furious and began to threaten him, but in the end, he expelled him from the office, telling him that he would give him another period to think it over, and if he did not agree, he would make his life a misery. One evening, while Abu Wadi was driving through the camp's streets, that young man was on his way to buy some necessities when Abu Wadi spotted him. He stopped to call out to him, but the young man noticed and turned, running away into one of the alleys. Abu Wadi jumped out of the car, chasing him through the alleys.

Often, Mahmoud and his colleagues discussed these topics during their meetings, talking about the activities of the intelligence and its collaborators, debating how to confront them, yet finding no solution. It seemed that the situation had reached the point of truth in the saying, "The tear has widened beyond the patch."

Our misfortune was that my cousin Hassan had reappeared in the camp. His Jewish girlfriend had kicked him out of her apartment after his business with her father collapsed, declaring their bankruptcy. He wandered aimlessly before deciding to return to the camp. When he came home, it was clear that there was no place for him among us and that he had reached a point of no return. He had become more like the Jews than like us, and none of us could bear to see him.

Despite this, Mahmoud developed the idea that we should give Hassan a chance and try to rehabilitate him, bringing him back to his normal state. We emptied the guest room for him and all began to try to make him feel the warmth of returning to the family. However, he was incapable of feeling either warmth or heat. Every day, he would attempt to insult a neighbor or violate their dignity, leading to complaints. Mahmoud would start advising and guiding him, but to no avail. Eventually, the situation became intolerable, and it became clear that we were dealing with a hopeless case, so we unanimously decided to expel him from the house, with Ibrahim being the most fervent supporter of this decision.

When Hassan returned from one of his reckless outings in a similar state, Ibrahim confronted him sharply and angrily, informing him that he had no place among us and should leave as he wished. We all entered to participate in this conversation, clearly expressing our stance. He gathered some of his belongings, especially his television, and left while muttering curses, most of them in Hebrew, with some in broken Arabic. He vanished from our lives, and we thought we had finally rid ourselves of him and the embarrassment he had caused with the neighbors.

Days later, we heard news that he was living in the house of one of the dubious women whose stench was so overwhelming it could nauseate anyone. Soon after, reports began to emerge that he was involved in the trafficking of drugs, hashish, and obscene photos and magazines. It became evident that he had a solid connection with the intelligence, confirmed when some of Muhammad's friends informed him that Hassan visited Abu Wadi's office regularly, entering and leaving without scrutiny or restrictions.

Our reputation in the camp was at its best, as any Palestinian would desire throughout our lives. Mahmoud's standing with Fatah and Ibrahim's with the Islamic current made us seem like a focal point for national work and religious integrity. As my mother used to say, "Thank God, the whole camp swears by your lives and your manners." Suddenly, Hassan appeared to disrupt the entire image. The most affected by this was my brother, Hassan. People often heard about the notorious and dubious "Hassan the righteous." Whenever my brother's name was mentioned alongside "Hassan the righteous," listeners would flinch, opening their eyes wide in inquiry and disbelief. Each time, Hassan had to explain and clarify the story from the beginning. Sometimes the listeners would believe him, while at other times they would shake their heads, their eyes revealing their disbelief.

Hassan and discussions about him, along with his problems, became our main concern. Despite everyone in the neighborhood and camp knowing us, we started to feel like we had to walk with our heads bowed under the stigma that had befallen us. How could we break free from this curse? It was clear that we had to take action, yet our helplessness was evident. One day, Ibrahim came to me and said, "Ahmed, I want to talk to you about something, and I want your promise not to tell anyone." I assured him of my promise. He then said, "We must kill Hassan!"

I flinched at what I heard, looking at him in astonishment without uttering a word. He reiterated, "Yes, we must kill him. Otherwise, we can do it publicly to erase the shame that has come upon us. I am willing to pay the price with life imprisonment, or we can do it secretly—the important thing is to remove him from the face of the earth."

I felt what Ibrahim was suffering, as we all did due to Hassan's actions and reputation, but I was not ready to go that far, even in thought. However, we needed a solution to the problem. I suggested to Ibrahim that we could ambush Hassan and break his legs so that he would be unable to harm anyone else. I made it clear that I was not prepared to go any further than that. He agreed.

We approached Hassan with the plan, and he immediately consented, ready to prepare three iron pipes and three masks. Indeed, we lay in wait for him. One night, as he was returning home, drunk and disoriented, we pounced on him. Ibrahim struck him on the head, and he fell unconscious. I whispered to Ibrahim not to hit him on the head but to focus on his legs instead, and we unleashed our blows on his legs and arms without consciousness. Then we departed the scene, taking the pipes and masks with us to hide them.

By the next morning, the news had spread that a group had attempted to kill Hassan and that he was still alive but had sustained severe injuries, with broken legs and an arm, along with a skull fracture. They took him to the hospital, and we pretended not to care while everyone looked at us, their eyes saying: "You did it. May God bless your hands." Days later, the police car arrived at our house and took us all, the young men in the house, for questioning about the attempted murder of Hassan. We denied it, claiming that how could we kill our cousin? He was of our flesh and blood, and blood cannot turn to water. They held us for about two weeks before releasing us after nothing was proven against us.

Despite the passing of those two weeks, Hassan remained in the hospital, wrapped in plaster for over two months. Eventually, he was discharged, walking with a limp that marked him even in the dark. However, he bought a white Peugeot 504 and continued to drive around, but we no longer heard about his scandals in the camp.



In 1985, a prisoner exchange deal took place between Israel and the Popular Front–General Command, led by Ahmed Jibril. A large number of Palestinian prisoners, who had spent long years in Israeli prisons, were released. Most of them belonged to Fatah and the Popular Front, while some were from the Islamic current, originally members of the Palestinian Liberation Forces. Their release transformed the occupied territories into a national celebration across the homeland. Wherever one went, there were festivities and well-wishers.

On another level, this event significantly boosted national and security awareness among Palestinians, as this wave of released prisoners brought with them deep experience and insight. Their presence intensified political discussions on various issues, whether at gatherings, workplaces, or even in our own home. However, the surveillance of our house by suspicious individuals did not cease; rather, it escalated, becoming more frequent and persistent, continuing day and night.

My brother, Sheikh Mohammed, had met one of his devout students. It was evident that he was drawn to her, and his heart had begun to incline toward her. At times, she returned his gaze with a modest shyness, a silent yet clear message of mutual affection. He returned to Gaza on a Thursday and stayed with us until Friday, when he confided in my mother about the young woman and asked for her permission to take the first steps toward proposing. My mother, after some hesitation, agreed—though she insisted on seeing the girl first, as she believed Mohammed was like a blind kitten and feared the girl might not be beautiful enough.

Mohammed returned to Birzeit and, summoning all his courage, asked the girl for a brief, private conversation. Nearly bursting with embarrassment, he inquired whether he could approach her family for her hand in marriage. A deep blush spread across her cheeks, making her even more beautiful, and she nodded in agreement. He then asked for her family's address, which she gave him.

The following Friday, he returned to take a family delegation with him. My mother, my brothers Mahmoud and Hassan, my aunt, and my sisters Fatima and Tahani accompanied him to the young woman's house. My mother was undoubtedly impressed, and later she joked, "By God, Sheikh Mohammed, I always thought you were like a blind kitten, but you proved to be a real fox!" The girl's family gave their blessing, and the engagement was officially announced. They agreed to postpone the marriage and the signing of the marriage contract until she completed her studies in a year and a half—a timeline that suited both Mohammed and our family well.



## Chapter Seventeen

Jamal and several of his brothers from the city of Hebron drive their cars, heading towards Surif to visit their friend Abdul Rahman... They knock on the door, and Abdul Rahim rushes to open it. He finds his uncle's friends, the older companions he has known for years. Since childhood, he has often accompanied his uncle on visits to them... He smiles in welcome, saying, "Ahlen wa sahlen!" Then, turning inside the house, he calls out, "Uncle, the young men have come to visit you!" He turns back to them and gestures, "Please, come in... come in," stepping aside to make way for them to enter the guest room. Meanwhile, his uncle Abdul Rahman hurries over, greeting them warmly. They sit down, engaged in conversation, and Abdul Rahim considers himself one of them, despite the age gap—more than twenty-five years.

The women prepare lunch and bring it to the door of the room. Abdul Rahman and Abdul Rahim step out to carry it inside. After their meal, they set out for a stroll around the outskirts of the village, with Abdul Rahim accompanying them.

The land is fertile and flat, yet it lacks good crops. Remnants of barbed wires stretch far into the distance. Abdul Rahman points towards the wires and says, "This is the Armistice Line. To the west lie the Palestinian lands occupied in 1948 and 1967. Part of the village's land extends beyond the fence—forty dunams belonging to our family were confiscated in '48. And this section here, just a few dunams, remains ours, but we cannot cultivate it as it borders the dividing line. Do not forget this, Abdul Rahim." Abdul Rahim nods, murmuring, "How could I forget, Uncle? How could I ever forget?" Jamal mutters, "How can one forget? How can we forget? How does a man live without his heart, without his very being..."

They get into the car and head back to Hebron, with Abdul Rahim sitting beside his uncle. Along the road, dozens of cars bear yellow license plates—Israeli plates—coming and going in both directions. Jamal exhales sharply, his voice carrying his frustration, "And then what? These settlers... they have devoured the land. They never stop. They never have enough..."

As they enter the city, the call to prayer approaches at sunset, and the adhan resonates from the muezzin of the Ibrahim Mosque. The driver heads toward the mosque, but the car barely moves due to the heavy traffic. Hundreds of settlers and occupying soldiers guard their way to the mosque.

They walk to enter the mosque, dozens of rifles raised and aimed by the occupying soldiers. The Jewish settlers wear small, colorful caps on their heads, their long, unkempt beards flowing, and their bodies wrapped in striped cloth, the threads hanging down. They rush toward the mosque, pushing past its regular worshippers, stopping them at every checkpoint.

The young men enter the mosque as the carpets have been lifted from the back section, and heavy barriers made of iron poles and thick ropes delineate the area where the worshippers can pray... only a quarter of the mosque is designated for prayer, while three-quarters, along with the external courtyard and the two attached halls, are filled with Jews. "Ah... today is Saturday," Jamal mutters, as in every corner stands a Jew holding a book, reading incomprehensible and rapid words while rocking his body back and forth.

The muezzin establishes the prayer, and Jamal steps forward to lead. The worshippers line up, raising their hands for the Takbir of opening, and he recites Al-Fatiha. The voices of the worshippers behind him rise in a roar in response to the supplication, **"Not the ones who have incurred [Your] wrath, nor the astray."**<sup>3</sup> "Ameen." He then begins to read in a loud, beautiful voice, **"Glory be to Him Who took His Servant by night..."** until he reaches the verse, **"And We have made Hell a prison for the disbelievers."** Allahu Akbar, and he bows, and they bow with him, while the Jewish worshippers behind them sway their bodies as they recite their Torah.

I left the lecture hall after my last lecture, which had run late as the sun was nearing the horizon. I saw Ibrahim, my cousin, in a nearby hall. I greeted him with peace, and he returned the greeting. I asked him if he was heading home, and he replied, "Yes." We set off together, each of us carrying our books, surrounded by many students heading to their homes, and a bus was waiting at the university entrance, gathering students from the southern regions to take them back to their houses.

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Surah Al-Fatihah, verse (7) <sup>3</sup>

Surah Al-Isra, verse(1)<sup>4</sup>

Surah Al-Isra, Verse (8) <sup>5</sup>

We walked back home on foot, and from a distance, a military jeep stood watching the students leaving the university. Ibrahim glanced in their direction and said, "Who would have believed that Gaza would have a real university, as it is now? Do you remember, Ahmad, when you decided to enroll in the Islamic University? What was your mother's reaction?"

I nodded in agreement. On the other side of the road, a car pulled up, carrying several members of the Islamic Bloc—friends of Ibrahim. They called out to him. He went over, exchanged a few words with them, then returned and handed me his books, saying, "Take these with you. I'll be going with the guys for an errand, and I might be late. Reassure the government."

I smiled, took his folder and books, and set off, thinking about our "government"—that is, my mother—her way of dealing with Ibrahim, her love for him, and his love for her. Memories and images played in my mind until the blare of a car horn startled me—I had unknowingly stepped onto a main road and nearly got hit. The shock made me drop the books from my hands, scattering them everywhere.

I bent down to gather them under the streetlamp's glow at the street corner. My books, notebooks, and papers had mixed with Ibrahim's. I tried to focus, distinguishing them, sorting each back into its place.

A paper caught my attention—one of Ibrahim's. As I was slipping it back among his papers, my eyes fell upon its title: "A Report on the Movements and Activities of Hassan Al-Saleh." I could not resist the pull of curiosity. Hastily gathering the remaining papers, I allowed myself to skim through that tightly written intelligence report Ibrahim carried. It was signed: "Your Brother (23)." So, matters with Ibrahim and his group were far more than student activities, party rivalries, and prayers at the mosque.

That night, Ibrahim was strikingly late. My mother grew anxious, so I reassured her on his behalf. "My heart tells me Ibrahim has stepped onto a perilous path," she said, her voice edged with worry. "And I fear where it may lead."

I tried to soothe her, "Mother, Ibrahim is wise and mature. Don't be afraid for him. What could possibly happen? What danger could he be in?"

She sighed. "My heart tells me so." "Don't believe your heart," I said. "This is the devil whispering to unsettle you." She shook her head. "A mother's heart never errs, Ahmad." I looked at her. Tears shimmered in her eyes. Sensing my surprise, she murmured, "He is my son just as you are. Have I not raised him since he was a child?"



My mother remained seated on the prayer mat after completing the Isha prayer for nearly three hours. Anxiety was evident on her face, and she could not conceal it, until she heard the door close. Ibrahim entered. She sprang toward him, shouting, "Where have you been? Why are you so late?" Ibrahim replied, "Does the government want a written report or a verbal one?" She cried out again, unable to calm her worry. "I'm asking you—where were you? Why did you take so long?" Realizing the situation was difficult, he answered, "A friend of mine had a problem. We went to resolve it, and it took time to convince his father until he was finally satisfied." "Couldn't that have waited until morning? Don't stay out so late again, do you understand?" With a playful grin, he responded, "Yes, Your Majesty, as you command." She turned to prepare him some food, but he called after her, insisting she leave it. He swore she should not trouble herself—he would prepare it himself.

I had been watching all of this, and inside me, a volcano threatened to erupt. I had to confront him—I had read the paper, and I needed to make things clear. I could not remain silent. He might get angry and walk out, but that did not matter. I had to tell him.

Mother went to her room to sleep. He stepped into the kitchen, prepared his meal, then returned to eat beside me. We shared the same room. As he ate, I pulled out a chair and sat next to him. I leaned in close, my lips hovering near his ear as I whispered, "I hope you'll forgive me. Your file fell from my hands. While gathering the scattered papers, I saw the report about Hassan." He froze, his food untouched, the bite in his mouth nearly choking him. "What?" he gasped. I said, "Don't worry. I'm Ahmed, and you know me. Your secret is safe with me. That's what happened. But then... I couldn't resist my curiosity. So, I read the paper."

Confusion clouded his face. He seemed utterly lost, unable to respond. It was the most vulnerable I had ever seen him. I continued, "Consider it unread, as if no one saw it." He said nothing. Not a word. He merely finished his meal in silence, then we went to sleep.

The next morning, I noticed he waited for me, wanting to accompany me to university. As we walked together, he broke the silence. "Listen, Ahmed, I trust you won't mention this to anyone," he said. "But you should know—Hassan worries me. I've put some of our friends on watch to keep an eye on him and find out what he's up to." I could tell he was trying to mislead me, to obscure the truth about who had prepared the report. I looked at him intently and said, "Ibrahim, don't try to play this game with me. That report wasn't put together by some random guys or friends. The information inside it—this is not something just anyone could gather. These are the details of professionals, people who know exactly what they're doing. But that's not what matters to me. What matters is... what are you going to do about Hassan?" He let out a deep sigh. "I swear by Almighty God, I will kill him. I will rid the world of his evil. And I will be the first to do it. But everything in its time".

Ibrahim had been saving any excess money from his construction work with my mother. That day, when he returned from university, he went straight to her, requesting a sum of one thousand five hundred dinars from their savings. He wanted to buy a car that would ease his transportation, help him carry work tools, and save time between his job and studies. I knew he had started planning in earnest to put an end to his brother Hassan's situation. My mother handed him the money and told him that approximately another one thousand five hundred remained.

Ibrahim bought a Peugeot Private (404), a widely known and common model in the sector. All of them were secondhand, at least fifteen years old, but by the standards of the camp, it was considered a luxury.

Meanwhile, Muhammad stepped out of the apartment he shared with a group of students in Birzeit and made his way to the university. The moment he entered, he sensed an unusual tension in the air. Students, as always, were preparing for confrontations with the occupation soldiers.

They gathered piles of stones in different corners, prepared their keffiyehs, and set up barricades. Then, they formed into a massive demonstration that erupted from the university, chanting against the occupation and settlements, raising their voices for Palestine. It wasn't long before the occupation patrols arrived, and the clash began. Soldiers took cover behind their vehicles while the students withdrew behind stone walls. Rocks rained down on the soldiers, who responded with gunfire and tear gas.

All student factions took part in the confrontation. In moments like these, when every student movement joins the fight, the clashes grow fiercer, fueled by the spirit of competition, igniting their resolve. The battle raged for hours, forcing the soldiers to retreat multiple times, dragging away their wounded—one bleeding from his head, another from his face, struck by the students' stones. Then, the soldiers began firing, not merely to disperse the demonstrators or wound them, but with an unmistakable intent to kill.

Within minutes, two students fell as martyrs—Jouad Abu Salmiya and Saeb Thahab. As always, the students erupted in fury, chasing the soldiers, who had no choice but to retreat to the outskirts of town, away from the university and the relentless crowd.

The bodies of the martyrs and the wounded were taken to Ramallah Hospital as night fell. By morning, news of the martyrs and the clashes in Birzeit had spread across the entire homeland. Demonstrations erupted everywhere, a general strike was declared, and the confrontations between protestors and occupation forces extended to every corner of the Islamic University.

The students erupted in massive demonstrations, hurling stones at the occupation patrols as the uprising spread—first to the refugee camp, then to every corner of the city, especially the Shuja'iyya neighborhood, where the martyr Saeb Thahab had lived. The flames of resistance reached the southern sector as well, particularly Khan Younis, the home of the martyr Jouad Abu Salmiya.

For days, the confrontations continued. Stones rained down on the occupation patrols stationed near the university, those that prowled its surroundings like hungry beasts. In response, large reinforcements of occupation forces arrived, encircling the university. It was clear—they wanted to discipline us, to tame us into obedient, docile children.

Hundreds of soldiers besieged the campus, attempting to storm it time and again, only to be repelled each time by an unrelenting barrage of stones crashing down upon their helmets. As the hours wore on and evening approached, it became evident—we would be spending the night inside the university.

Then, a car carrying several respected figures was allowed through the gates. They negotiated with the student activists and university officials, relaying a message from the military governor: he would permit the students to leave, but only in carefully controlled groups—ten at a time, every five minutes—so that no large gatherings would form, no further demonstrations could spill into the city. He also pledged that the soldiers would not harm a single student.

With no better alternative, the agreement was accepted. The evacuation began, group by group, with soldiers directing the students down a side street. One group followed another in tense, measured steps.

I was among one of these groups. As we reached a branching alleyway, the soldiers signaled for us to turn—only to find ourselves face to face with hundreds of soldiers waiting in ambush, batons clenched in their fists. Their vehicles had sealed off the street, transforming it into an open-air prison.

Under a storm of blows, we were forced to our knees—hands raised above our heads, faces pressed to the cold wall. They collected our identity cards for inspection. It was clear they had lists—names of activists carefully marked. Those they identified were dragged aside, kicked and beaten as they were herded into a nearby holding area. The rest of us were dismissed one by one, our identity cards tossed back at us.

I had no affiliations, no record as an activist. They returned my card, and without a second thought, I fled—vanishing into the city like a man who had just glimpsed death. Ibrahim was not so lucky. He was among nearly a hundred students detained for three days—three days of savage beatings, of humiliation beyond words. The military governor believed he had disciplined us, that he had taught us our lesson. That we would now become—"good boys."

A few days later, I entered the university, and at first glance, it was clear that war was about to ignite. A group of activists, led by Ibrahim, were preparing for confrontations. After the students gathered, stones began to rain down on the patrols and military vehicles passing near the university. Within half an hour, the university was under siege, and military buses were assembling hundreds of soldiers... It was evident that this time we would endure twice the beating we had faced before. But for now, we would face the confrontation as we should.

The majority of the students masked their faces to avoid the cameras and surveillance equipment set up on a tall building across the street, and the stones began to fall on the soldiers who took cover behind their vehicles and plastic shields. They responded with gunfire and tear gas. It was clear that the students this time were seeking revenge for the humiliation they had suffered days ago. A large armored vehicle was brought in to spray hot water. It advanced toward the university gates, with the soldiers sheltering behind it. It crashed through the door, undeterred by the hail of stones, and moved toward us, met by a heavy downpour of stones.

The soldiers could not advance alongside it, so it retreated. The struggle became one of back-and-forth; sometimes they attacked us, sometimes we fought back until the afternoon. Then, a loud rumble echoed through the streets. A military tank shook the ground and demolished the back gate of the university. A student shouted through a loudspeaker, "A tank has entered the campus from the back gate!" And then, in an extraordinary turn of events, more than seven hundred students, instead of fleeing, turned toward the tank, their feet racing like the wind. It was a scene of madness; there was more than a hundred meters between us and the armored beast, but we surged forward. It was clear that the tank's driver and crew thought they would crush dozens beneath their tracks. Yet they were confident that this crowd, which was now upon the tank, would tear them apart.

The tank turned and began to retreat, exiting the university grounds. The crowd reached the door that had been torn off and began to barricade it with whatever they could find—stones, concrete blocks, barrels, tree trunks... Most of them returned after a few stayed on the walls to monitor the soldiers' movements.

Time passed, and dusk approached. The local dignitaries arrived to mediate. I rejected their mediation and heard hurtful words. We stood waiting, wondering: What next? Ibrahim tried to hide a broad smile that spread across his face, but he could not. A moment of quiet fell, and then, all at once, the voices of dozens of mosques erupted. The loudspeakers in every mosque in Gaza City shouted at the same moment, "Come to Jihad... The soldiers of the occupation are besieging your sons and daughters in the university; come to save them! Allahu Akbar... Allahu Akbar."



And suddenly, the people in every neighborhood of the city began to gather, merging into mass marches and demonstrations erupting from all directions toward the university. It was as if all of Gaza had come out in unison, chanting "Allahu Akbar... Allahu Akbar, and death to the occupation!" A state of security breakdown prevailed, and immediately orders were issued to the forces surrounding the university to abandon it and spread throughout the city to restore order. The forces turned and scattered, only to face a throng of furious people, followed by thousands of angry university students filled with pride.

Ibrahim drove his car out of the university gate and saw me, stopping to take me along. He said, "I'm not going home; I want to take a tour around the city to see the situation." The streets were alive with men and women, children and elders; burning car tires blazed everywhere, and barricades closed off the roads. Groups of terrified soldiers spun around, unsure of what was happening around them.

The smile on Ibrahim's face was wide, and he no longer tried to hide it. I told him, "You have organized things well." He continued smiling, saying, "Thank God, thank God, people are okay." We saw throngs of thousands of citizens and students heading toward the Saraya building, where the military governor's office is located, hurling tons of stones at it, while the soldiers could hardly protect themselves, firing indiscriminately. A number of Mahmoud's friends came to visit him at home, clearly concerned. They sat down, and after a while, I brought them tea that Mahmoud's wife had prepared. I entered to serve them while they continued their discussion. They were talking about a young man from Fatah who had recently been arrested and was responsible for one of the elite military groups. In interrogation, he confessed everything. Mahmoud asked, "How? I heard he was strong and stubborn." One of them replied, "True, he is strong and stubborn, but they took him to the 'Birds' and he confessed there."

I took the liberty to intervene, asking, "To the 'Birds'? What are these 'Birds'?" He answered, "They are a large group of spies who assist the intelligence in interrogations. They place them in rooms like prison cells and take the detainee to them when the intelligence fails to extract a confession. These spies pretend to be patriotic prisoners in a regular jail and start trying to lure that detainee into talking to them about any information he may have."

Their argument is that they want to extract information for the authorities, fearing the arrest of that cell, or under some other pretext. Sometimes, when they see that the detainee is trying to defend himself, claiming he is respectable and not an agent, they continue to accuse him. Some are forced to reveal their secrets to prove that they are not collaborators. This is how such tricks and deceptions work.

At the Islamic University, there is a complete separation between male and female students. Each group studies in its own sections, and there is no mixing between the two. However, while going to and returning from the university, they meet in the streets, parking lots, and bus stops. The majority observe road etiquette and general rules, often going to extremes, although there are a few students who, upon leaving the university, rush off without any arrangement, which is typical in such communities. All the female university students wear the hijab, as it is the university's rule, and they are not allowed to enter without it. Most of the female students, reflecting the conservative nature of the community in the sector, wear the hijab seriously, though some wear it only when entering the university and remove it as soon as they leave, with some even pulling their headscarves back, revealing part of their hair.

One of the students from the neighborhood in the camp was studying at the university, and it often happened that I would be on my way to or from the university and find her along the way. I do not exaggerate when I say that she was indeed as radiant as the full moon. Sometimes I would steal glances at her as she gazed down at the ground, walking straight toward her goal without looking around or hesitating. My heart began to ponder and wonder if I might grow fond of her later. I did not dare to greet her, feeling shy and fearful.

One day, by chance, our eyes met, and I felt a shiver run through my body, overwhelmed by emotions that surged in my heart. It was a fleeting glance, and then she immediately lowered her gaze. I began to aim to encounter her on her way to or from the university, and even if I didn't look at her or she didn't look at me, just the fact that she was on the street filled me with a sense of comfort. I started to wonder if I had fallen in love with her. Is this love, which they often speak of? The second time our eyes met from afar, I felt my heart racing more and more every time I saw her in the street. And the third time our eyes locked, I smiled, causing her face to flush so deeply that it seemed about to burst; she quickly averted her gaze and hastened her steps away from me.

I eventually settled for waiting to see her as she left the university from a distance, not aspiring for anything more, not even a glance. It was enough for me to love her, and it sufficed that she understood that well, feeling it every time she sensed my eagerness to catch a glimpse of her every day or two. I had to be cautious and not seek more at this stage before graduating from university and being able to approach her for marriage according to the customs and traditions I had been raised with since childhood.

The matter of my cousin Hassan troubled Ibrahim greatly, and he had filled my head with it more than once. He took me along to monitor Hassan's movements to confirm the information from the report. We verified several details, as we saw him go to meet Abu Wadi in specific timings, park his car close to the military headquarters, then get out and enter the building after showing a special card to the soldiers guarding the gate. He would disappear for an hour or a few hours before coming out again. We observed him visiting several shops owned by well-known agents, their stench obvious and suffocating.

We also witnessed him harassing girls in the streets, making vulgar remarks at them, and we saw some girls getting into his car, which he then drove to distant locations. At times, he would take one of them along and bring an unmarried young man to a deserted place, confirming that he was working to ensnare that young man. The situation had become as clear as day, leaving no room for doubt or misinterpretation.

My mother would not allow any of us to stay out late at night, and she was particularly strict if one of us wanted to go out at a late hour, thinking she was asleep or busy. Whenever one of us approached the door, she would leap up, shouting, "Where are you going, Ahmad? And where are you going, Ibrahim?" At that moment, it was a challenge to escape her questions and inquiries.

Ibrahim knew that she would create problems for him in his attempts to deal with Hassan, so he agreed with me to start coming home early to study diligently and then go to bed early. At midnight, I would help him sneak out of the house and wait for his return, so he could enter quietly. We began to execute the plan; every week, he would go out once or twice and then return to thank me before going to sleep, without me asking him what had happened, where he had been, or what he had done.

One night, Ibrahim returned with a dark expression, clearly having gone through a very tough situation. He changed his clothes and went to bed without exchanging a word. After that night, he never took me along again on any surveillance or pursuit of Hassan.

About a week after that night, Ibrahim said to me, “Ahmad, there’s no need for you to stick to this routine. Feel free to do as you wish.” I was surprised by his words but didn’t ask him about his motives.

One of the following nights, I was returning home late at night, and as I turned onto one of the side roads, I saw the intelligence officer Abu Wadi’s car parked on the side of the road. He had gotten out in his civilian clothes, as usual, standing next to the wall of the mosque with something in his hand, pointing at the wall. I took a detour down a side alley to avoid running into him and waited until he left. When I returned to the spot where Abu Wadi had stood, I noticed he had drawn some marks and written some numbers on the wall.

When I arrived home and entered the room, I found Ibrahim sitting on his bed reading one of his university books. I told him what I had seen, and he prepared to go out but then looked at the clock. “If it weren’t so late,” he said, “I would go see that. But the government will expose me if I go out at this hour, so let’s wait until morning.” At dawn, we set out for prayer at the mosque. Before we reached the wall in question, Ibrahim warned me not to stand or gesture toward it, but to speak to him without any signals. I informed him about the spot before we reached it, and he managed to see it clearly.

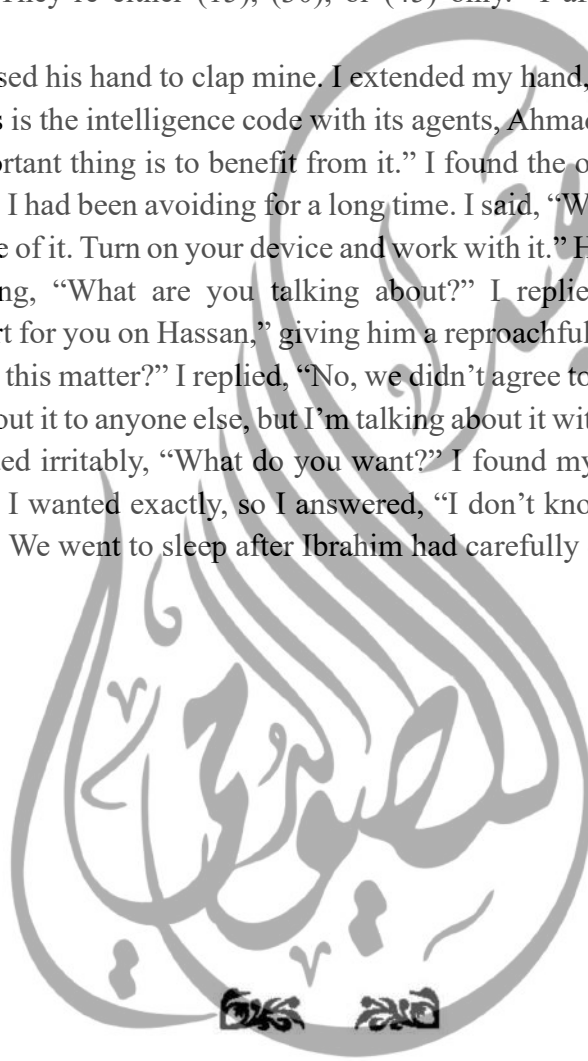
After we passed the location, he whispered to himself, “There are many of these marks in various places. They had caught my attention before, and I thought they were signals for the municipality regarding sewers or electricity or something similar. But they’re for intelligence, meaning they’re for agents. They are signals indicating the schedules for very secretive and dangerous meetings because if they were known and burnt, there wouldn’t be a need for such effort and trouble.” We prayed the dawn prayer, and on our way back, we looked at it again. After we passed it, Ibrahim mumbled to himself, “This day, this hour, and this for the place.” I asked him what he was saying, and he replied, “Nothing, but we will see.”

That afternoon, he took me with him in the car and asked me to pull out a notebook and a pen and be ready to record some things. He began driving around the camp, and every time we passed by one of the walls, he slowed down and said, “Look at the wall to your right. This mark is similar to the one from last night. Write it down in the notebook, then another mark, write it down, and a third and fourth.” We left the camp and went to other neighborhoods, collecting dozens of signals. We stopped to pray at one of the mosques for the Maghrib prayer before returning home.



I entered the room, and Ibrahim took the notebook from me, placing it on the table. He began comparing the numbers, whispering, "Don't you see this one hundred percent similarity? This number signifies today's date. All the numbers fall between (1) and (31). Doesn't that make sense?" I replied, "That's correct." He then compared the second number and said, "This one seems to indicate the hour. Don't you see it falls between (1) and (24), corresponding to the number of hours in a day? Isn't that reasonable?" I answered, "Yes, that's right." He continued, "And these numbers indicate the minutes. Don't you see how small they are next to the larger numbers that represent hours? They're either (15), (30), or (45) only." I affirmed, "One hundred percent."

He smiled and raised his hand to clap mine. I extended my hand, and he lightly clapped it, then said, "This is the intelligence code with its agents, Ahmad. We've deciphered it, and now the important thing is to benefit from it." I found the opportunity appropriate to bring up a topic I had been avoiding for a long time. I said, "Well, the important thing now is to make use of it. Turn on your device and work with it." He looked at me sharply and angrily, saying, "What are you talking about?" I replied, "About those who prepared the report for you on Hassan," giving him a reproachful look. He said, "Didn't we agree to forget this matter?" I replied, "No, we didn't agree to forget. We agreed that I wouldn't talk about it to anyone else, but I'm talking about it with you, not with anyone else." He responded irritably, "What do you want?" I found myself in confusion, as I didn't know what I wanted exactly, so I answered, "I don't know, I don't know. Let's forget it for now." We went to sleep after Ibrahim had carefully destroyed the papers.



## Chapter Eighteen

I was deep in sleep when I awoke to the sound of men shouting in the house. I rubbed my eyes and glanced at my watch; its hands pointed to three-thirty before dawn. My mother's voice rang out, "What do you want?" Before Ibrahim and I could get out of bed, the door to our room was slammed open with a force that sent it flying. Several rifles were drawn and aimed at us, and the voice of "Abu Wadi" echoed, "Don't move; stay where you are."

He entered, accompanied by a number of soldiers, and pointed at Ibrahim, saying, "You are Ibrahim?" Ibrahim replied, "Yes, I am Ibrahim. What do you want?" Abu Wadi laughed and said, "Why are you in such a hurry? Take your time, Ibrahim." Then he looked at me and asked, "You are Ahmad?" I said, "Yes." He commanded, "Get up and come here." They took us and stood us against a wall, ordering the soldiers to search the room. They rushed in, rummaging through the place, while Abu Wadi himself searched us personally, finding nothing. The soldiers turned the room upside down, but they didn't find anything they were looking for. He flipped through Ibrahim's papers and notebooks, reading what was inside, then gathered everything he was suspicious of into a box brought by one of the soldiers and ordered him to take it to the car.

My mother was screaming, "What do you want? You've ruined the house; may God guide you." Dozens of soldiers were searching every corner of the house. After about two hours of searching, they tied my hands behind my back and blindfolded me. They did the same to Ibrahim and took us out of the house while my mother screamed, "Where are you taking them? You criminals, may God kill you." They threw me into a jeep like a sack of potatoes, and then I felt another sack of potatoes being tossed on top of me, realizing it was Ibrahim.

I was trembling from fear and anxiety, and it seemed that Ibrahim sensed this, whispering, "Hold on, what's wrong with you, man? You're shaking; there's nothing to worry about! We'll be back home in a few days." Suddenly, a strong slap hit the back of his head, and a soldier shouted in broken Hebrew, "Shut up, you donkey!" The convoy moved, and soon we stopped; it turned out we had arrived at the barracks. They shoved us out with kicks and began dragging us through narrow alleys and passages. Then they led us up a long, narrow staircase. One soldier, who spoke Arabic somewhat better, instructed me to stand still and not move, positioning me against the wall. I heard him do the same with Ibrahim, asking him to do the same.

It had been a long time without anyone speaking to me, and all I could hear were the sounds of doors opening and closing, and voices speaking in Hebrew, a language I did not understand. After a long while, someone with that voice pulled me, saying, "Come," and shoved me into one of the rooms, removing the blindfold from my eyes. I found myself in a small room with a desk behind which sat a young man dressed in civilian clothes, smiling as he said, "Please, sit," while gesturing to a chair in front of him. I sat on the chair, my hands still bound behind my back.

He asked, "Where is Hassan?" I looked at him in astonishment and replied, "At home." He asked, "Which home?" I said, "Our home." He replied, astonished, "Hassan is in your home?!" I said, "Yes."

He looked at the papers in front of him on the table and then asked, "Which Hassan is that who is at your home?" I said, "My brother Hassan." He said, "Ah, I'm asking you about Hassan, your cousin. Where is he?" I said, "I don't know." He said, "How do you not know?" I replied, "He hasn't lived with us for many years, and we don't know where he goes." He asked, "When did you last see him?" I said, "I don't remember." He said, "Approximately?" I replied, "A long time ago." He asked, "When did you mention him last at home?" I answered, "I don't remember." He said, "Approximately?" I said, "A very long time ago; we've forgotten him." He asked, "Why?" I replied, "He caused us many problems with the neighbors, and we kicked him out of the house. We no longer care about him; he doesn't concern us."

He asked, "Did you hear that he was beaten about a year ago and spent around two months in the hospital?" I said, "I heard." He asked, "Who beat him?" I said, "How would I know?" He replied, "What's your estimation?" I said, "I don't know, but it could be the relatives of one of the girls he was chasing, or people he had a disagreement with about something." He asked, "Like who?" I said, "I don't know, but that's what I thought at the time, and he doesn't matter to us anyway." He asked, "So you don't know where he is now?" I said, "No, I don't know and I don't want to know..." He called for the man who brought me in and asked him to take me out of the room. He placed a thick cloth bag over my head and pulled me from the room, stopping me against the wall. I then heard them dragging Ibrahim in and closing the door hard behind him.

After a long while, which could be up to an hour, I heard the investigator calling for that man: "Abu Jamil." He went to him, and I heard him pulling Ibrahim and placing him against the wall, estimating that he asked the same questions. I wondered to myself why they were asking about Hassan and where he was. Was he missing? Or was he on the run from them? I remained in that position, facing the wall, receiving a slap or a kick that made me forget my exhaustion and fatigue.

My legs could no longer support me, so I collapsed to the ground. The soldiers came, hitting and screaming, kicking me, demanding that I stand up. Fatigue and exhaustion had taken their toll on me, and I no longer cared about the beatings and kicks. They struck me and struck me again, urging me to stand, but I refused to comply. Each time they grabbed my shoulders and lifted me, I would slip back down to sit, prompting more blows and attempts to lift me again. Eventually, the investigator came and ordered them to leave me on the ground. Though I paid a heavy price for my sitting, I felt extremely relieved.

Life stirred in the interrogation section all at once as dozens of investigators entered simultaneously. I realized that it was daytime and that this was the start of their new workday. After some time, they took me into one of the rooms, and when they removed the bag from my head, I found about seven investigators in front of me. Before I could fully grasp my surroundings, one of them kicked my feet forward, and another pushed me in the chest backward, causing me to tumble to the ground. They caught me and brought me down hard.

The iron cuffs dug into my back as one of them tackled me, choking me, while another stood on my stomach, beginning to stomp down on me with his feet. A third separated my legs, while the fourth started to apply pressure to my groin.

As minutes passed, they would all pause together, and the one sitting on my chest would ask, "Where is Hassan?" I would respond that I did not know, and they would start again. Then they would stop and repeat the same question, and I would give the same answer, prompting them to resume their assault. They would then stop and ask Ibrahim if he had confessed, saying, "Tell us where Hassan is." I would reply, "I don't know." This went on repeatedly until they were convinced that I genuinely did not know where he was, at which point they left me and called a soldier from outside to take me away. He brought me next to the wall, and as I sat there, he attempted to drag me and hit me, but I had already made up my mind the night before.

I heard Ibrahim's screams and their shouts at him; it seemed they were using the same methods. Ibrahim denied any knowledge of Hassan's whereabouts, but he replied to them sharply, cursing and insulting them, which only made them increase the pressure on him. However, in the end, they took him out and placed him next to the wall. Days later, they put me in one of the cars, blindfolded, with my hands bound behind my back and my legs shackled. The car drove for about an hour before stopping and pulling me out, dragging me along as I stumbled whenever we passed stairs or doors. They made me stand for a while against one of the walls, then pulled me a short distance, and I heard the sound of a metal door opening. They shoved me into a dark cell with black walls, lifting the bag from my head.



I sat in the cell. After a while, the door opened, and another young man was pushed into the cell; they lifted the bag from his head. He sat next to me and introduced himself, sharing his name and where he lived, explaining that he had been under investigation for two months. They brought in lunch and dinner, and after we finished eating, we heard a commotion as the door opened, and five young men in brown prison uniforms were shoved into the room. They were beaten with batons while the young men defended themselves.

The young man beside me began to talk about himself and his case, what he concealed, and what he revealed, while they urged him to lower his voice, assuring him that they would share this information with the revolution outside the prison so that they could take precautions. Then they turned to me and asked for details. I recalled Mahmoud's friends talking about the "birds" and realized it was a trap of knowledge, and the truth was that I had nothing to hide.

I answered them very briefly as they questioned me, probing to see if I had anything concealed. After a long time, the door opened again, and the guard called me. They put the bag on my head and dragged me into another cell. I was sure they were now reporting on me to the investigating officer.

After a while, the officer took me to the interrogation room, where I found one of the investigators who told me that they had confirmed I had no information to hide, but they would transfer me to administrative detention for three months, and that my interrogation was over. The guard took me and walked me some distance before taking me to the clothing storage, where they handed me the items given to every prisoner. Then they brought me to a section of the prison with several rooms and dozens of inmates.

It was a complete and normal prison life. The inmates welcomed me warmly and kindly, introduced themselves, and led me to one of the rooms. They arranged my bed and belongings, made me tea, and prepared the bathroom. I showered, rested, and ate my meal. In the evening, everyone sat together with me to get acquainted. They celebrated my arrival and honored me, and at the end of the gathering, the prince of the room told me not to discuss my case with anyone. He informed me that tomorrow the organization's official and the security official would come to explain everything to me, and it was strictly forbidden to talk to anyone else about this matter.

The next day, the two officials came. We sat together in one corner of the room; they introduced themselves and mentioned that they knew my brother Mahmoud, my brother Hassan, and our neighbor Abdul Hafiz, along with other information that made me feel completely at ease with them. They then began to ask me about my case, the reason for my interrogation, and the cause of my arrest. I explained the situation in detail, stating that they had arrested me for a reason I did not know and were asking about Hassan, my cousin. I reiterated that I had no idea where he was or why they were asking these questions. Hassan had not lived with us for years; we had expelled him from our home long ago and had no idea where he was or how to keep track of his news. They repeated the questions several times before thanking me and leaving.

Days later, the guard called my name and took me to the storage area. They took away the items they had previously given me and returned my belongings and clothes, informing me that I would be released. They brought me to the prison gate and left me outside. I breathed in the fresh air once more, unable to believe that I had been set free, still wondering about Hassan and why they had questioned me about him. I found no answers.

When I arrived home, news of my return had preceded me. My mother rushed out to greet me, her joy resonating in the air as neighbors congratulated and thanked God for my safety. I asked my mother where Ibrahim was. I replied, "I don't know. He was with me during the initial interrogation, and I haven't heard anything about him since." I recounted my experience to my family. A week later, while we were sitting at home during the afternoon, there was a knock at the door, and a voice called out with excitement, "This is Ibrahim! He has been released!" We jumped up to welcome him, filled with joy and celebrations from every corner.

He asked me what had happened to me, and I told him my story. He shared his experiences during the interrogation, which were nearly identical to mine. When I was alone with him in our room that night, I asked him about it and what it all meant. He replied, "I don't know, but it seems that Hassan is either on the run or missing!" I asked him if he realized that those who had entered his room were spies and that it was a trap to uncover what he knew. He laughed and said, "That's not the trap, Ahmed." I was bewildered and asked, "What do you mean?" He explained, "This is the known trap designed to catch someone in the real trap." I pressed for clarity, "How? I don't understand." He continued, "They know that we've heard about traps and spies during the interrogations, so they lure one person into an obvious trap to make them feel clever for having seen it, inflating their pride in having outsmarted them. Then they take them to that section to ensnare them there; this is the real trap."

I inquired, "You mean that the section and the people in it are spies, and they..." He interrupted, "Yes, yes." I thanked God that I had no information to hide in the first place, as I would have revealed it to them without hesitation.

He told me that when he was with them, they had questioned him, and he denied any knowledge of the matter. It was as if they sensed he might be suspicious of them, so they threatened him, claiming they suspected him of being an agent and a spy. They announced this in the room, enforcing a state of emergency upon him and began treating him as if he were a spy. He realized that they were trying to provoke a reaction from him, to defend himself and prove he wasn't a spy, which led him to discuss his secrets. They presented him with signed papers from officials in the movement, stamped with red seals, and he spoke to them candidly, revealing nothing, assuring them he had told them the truth and that he was hiding nothing at all. He asserted that if he had said anything, he would not have left prison for years.

I looked at him intently and asked, "But you haven't told me where Hassan is?" He replied nonchalantly, "Forget about that matter. The important thing is that he won't bother us, tarnish our reputation, or trouble anyone anymore." I realized that he had fulfilled his oath, and I silently thanked God that I had not been privy to his secret before or involved in what he was doing; otherwise, I might have found myself entangled and would have compromised my cousin.

At the first opportunity I had after being released from prison, I left early to wait for "Intisar," my beloved, hoping to see her and let her see me. If she had heard about my arrest, I wanted to reassure her and bring her comfort. I caught sight of her as she peered from the alley; our eyes met for a fleeting moment before she averted her gaze. I thought I read her lips murmuring a few words—perhaps "Thank God." Maybe I was deluding myself into thinking that, but she seemed to know that I had been in prison and was thanking God for my safety. An indescribable joy filled me, and I rushed ahead to the university, wanting her to see me and confirm my well-being.

One evening, after Ibrahim had been released and while I was sitting with him in our room studying our university books, my mother entered the room, greeting us. She carried a tray with three glass cups and a teapot. She pulled the table toward Ibrahim's bed and sat at the edge of it. Leaning next to her, she poured the tea and handed each of us a cup. She sipped long draughts from her cup and spoke to Ibrahim, saying, "Look how beautiful are the children of Mahmoud, Hassan, Fatima, and Tahani. A son is the most precious thing in the universe, and you don't feel that meaning until you have a child. Oh, how wonderful it is to become a mother or a father; this is the most beautiful of all feelings and emotions."

I realized she was preparing to lead into another topic, so I cast a subtle glance at Ibrahim. The sly one caught my look and responded with a faint smile, as if to say, "I know what your mother is hinting at."

As if she realized she had prolonged the introduction, she said: "Oh, Ibrahim, I want to marry you and rejoice in your happiness!" He laughed heartily and replied, "No offense, dear aunt; may God keep you with us as our blessing. But don't worry about me; I won't do anything harmful or dangerous, and I'm still young. After graduating from university, everything will be good, God willing." She responded sharply and angrily, "I will marry you. I mean, you will marry? And why wait until after graduation when you have about two thousand dinars with you, which is enough for your marriage and more?" He interrupted her, "Aunt..." She cut him off, "Be quiet; the matter is settled. You will marry, which means you will marry! Now, who will you marry? Tell me, and I'll take care of the rest. Don't argue with me about it." She nudged him several times in his side. He thought this wasn't the time for such matters, as it was still too early and premature. She asked him, "Is there a particular girl you want?" He looked at her in astonishment and said, "No." "I told you, I haven't thought about anyone." She stood up, carrying a tray of tea.

I found it an opportune moment to gauge his stance and opinion on a sensitive issue: "Don't you really want to marry?" He replied, "This matter hadn't crossed my mind before your mother entered the room, nor had I thought about it before." I asked, "And now?" He said, "I think this isn't the time for such things; it's still early and premature." I asked him again if there was a particular girl he wanted. He looked at me in astonishment and said, "No, I told you I haven't thought about it." I continued, "So, honestly, is there someone you like?" He, growing even more astonished, said, "Someone I love?!! What are you talking about, man?" I clarified, "I mean, are you saying you don't love anyone?" He replied, "Who said that I love anyone to even deny it?"

I asked, "Have you ever loved anyone?" He said, "Do you want the truth?" I replied, "Yes." He continued, "This is a complicated and lengthy topic. Five years ago, I saw a girl and felt that I loved her. I began to observe her comings and goings, and I felt she loved me back. But the situation never developed beyond that. However, when I started praying and committed to the mosque, I understood that such relationships are forbidden before serious thoughts of marriage. So, I refrained from pursuing her, but I felt my heart was still attached to her and adored her. I don't believe there's any religious issue in that.

But after Hassan returned and stayed in the camp, along with the misfortunes he caused, and as I immersed myself in political life and felt that I became part of the national concern for this country and its sanctities, I thought for a moment and decided I should stop even thinking about love. It seems, Ahmad, that we must remain deprived even of this feeling... just the feeling.



He spoke from the depths of his soul, as if he were in a state of rebirth after labor. I wondered, “Don’t you think you’re exaggerating?” To my knowledge, revolutionaries are lovers and poets. He laughed and said, “That’s true, that’s true, Ahmad, but not for us—not in the Palestinian people. It is true for the revolutionaries of Vietnam, Cuba, and the People's Republic of China, but it seems our fate is to live with only one love: the love of this land, its sanctities, its soil, its winds, and its oranges. It seems that this land refuses to allow any rival to compete with the love of lovers for it, aside from the girls.”

I laughed and said, “By God, you embody all three—a revolutionary, a lover, and a poet. What you said is nothing but a reflection of poetry, weaving words for your jealous beloved. But I don’t believe this contradicts the love for one of the beautiful girls, for loving them is part of loving the homeland.” He sighed and said once more, “Ahmad, do you want the truth?” I replied, “I want nothing but that.” He continued, “As the popular saying goes in this country, ‘the illegitimate children have left nothing for the legitimate ones.’ Ahmad, the occupation has tainted everything for us—tainted our land, tainted our peace, tainted our sea, tainted our streets, and tainted our souls. Ahmad, how many stories have I heard that began with intense love in this country only to turn into a whip with which the occupation lashes the backs of lovers? Ahmad, when this sacred, noble relationship is exploited by collaborators into leverage against lovers, forcing them to betray their first beloved (Jerusalem), does any space remain in our lives for love and passion?”

I said, “I’m sure you’re exaggerating and that you’re mixing your religious concepts and legal rulings with the practices of the occupation and its collaborators, creating a heavy and sharp mixture of ideas.” He smiled and said, “Who said that religious concepts can be separated from the realities of life and its interactions? Ahmad, I decided to cut this cord after I fell in love with a girl with all my soul and senses, even though my relationship with her remained within the bounds of what is permissible and chaste. Not a word did I exchange with her, yet I loved her from the depths of my soul. When that heavy, intense feeling of ideas came over me, I asked myself: ‘Do I truly love her?’ And I answered myself: ‘Absolutely.’ I told myself then: If your love is sincere, then in the chains of our lives as Palestinians, you must devote yourself to love, leaving behind anything that might open the doors to corruption and evil—anything that might tarnish the image of the beloved or her reputation. You must even stop the breezes that might touch the beloved’s face or stir her feelings. We are not like others, Ahmad... we are not like others. Goodnight.”

He entered his bed and pulled the covers over him. I replied, “And you are among them,” and I pulled my blanket over me, thinking of every word he said and wondering: Is he truly exaggerating, or are we not like others?!! Our story is not that of the Irish, the Khmer Rouge, or the Pakistanis; this is a Palestinian story that centers around the sacred Al-Aqsa Mosque.

The next day, as I was on my way home from the mosque, I noticed new signals similar to those I had seen the intelligence officer writing, which we had decoded on the wall. I returned home and waited for Ibrahim to come back, telling him about the matter. He immediately went out to gather details on what was written and returned. According to our previous analyses, the meeting specified in this code was set for a week later. I asked Ibrahim what he thought. He replied, "This is a signal for an unknown agent, and he is dangerous because he is unidentifiable; we must find out who he is." I inquired, "How?" He said, "Let me arrange things; we still have a week." The signal indicated that the meeting was at 20:00, or eight in the evening.

On the designated day, he told me in the morning, "Be ready today; we'll go out to try to identify the agent at six. I'll wait for you at the mosque." I waited for him at the mosque at the agreed time. He arrived, took me in his car, and drove out of the camp, heading north beyond the city of Gaza. Then he turned onto one of the side roads leading to a group of settlements and pointed to a small bush by the side of the road, saying, "Do you see this bush?" I replied, "Yes." He continued, "In an hour, it will be dark, and whoever is hiding behind the bush will not be seen by anyone, while he can see everyone passing on this road, especially under the electric light on that pole." I acknowledged, "That's true." He explained, "When darkness falls, I'll leave you there. Move quietly and assess the atmosphere around you. If you find the situation suitable, hide behind the bush. I will keep watch. If you don't hide, I will come to get you. If you hide well, observe the street carefully and see who will come here and what will happen. Stay behind it until I come to get you." I wondered, "How are you so sure that the person indicated will come from here and not anywhere else in the world?" He laughed and said, "Don't you trust me? Leave the arrangements to me, Ahmad."

He returned me at the scheduled time, let me out of the car, and I walked, assessing the surroundings. The conditions were right since the place was empty, so I hid behind the bush. I awaited the hands of the clock, which seemed unwilling to move. Minutes passed, and as the hour neared eight, it ticked... one minute... two minutes... three... and nothing happened.

I said to myself, "It seems we are deceiving ourselves, thinking we are clever while they are so simple. It appears I trusted Ibrahim more than I should have." I was pulled from these thoughts by the sound of a car stopping on the main road several meters away from me. A person opened the door, got out, and closed the car door, which then drove off. I confirmed it was a public taxi.

That person began to walk towards me on the side road. I strained to see, my heartbeats quickening, rising to the point where I feared he might hear them. I rubbed my eyes to ensure I could see him clearly. When he stepped into the light, about ten meters away, I gasped, my spirit nearly escaping me, and I held my breath. It was "Fayez," one of Ibrahim's closest friends and an activist.

I thought to myself, perhaps he came at Ibrahim's request to watch as well! Before I could dwell on this idea, a speeding car turned into the side road, stopped, opened its back door, and Fayez got in before it sped off. I was one hundred percent sure this was the car of the area intelligence officer, "Abu Wadi," and I was almost ninety percent certain that "Abu Wadi" was in the vehicle.

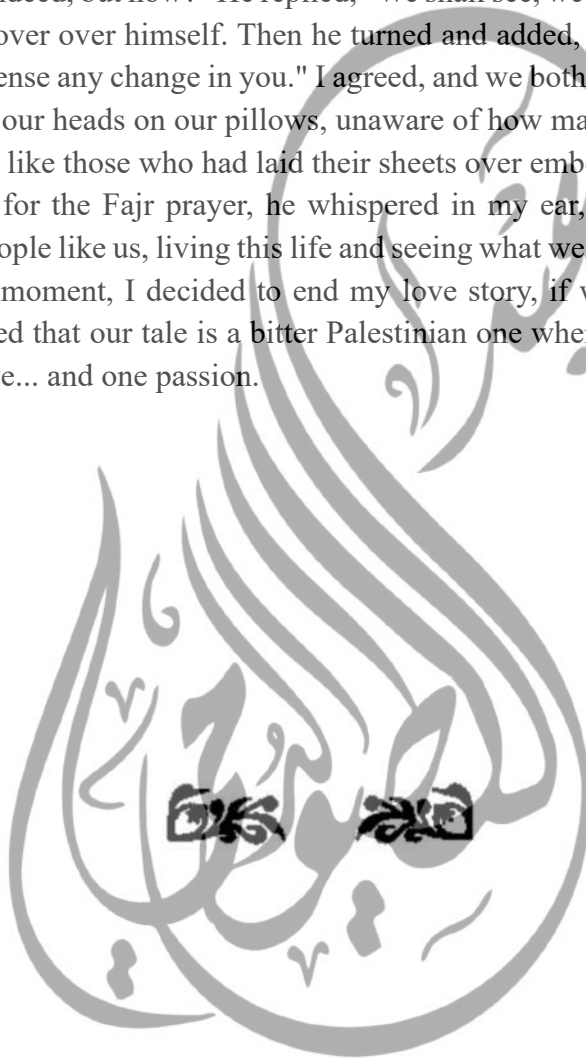
Conflicting thoughts swirled in my mind. Am I dreaming? Is this real? Isn't this a police or spy movie? What should I tell Ibrahim? Should I tell him the truth? Should I hide the matter and say nothing happened? The thoughts and questions tormented me until Ibrahim's car arrived. As he got closer, I scanned the area and found it empty. I emerged from behind the tree, got in with him, and he drove off, questioning me, "Did anything happen here? Did you see anyone? Did the intelligence officer come?" I didn't respond. He noticed I was in an unusual state and asked, "What's wrong with you?" I said, "You won't believe what happened." He eagerly pressed, "What happened?" I replied, "The man came, and 'Abu Wadi' took him in the car." He shouted, "Really? Who's the man?" I said, "That's the problem." He asked, "What problem? Who's the man?" I replied, "Fayez." He exclaimed, "Fayez! Who?" I responded, "Your friend?" He shouted, "What are you saying? Who else could it be?" I insisted, "Yes, it was him, in the flesh. I saw him with my own two eyes, one hundred percent without a doubt." He asked, "'Abu Wadi' came and took him?" I affirmed, "Yes, 'Abu Wadi' in his car, stopped next to him, opened the door, and he got in. The car drove off towards the settlements."

Ibrahim turned to the side of the road, slowed down, stopped the car, pulled the handbrake, and rested his head in his hands on the steering wheel, saying, "Oh my God, what is happening here? I can't believe it. This is unbelievable; it can't be..." He kept repeating it hundreds of times. I asked, "Why can't it be? Is it possible he doesn't know about..." He stopped mid-sentence, then continued, "Oh my God, it seems I've lost control of my mind. Let's go home." I took over the driver's seat, drove home in silence, and as we approached the house, he asked me to head to Sheikh Ahmad's house. Before we reached, he instructed me to stop and wait far from the Sheikh's house until his return.

He was gone for about half an hour before he returned, climbing into the seat beside me as we set off for home without either of us uttering a word. My sister Mariam brought us dinner; he barely managed to eat a few bites. We drank tea, each of us holding our book, looking at it yet unable to see the letters.

After an hour, he turned to me and said, "Ahmed, I know you don't need reminding, but I must emphasize this: this topic is closed, and you must not tell anyone." I replied without hesitation. He continued, "We are still unable to determine whether this is merely a string of coincidences, and we must examine the matter to be absolutely certain." I said, "Indeed, but how?" He replied, "We shall see, we shall see. Good night," as he pulled his cover over himself. Then he turned and added, "If you meet him, you must not let him sense any change in you." I agreed, and we both pulled our covers over ourselves, resting our heads on our pillows, unaware of how many hours passed as we tossed in our beds like those who had laid their sheets over embers.

When we got up for the Fajr prayer, he whispered in my ear, trying to smile, "Is it permissible for people like us, living this life and seeing what we see, to love and desire, Ahmed?" At that moment, I decided to end my love story, if we could call it a love story, and I realized that our tale is a bitter Palestinian one where there is no room for more than one love... and one passion.





## Chapter Nineteen

I noticed Ibrahim with a Hebrew newspaper that I didn't know he could read. However, he understood a little of it. I saw that it was Yedioth Ahronoth. I asked him, "What is this newspaper? What does it contain?" He replied, "This is a Hebrew newspaper, Yedioth Ahronoth, and it has an article about the Gaza Strip." He gently pulled the newspaper and its translated article and handed them to me.

It was a lengthy article describing the situation in Gaza, summarizing that the Gaza Strip has turned into a swamp of collaborators and spies working with the Israeli intelligence agency, the Shabak. It stated that Gaza, which had once been a center of turmoil and a headache for the Israelis at the onset of the occupation, could never regain its former status, and it would never return to that corner again. Most of the content in this article was attributed to intelligence sources and officials from the Shabak.

I read this with great anxiety, and Ibrahim noticed my concern, saying with a smile, "It's worrying, isn't it?" I replied, "Certainly." He said, "All this is nonsense. Did you not see how Gaza became a volcano when they besieged the university and we called the people from the mosques?" I agreed, saying, "True, but..." He interrupted me, saying, "There is no doubt they succeeded in delivering a devastating blow to the resistance, and they have infiltrated our people's ranks in a frightening manner. But this is a blessed land; God has blessed it and its people. When the time comes, the giant will rise again, and these people will know what fate awaits them." I said, "Once again, I see you as romantic and fantastical. I don't believe you are basing your theory on accurate information and statistics; rather, it's just dreams and wishes." He smiled confidently and said, "You will see, Ahmed, you will see."

Three young men in their early twenties gathered in a refugee camp in Rafah, just meters away from the border barrier with Egypt, sitting on old cloths and whispering to each other.

Abdul Hamid said, "We have to do something; we can't just wait around without doing anything." Khalil asked, "What can we do?"

Farid answered, "We can arrange to get some old weapons and start working with them." Khalil jumped up, saying, "No... we can't use weapons bought on the black market. You know that most of them are defective or compromised, leading to immediate arrest, as those who trade them do so with the knowledge of the intelligence to capture anyone thinking of acting against the occupation." Abdul Hamid asked, exasperated, "What should we do then? We must start doing something." Khalil smiled and said, "I have a good idea, and we must try it."

On Saturday at eleven o'clock in the morning, numerous buses stop at Palestine Square in the city of Gaza, unloading hundreds of Jews, men and women alike. They begin to roam the city and its markets, moving in groups, swaying, laughing, purchasing whatever pleases them, eating and drinking. Omar Al-Mukhtar Street, particularly the bustling commercial section stretching between Palestine Square and Al-Shuja'iyya Square, becomes packed with them. They speak Hebrew, occasionally uttering a few broken Arabic words, prompting laughter from the vendors, to which they respond with laughter of their own.

From the side of Al-Mukhtar Street, near Al-Shuja'iyya Square, Khalil strolls idly, a folded copy of Al-Quds newspaper in his hand, as is the habit of many young men from the refugee camps. His gaze shifts across the glass displays of the shops, moving forward at a slow pace. Soon, a Jew is walking just a meter beside him, on his right. Khalil passes along the iron barrier that separates the sidewalk from the road. Suddenly, the newspaper slips from his hand, and in its place, a sharp kitchen knife appears in his grip. His hand flashes forward, the blade slicing through the Jew's neck—once forward, once back, no more, no less. The throat is slit, blood gushes in torrents, and the body collapses to the ground.

Khalil swiftly turns into a side street. By the time people realize what has happened and cries fill the air, he is already inside a waiting car, driven by Abdul Hamid. The vehicle merges calmly into the city's dense traffic. Within fifteen minutes, large forces of occupation soldiers, intelligence agents, and police swarm the scene, sealing it off, removing the corpse, inspecting the area, and launching an extensive investigation among shop owners and passersby. Not long after, the incident repeats itself in a nearby location.

Khalil sends his knife flashing like lightning into the throat of another occupier—once forward, once back—before vanishing into the city's alleys, disappearing with its soft breeze. The occupation forces and their intelligence services turn the world upside down—arrests, detentions, interrogations... all to no avail.

One evening, as I sat in my room studying one of my books, I heard a knock on the door. I got up to see who it was. I opened the door, and there stood Faiz, greeting me with peace. I couldn't return the greeting—words stumbled in my throat. Then I remembered what Ibrahim had said, so I returned the greeting.

He asked, "Is Ibrahim here?" I said, "No, but he might arrive at any moment." He said, "No, I'll come back shortly. If he returns, tell him I'll be coming to see him, so he should wait for me." Then he left. I returned to my studies.

About half an hour later, there was another knock at the door. Ibrahim had not yet returned. It was Faiz at the door. I said to him, "Ibrahim hasn't returned yet. Come in, come in." By then, I had grown more comfortable with the idea of speaking with him. I called out to the family to clear the way, and he entered with me into our room, where he sat on the edge of Ibrahim's bed. I tried to start a conversation to pass the time and ease the tension I felt. I asked him about his studies and preparations for the upcoming exams. He answered that they were going well, that his preparations were in full swing. Studying, after all, was easy and not complicated. Suddenly, he asked, "To your knowledge, will Ibrahim be late?" I said, "I don't think so." He said, "I don't want to stay too long. Does he usually stay out late at night?" I said, "No, but sometimes he does." He asked, "Do you know where he might be right now? Perhaps I could go see him there." I said, "I don't know." He asked, "Doesn't he visit his brother, Hassan?" My heartbeat quickened, and I answered, "No. We don't visit Hassan. We don't know him. We haven't heard anything about him in many years—ever since we cast him out of the house for his misdeeds."

Faiz said, "But Hassan is his brother. Blood doesn't turn to water—he must still care about him." I said, "No... no. I haven't heard him mention his name since that time. We've forgotten him completely. If you hadn't brought him up, I wouldn't have even remembered him." Then I asked, "But why do you ask about Hassan?" For a moment, he seemed flustered, then said, "I just thought he might be with him, and I could find him there." Then he asked, "But where does Hassan live now?" I said, "I don't know. We haven't seen him in a long time." He asked to leave, so I walked him out. Then I returned to my room and my studies—but I could no longer understand a single word on the page. A single thought consumed me: Was he sent by the intelligence services to investigate us about Hassan? Otherwise, why all these questions about him?

Ibrahim returned after a while, and I told him about the matter. He laughed and said, "Excellent, excellent. Now we see him, and he does not see us. Let him do his job, and we will verify whether he is working with them or not." I asked, "How?" He replied, "There are those who are watching him now, counting every move he makes." I said, "Don't you see? I've been certain since I found the report with you that you have a security apparatus working on these issues." He looked at me angrily and said, "Ahmed, what's the point of all this talk? Do you want the grapes or do you want to fight the guard?" I laughed and said, "The important thing is that you keep me informed of any developments in this matter, as I was an essential part of it from the beginning." He replied, "This is yours."

My mother entered carrying dinner and greeted us, to which we responded in kind. We placed the food on the table and sat on the edge of Ibrahim's bed, saying, "Eat your dinner." As we took our seats around the table, she asked, "What's the news of our groom?" Ibrahim turned to her and said, "Fine, auntie, but there's no need for this groom of ours." She replied angrily, "Why not? Just so you know, I've started looking for you a bride like the moon." He said, "Didn't we agree to postpone this matter until graduation?" She replied, "Yes, yes, but I'm looking for you, and as soon as I find a suitable bride, we'll propose to you even before graduation." He said, "Oh, auntie..." I interrupted him to get him out of the predicament, saying, "What do you think? He wants a specific one and loves her." She looked at me mockingly, "Shut up, who asked you to intervene? And who introduced you to men? Ibrahim wants a specific one!! And he loves her, what an idiot. Be quiet, boy, be quiet." Then she turned to Ibrahim, saying, "I'm looking for you, Ibrahim, and I will take you soon to meet them." He said, "Oh, aunt," and she interrupted him, saying, "Be quiet too," and left the room.

In the city of Hebron, after the sunset prayer, Sheikh Jamal stood among a group of young men in the mosque, teaching them religious matters, instilling in them the meanings of piety, encouraging them to desire what is with God, and helping them renounce worldly desires. At the same time, in another mosque, Abdul Rahman sat among a group of young men, discussing the same meanings.

The sheikh sitting next to the pulpit glanced at his watch and began preparing to stand for the call to prayer. The call to prayer for the evening prayer resonated from the minarets of the mosques in Hebron... God is Great... God is Great. After completing the prayer, Abdul Rahman gestured to his nephew Abdul Rahim to let them leave the mosque. Abdul Rahim set off to meet his uncle at the door of the mosque, and they departed together. Abdul Rahman said, "Let's go; we don't want to be late because we don't have a car today to take us to the town." They set off through the streets of the old town with its ancient stone houses.



In one of the alleys, a cry rang out: "Allahu Akbar, people! This is our home!" A voice responded in broken Arabic, "This is not your home; this is my home! Leave here!" Abdul Rahman and Abdul Rahim looked into the alley and saw dozens of soldiers standing with their weapons drawn, protecting a number of settlers—both men and women—who were driving the residents out and throwing their furniture outside the house. Whenever the Arab residents attempted to return to their home, the soldiers aimed their weapons at them, while the settlers pushed and pulled them, yelling at them. Abdul Rahim stopped, his foot having instinctively stepped toward the alley, and his uncle felt it and grabbed his hand, pulling him back forcefully, saying, "Where are you going? What can you do against those guns?" Abdul Rahim looked at him reproachfully and said, "Are we just going to pass by without doing anything?!"

His uncle replied, "My nephew, this is a problem that cannot be solved with emotional outbursts or quick reactions. This is not the first house nor the last that the settlers will seize, and this is not the first family nor the last family to be expelled from their home. You can see that the eye is insightful, but the hand is short, and matters need a fundamental solution."

Abdul Rahim, feeling frustrated, asked, "How? When?" Abdul Rahman responded, "Patience, my son, patience, for every fate has its appointed time, and God's command will come inevitably."

By the next morning, the cries of the village children rose, and Abdul Rahim ran toward the door to see what was happening. His aunt called out to him, "Where are you going, Abdul Rahim?" He did not respond and ran with the children toward the west. From the west came the sound of bulldozers and trucks pounding the ground.

The children peered at the machines leveling the land and uprooting trees, demolishing some of the small stone houses. Many of the children shouted, "This is our land, they are bulldozing it!" and they dashed back to the village, their voices rising, "The Jews are bulldozing our land! The Jews are uprooting our trees!" As they shouted, doors opened, and people emerged, questioning what was happening, and they too walked toward the west.

A man shouted as he hurried toward the crowd, "Allahu Akbar, people... Allahu Akbar! What has happened? What has happened?" When he looked at the bulldozers crushing his trees, he collapsed on the ground, losing consciousness. A number of people gathered around him to provide aid, and one shouted, "Bring water!" While several people were busy helping him, some men approached the bulldozers, and soldiers stepped forward to confront them, leading to a dialogue that resembled a conversation between the deaf.

The men shouted, "This is our land! Why are you bulldozing it?" The soldiers ordered them to back off, aiming their rifles at their faces. The men repeated their objections, and the soldiers shoved them, causing an elderly man to fall. Another rushed to help him up, while a third defended against the soldiers. The shouting escalated, and cries rose in intensity. Then the soldiers began to strike the men with batons, and those who fell to the ground were kicked. The crowd started to scream and chant praises. The soldiers then unleashed tear gas canisters, causing the crowd to disperse, while the children began hurling stones. The soldiers fired above the heads of the demonstrators, as the land was torn up, olive trees were cut down, and everything was crushed beneath the bulldozers. Abdul Rahim hurled stones at the soldiers, and the gunfire and gas continued, along with the bulldozers' work, until sunset. The bulldozers and the guarding troops finally withdrew, and most people left, except for a few elderly men and women who collapsed onto the soil of their land, kissing it and scattering it over their heads, their wails unceasing.

Ibrahim came to me, saying, "Today, God willing, we will settle the issue of 'Fayez' definitively." I asked, "How?" He replied, "You just need to do your part, which is to monitor him for the next six hours. Here are the car keys. Be very careful not to attract his attention while you watch him, as the entire plan will be ruined." I took the keys, saying, "Don't worry about it." He left, saying, "From now on, it's time to watch." I said to myself, "Let's go," and began scanning the crowd of students in the university courtyard. I found him, and to my surprise, I saw that Ibrahim had gone to walk with him. He started a seemingly casual conversation, then led him toward the university cafeteria. I watched them; they sat for about half an hour before Ibrahim excused himself and left.

Fayez appeared confused and uncertain about what to do. He then got up and exited the cafeteria, wandered around the university for a bit, and then headed outside. I hurried to the car and drove behind him from a distance so he wouldn't notice that I was following him. He walked along Thirtieth Street heading east, glancing at the shops around him, inspecting something. He then entered one of the shops. I quickly drove my car in front of the shop to see what he was doing inside. I saw him talking to the shopkeeper, as if asking for permission to use the telephone. After getting permission, he picked up the receiver and made a brief call. Then he thanked the man and left.

I waited for him from a distance, and he signaled to one of the passing cars, which stopped, and he got in. I followed closely behind until we reached Palestine Square, where he got out of the car and wandered around the square for a bit. He then approached one of the taxi stands, spoke to the driver, and got into a car that drove him out of the square. The car exited Gaza to the north. When the car approached the intersection where I had seen him get into "Abu Wadi's" car, I slowed down, then stopped. He got out and headed down that side road. I drove north, then turned around and returned, going back and forth on the main road. Each time I passed the side road, I looked in, finding him still heading west.

During one of those glances, I spotted the intelligence officer "Abu Wadi" speeding by in his car. He slowed down and turned onto the side road. I rushed toward the intersection, and upon arriving, I saw Abu Wadi had stopped his car and opened the door. Fayez got in with him, and they drove off. I didn't know what to do next; should I continue my surveillance or was my role over? I drove down the side road and, from a distance, saw "Abu Wadi's" car enter one of the settlements. I turned around and returned to the main road, waiting at the intersection about fifty meters from the turnoff. I waited for about forty minutes when suddenly "Abu Wadi's" car came speeding out, heading back to Gaza.

I took off and glanced at the side road, spotting Fayez on his way back to the intersection. I quickly turned around and returned to my previous position. Fayez reached the intersection, signaling to passing cars until one stopped for him, and he got in. I followed him, and he got out at Palestine Square, then hopped into another car heading to the camp and went home. I realized my mission was over, and I needed to inform Ibrahim of what had transpired.

I hurried to the house to find him, but he wasn't there. I rushed to the university and found him. I told him everything that happened, and he laughed so hard he nearly fell over, saying, "He took the bait! We're now certain of his collaboration, but we need to finish the setup." I asked, "What bait? What setup?!" He explained, "A few days ago, after seeing him that night, he hasn't missed a chance to ask me about Hassan. I realized his mission now was to find out what information I had about Hassan. So, I told him today that I would be meeting Hassan at eight, whom I haven't seen in years, and that he sent me a message via someone I don't know, wanting to see me for something very important. I was confident he would rush to report that important information they were looking for. He took the bait, and now we need to carry on."

"I'm going to a faraway place, pretending I've been waiting for Hassan for a long time, showing that I'm anxious and concerned. I'll wait an hour, glancing at my watch as any worried person would do, then I'll return home." I asked in confusion, "What's the benefit of that?" He replied, "Ahmad, they arrested us, interrogated us, and took us to their traps to see if we had killed him or knew where he was. They didn't stop there; they sent us this traitor to dig around about him. They won't let us go until they're sure we have no connection to this and that we genuinely don't know where he is. This way, they'll stop searching for us, and we'll have killed two birds with one stone: confirming his collaboration and betrayal, and using him to relay information that will keep their evil away from us."

I said, my astonishment evident, "By God, you're something else." He smiled, murmuring, "That's a blessing from God." I asked, "Do you need anything from me now?" He glanced at his watch and replied, "No, there's enough time to get you home before I head to my appointment." He drove me home, and on the way, he informed me that a group of young people associated with Islamic Jihad had been arrested; they were responsible for the recent stabbings in Gaza. "God is great! Every cell operates for no more than a month before being apprehended. What a calamity!" I exclaimed. He continued, "As long as our people have traitors like this and as long as we, as organizations and political forces, are unable to address this issue fundamentally, the situation will remain as it is, and it will only worsen."

By the time we reached my house, I got out, telling him not to delay. "If you're late past ten o'clock, I'll know something has happened to you." He left promptly to arrive at his appointment on time.

My brother Mohammed's fiancée was preparing for her final exams and the end of her studies at the university. Therefore, Mohammed was keen on visiting their home frequently to see if she needed any help with her studies. After praying the afternoon prayer at the nearby mosque, he headed to their house. He knocked on the door, and one of her brothers opened it to welcome him in. Her father and mother received him warmly, and she joined them, bringing her books and sitting in the adjacent chair.

Her mother went to prepare tea while her father remained seated. She began asking questions about her studies, and Mohammed answered until the call to prayer for the evening prayer. They all stood to pray together—her father, she, and her mother praying behind him—then he sat down to continue explaining. After about half an hour, he said he needed to leave. She asked, "Isn't it still early?" He replied, "No, you know that the situation is unstable, and the country has become like a ghost town—no one comes or goes. I need to get home before dinner to avoid getting caught up in problems with soldiers, settlers, or some hoodlums."

She nudged him in the knee, as if to say, "Why the rush?" Her father said, "You're right, Mohammed; your words are spot on." Mohammed had already stopped to leave, saying, "Peace be upon you." The man stood to see him off to the door, saying, "And upon you peace and mercy of God. Goodbye." Mohammed stepped out into the darkening surroundings and began his journey back to his apartment. He walked down a deserted path, the only company being some stray cats and dogs wandering around in the early evening hours. All the shops were closed, and everyone had hidden in their homes, fearing trouble and headaches. Mohammed hastened his steps, heading home without much distraction or delays.



Ibrahim returned home just before ten o'clock. After entering the room, I asked him, "How did it go?" He replied, "They took the bait, and it seems we succeeded one hundred percent." I inquired, "What happened?" He explained, "I went, waited, and displayed concern and tension. I noticed there was heavy surveillance on me and the area; even the cars parked nearby seemed to have special forces ready to pounce if anything happened. When nothing occurred, I returned without anyone stopping me. They must be sure we know nothing about Hassan."

My mother entered the room, saying, "Don't you want to have dinner?" She was carrying a tray of food, placing it on the table, and greeting us with "Peace be upon you." We replied, "And upon you peace." She sat on the edge of Ibrahim's bed as we moved to eat. She said, "By God, Ibrahim, I saw a bride for you who is as beautiful as the moon, and I'll take you tomorrow to see her at her family's house." Ibrahim raised his hand away from the food, asking, "What are you saying?" I said, "Just as you heard. Tomorrow, pray the afternoon prayer and come immediately to take me to 'Abu Hussein's' house to see his daughter, Salwa, who is beautiful in character and faith, everything you desire and wish for." He responded, "Aunt... Aunt, didn't I tell you..." I interrupted, "Enough, Aunt, enough! The matter is settled. You know that Mohammed's fiancée will finish her studies in a week or two, and we will have your engagement alongside theirs, just as we did with Mahmoud and Hassan. It will be simpler, quicker, and lighter." He protested, "Aunt, I told you before that I won't marry until I graduate." She replied, "You have a year left until graduation, and I won't wait a year for you. You will get married, and you only have the right to choose your bride. As for whether you marry or not, that is not your choice. Don't forget to come tomorrow right after the afternoon prayer."

He fell silent, defeated. My mother stood up, carrying the food tray, and he sat on his bed without saying anything for a while. Then he called out, "Aunt! Aunt!" She came out of her room, asking, "What's wrong, Ibrahim?" He said, "Come here; I want to tell you something." She came and sat beside him, saying, "What do you want?" He said, "I won't come tomorrow after the afternoon prayer, and you won't take me to 'Abu Hussein's' house, and I will not marry his daughter Salwa." She looked at him in complete astonishment and confusion, thinking, "This is not the Ibrahim I know." She exclaimed, "What are you saying? There's no need for that, Aunt." I said, "What does that mean? Do you want to break my word? You won't listen to me? You won't get married now?" He replied, "No, no! I will marry, Aunt, as you wish, whenever you want."

I shouted, "Didn't I tell you he loves someone and has set his sights on a specific girl?" She looked at my mother with disdain and said, "I told you to be quiet and not to interfere." He replied, "The truth, Aunt, is that he has a point, but things are not exactly as he says."

She said, her patience wearing thin, "I don't understand anything. Can you clarify what you want?" He lowered his head and replied, "I want to marry Maryam, my aunt." I asked, "Who is Maryam?" He responded, "Yes, my cousin Maryam." "Maryam," she echoed, trying to grasp the situation. He continued, "Will I find someone better than her? Will you agree to my marrying her?" Tears welled in her eyes as she said, "Will you find someone better than you, Ibrahim? Let me go see Maryam, Mahmoud, and Hassan." She got up to leave, and I asked, "And you don't want my opinion?" "No," she replied firmly. "I don't want your opinion on this matter because he is your soulmate, and your opinion is well known."

I laughed and said to him, "Congratulations, Ibrahim." He lowered his head and replied, "May God bless you, Ahmed, but let's see what others think." My mother emerged, and he looked at me anxiously, saying, "By God, I don't know what to do. We are in one valley, and your mother is in another. I don't want to anger her, and I fear I'll involve Maryam in my troubles and then end up imprisoned or..." He fell silent. I pressed, "Go on, what are you afraid of? Are you afraid of being killed?"

He quickly responded, "No, no, but who knows what fate has in store for us and what the days will bring?"

My mother returned after a long absence, accompanied by Mahmoud and Hassan, exclaiming, "Congratulations, Ibrahim, congratulations!" My mother added, "If it weren't midnight, I would have ululated! My joy is doubled, for you and Maryam, but tomorrow, God willing, we will do what is required." Then she called out, "Maryam, come here!" When Maryam didn't respond, she got up to fetch her. She returned, pulling Maryam along, who was blushing and trying to hide her face until she entered the room. My mother nudged her, saying, "Sit next to your fiancé, your cousin." Maryam sat down, shyness radiating from both of their faces, and neither dared to look at the other. Ibrahim then ventured to ask my mother, "Is Maryam in agreement, or have you forced her, my aunt?"

My mother replied, "Forced her?! Why would I force her? Will she find someone better than you?!" His face turned red again as he said, "I seek refuge in God. Will I find someone better than her? By God, my aunt, I am ashamed of your kindness toward me." My mother reassured him, "We have favored you, my son. You are a man who has shaped your life with your own hands. May God bless you." He paused for a moment and then asked, "My aunt, does Maryam agree?" "Of course, of course she agrees," my mother replied. "I want to hear that from her," he insisted. "Say it, Maryam. Do you agree?" my mother prompted. Maryam nodded in agreement and then left, our laughter following her as she exited the room.

They sat for a while discussing the arrangements for the engagement and wedding, then excused themselves to go to sleep, intending to wake up early for the many obligations ahead. As they left, I whispered, laughing, "Enjoy your day, my uncle; from the very beginning, you've been achieving success, each triumph greater than the last." He chuckled in response, "May God protect me from envy," and I echoed, "Good night." Here, in the Gaza prison, in the same section where my brother Mahmoud once lived, in a room adjacent to the one he occupied, after the guard turned off the lights and went to sleep, one of the prisoners lay stretched out on his mattress by the door, holding a small piece of mirror, its edge sticking out from beneath the door to watch the guard's movements. The guard approached and tapped three times on the floor with his finger, prompting everyone to remain in their beds, feigning sleep, while he pulled back his mirror.

The guard reached the door of the cell and turned on his flashlight, inspecting the situation. He found everyone asleep and continued on to check the other cells. After completing his rounds, he returned, passing by the door until he reached his chair at the end of the section and sat down.

That prisoner pulled his mirror out again, looked into it, and then whispered, "Let's go," signaling with his hand. Three prisoners stood up and entered the bathroom, one of them clutching a piece of iron saw, its end wrapped in cloth to grip it firmly. He climbed onto his friend's back and began cutting through the iron bar again. The young man lying on the ground tapped three times, and they rushed back to their beds. The guard made his rounds and returned to his chair, allowing them to continue their work.

Just before the dawn call to prayer, the job was complete: the window of freedom stood open. Drowsiness was overwhelming the guard sitting in his chair, leaning against the wall, while six of us young men embraced our remaining friends and slid out of the window, one after another, after placing some items in their beds to make it appear as if they were still asleep. As the last one slipped through the window, the sound of the morning adhan rose, "Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar." They stealthily escaped the prison after jumping over the outer wall.

At six o'clock, the guards arrived to turn on the lights, with the loudspeaker announcing the readiness for the morning count. The counting officer opened the cell and began the roll call. "Where are the rest?" he asked, noting the shortage. The present prisoners smiled as one dashed to the restroom, emerging panting with sweat, raising his communication device to speak into it, just as the prison alarm blared.

Two and a half hours had passed since the young men had left, ample time for them to reach the farthest corners of Palestine, not just a safe hideout in one of Gaza's neighborhoods or its outskirts. A large number of guards came pouring in to search, ransack, and disrupt everything in the rooms, while hundreds, even thousands, of occupation soldiers set up checkpoints, stopping people and inspecting everyone coming and going—an evident state of confusion and hysteria.

As the afternoon call to prayer approached, all arrangements were in place. My mother sent someone to apologize to Abu Hussein's house, informing them that we would not attend the engagement because the boy only wanted his cousin. She also reached out to my aunt, informed most of the neighbors, and sent me to buy baklava for the occasion. After the afternoon prayer, the house was bustling with people; joyous ululations filled the air, and songs echoed as baklava was distributed. Thus, Ibrahim's engagement to Mariam became known and publicly declared before both family and friends, alleviating any embarrassment for Mariam in front of everyone.





## Chapter Twenty

Al-Wahda Street in Gaza City, near the intersection with Fahmi Bak Street, is crowded with people and cars. This location is a central hub for the movement of thousands of Gaza's residents and the hundreds of senior officers and officials from military, civilian, and intelligence agencies.

In the Saraba building, the central base of the occupation in the Gaza Strip, the street is filled with vehicles, and with no traffic lights to regulate the flow, the scene becomes a chaotic traffic jam, forcing everyone to come to a standstill. Cars inch forward, one centimeter at a time. One military vehicle, driven by the Israeli military police commander in the Gaza Strip, slowly advances, his arm resting on the car window as a radio broadcasts a Hebrew song with discordant music.

Among the crowd, "Mohammed," one of the young men who escaped from Gaza prison weeks ago, approached the vehicle. When he reached it, he drew his pistol, aiming it at the commander's head and chest, and fired several shots before disappearing into the throng. A car that had been waiting for him took him away from the scene.

Large forces from the army surrounded the area, beginning to detain people, close shops, and resort to beating, kicking, and vandalism. Intelligence officers arrived to investigate the incident and gather information that would prove fruitless in apprehending the perpetrators.

Days later, a military vehicle was conducting routine patrols on one of the main roads in the city, moving slowly. From behind one of the nearby graves, a young man who had escaped from prison days earlier emerged, pulling the pin from a hand grenade and throwing it at the vehicle, causing it to explode. He then retreated from the scene as the screams of the wounded soldiers rose around him.

After several days, automatic rifles opened fire on one of the military vehicles, and their occupants withdrew without any complications. This news spread throughout the occupied territories, echoing in every neighborhood, home, and gathering. Everyone was impressed by the level of operations and the audacity of their executors, pleased by the confusion that had befallen the occupation forces. This became a topic of many discussions in our home.

A few days later, the region awoke to bad news. The occupation forces and their intelligence succeeded in capturing two of the young men who had escaped from Gaza prison, believed to be behind the recent operations. They were eliminated with thousands of bullets in an ambush set for them on one of the side roads north of Al-Bureij camp. The news reached the university, prompting us to suspend classes and join a demonstration that clashed with soldiers, with protests spreading throughout the sector.

On October 6, 1987, after several more days, and just after the call to prayer for Maghrib, another group of those young men and some of their aides were moving in their cars through one of the streets in Al-Shuja'iyya, Gaza. They were attacked by several civilian vehicles that opened fire on them, and soon, a large military force joined the fray. The young men engaged in a fierce battle, killing one of the intelligence officers overseeing the operation and the ambush laid for the fighters. All the young men were martyred, and a curfew was imposed on the neighborhood.

Ibrahim came to me and told me that they would mobilize everyone possible for Friday prayers at Osman Mosque in Al-Shuja'iyya. From there, a massive demonstration would emerge to mourn the martyrs and honor their memory. He urged me to go. A huge number of young men gathered in the mosque to perform Friday prayers. The sermon and prayer were ordinary. Once the prayer ended, worshipers began to exit the mosque. A group of activists gathered around Ibrahim, starting to chant, "With our souls and blood, we sacrifice for you, O Palestine... with our souls and blood, we sacrifice for you, O martyr." People flocked around them in a massive demonstration that marched through the streets of Al-Shuja'iyya, passing by the homes of the martyrs, with mourning tents set up nearby. Each time they reached one of those places, the march would stop, and chants rose, honoring the martyrs and their families.

After a while, large army forces arrived, and clashes began with stones and empty bottles, continuing until the afternoon. This was the first time mass demonstrations took place in the sector in such a manner, openly supporting armed resistance, in a way that left no room for interpretation. Even my brother Mahmoud, when we gathered at home that evening, said, "You are crazy! How can you hold demonstrations like this in clear support of armed resistance?"

Mohammed's fiancée completed her studies and exams, and Mohammed returned from Gaza to arrange for their wedding. He had rented a private apartment in Ramallah and furnished it with all the essentials.

My mother wanted a wedding that embodied celebration in every sense, without any deficiencies. However, Mohammed and Ibrahim preferred a modest, small family gathering. The conflict intensified, and disagreements escalated. Mohammed wanted to hold the wedding in Ramallah, where the family and close relatives would travel in two or three cars to conduct the ceremonies simply and smoothly. Ibrahim envisioned a very simple affair at home for relatives and neighbors to allow my mother, my siblings, and our neighbors to celebrate.

Mahmoud and Hassan didn't find the matter significant; what mattered was that they reached an agreement. Fatima and Tahani sided with my mother, while Meryem and I supported Mohammed and Ibrahim. Everyone eventually agreed that a small delegation from us would go to Ramallah for Mohammed's marriage contract with his bride. They would bring her and any family members who wanted to come to Gaza, where Ibrahim and Meryem would hold their marriage contract, followed by a wedding celebration for the women as they desired. The next day, Mohammed and his bride could travel back to Ramallah, and everything would proceed as planned without any complications.

Before this, I had to move out of our shared room, which I shared with Ibrahim, as I prepared for him and his bride, and temporarily move into the guest room. After the wedding, I began living with my mother in her room. It became clear that the house could not accommodate three young couples, and I, along with my mother, suggested that Engineer Mahmoud build a second floor above the house. He explained that from an engineering perspective, it was feasible with a bit of patience and effort, which would ultimately benefit us at home. Ibrahim agreed with his ideas, asserting that they were executable and that he was capable of carrying them out. They decided to postpone the matter until two months after the wedding.

On the evening of Tuesday, December 8 of the same year (1987), while a bus carrying a number of Palestinian workers returning from their jobs inside the occupied territories of 1948 was heading south toward Gaza City, having passed the Erez checkpoint, a massive tractor driven by one of the Israelis was recklessly tearing across the land, almost flying off the ground, heading north. As it neared the workers' bus, it swerved toward it, crushing it completely, resulting in the deaths of several workers and injuring others. The deceased were taken to their homes, and the injured were sent to hospitals. News of the deliberate attack on the workers spread throughout the sector, prompting thousands to take to the streets, discussing and inquiring about the incident.

One of the young men slipped into Sheikh Ahmed's house to inform him of the situation, asking for suggestions on what to do. The Sheikh simply directed him to escalate the situation with the funerals, turning them into massive demonstrations and violent clashes with the occupation forces. The young man set off to arrange what was needed, and as the funerals left Jabalia heading to the Jabalia camp, throngs of people gathered behind them, chanting slogans and raising their voices in praise. The occupation forces arrived, leading to fierce clashes that continued until midnight.

When Ibrahim returned home that night, he whispered in my ear that the Islamic University would be the focal point of the demonstrations the next day, as they had organized their plans. Early in the morning, the Israeli radio announced the military governor's decision to close the Islamic University for three days. Ibrahim drove through various areas, informing activists to change their plans from focusing the demonstrations at the university to spreading them throughout all areas, instructing each group of activists to ignite the situation in their respective neighborhoods.

Indeed, during the first half of the day, the Gaza Strip, from its northernmost point to its southernmost, erupted in flames against the occupiers. Tens of thousands poured into the streets across various regions in violent demonstrations that clashed fiercely with the occupation forces. In every area, dozens of injuries were reported, with the wounded being transported to hospitals or nearby clinics. With each new injury, the feelings of the crowds intensified, and their anger and violence grew, culminating in the first martyr of the Intifada, Hatem Al-Sis, falling in the Jabalia camp.

On the second day, Thursday, events exploded from the early morning hours as dozens of masked men blocked roads and set up barricades, halting the movement of workers heading to jobs in the occupied territories of 1948. The occupation forces rushed to clear the roads for the workers, but each time they opened a path in one place, another was closed elsewhere. The masked young men confronted the occupation forces by throwing stones and empty bottles. By midday, massive marches erupted across the sector, carrying Palestinian flags, chanting for Palestine, for the martyrs, and against settlement, directly facing the occupation forces.

An old man rushed into his house, barging into his son's room, where he was still asleep even after ten in the morning. "You're still sleeping? Get up!" The young man leaned against his bed, looking at his father in astonishment, rubbing his eyes and wondering to himself who was waking him up to join the demonstrations and clashes. "Father? My father, who just days ago trembled in fear upon hearing that events were occurring against the occupation, locking us in and preventing us from going out! What has happened in this world for such a drastic transformation to take place?"



The loudspeakers of the strange mosque were blasting the anthem: "I swear to God the Almighty, that you may return, O home... In the name of religion, let the traitor flee from Palestine... We walked the path... We braved the difficult... We crossed the borders... No matter how many thorns... The bitter path, that you may return, O home... That you may return, O home."

Hundreds of young men stood at every crossroads, at every end of the alley, wrapped in the keffiyehs they had brought with them, or even their shirts. They set up barricades, ignited tires, and clashed with the occupying forces. Their eyes streamed with tears, their noses ran continuously from the sting of tear gas. As soon as the canisters fell, they hurled them back at the occupation soldiers who had launched them before, forgetting the taste and smell of the gas. They rushed in droves to carry one of their own, who had fallen wounded by a treacherous bullet. The sound of the soldiers' gunfire echoed like that of a real battle, and the shouts of the demonstrators filled the air—one warning another, a third calling for help from a fourth, while the mosque's loudspeakers crackled, instilling a spirit of enthusiasm in their souls.

Ibrahim drove his car, and I called out to him, "Where are you taking the car? All the roads are blocked with barricades. You won't be able to pass! Go on foot!" He smiled at me and replied, "Don't worry, Ahmad, don't worry." He set off, and I followed him with my eyes to see what he would do at the first barricade. The moment he arrived, the demonstrators and those behind the barricades rushed to open a path for him, dragging the burning tires with long, curved iron rods they had prepared for this very purpose. He crossed the first barrier, then the next, as if he were the commander of the battle, and perhaps in that moment, he truly was.

In the afternoon of that day, a group of about thirty young men gathered around us, and a patrol of about twenty occupying soldiers arrived. We immediately positioned ourselves at the entrances to the alleys, and as the soldiers reached the center of the street, stones began to rain down on them like a torrential downpour. They fired indiscriminately in every direction, unaware of their surroundings. Upon hearing the gunfire, hundreds of men and women emerged to join in the assault, pelting the occupiers with stones. In their frenzy, the soldiers fired without regard for life, and as the wounded fell, the barrage of stones continued unabated. Soon, the soldiers began to flee. One soldier, however, could not escape. Weighed down by a heavy radio on his back, he called for help. He attempted to fire his weapon again, but his strength failed him; his legs could no longer carry him. He collapsed to the ground, crying out for his mother in Hebrew, "Emma! Emma!"—"My mother, my mother."

Dozens of jeeps rushed to the rescue, colliding with demonstrators from every alley. After immense effort, they managed to extricate their soldiers from the angry hail of stones. Dozens, if not hundreds, of wounded arrived at Dar al-Shifa Hospital, some in ambulances, while the majority were transported in private cars, speeding along the road with their doors flung open, and dozens clinging to them in support of the injured. Thousands gathered at the hospital entrance to donate blood, rolling up their sleeves as medical staff pushed them back, shouting that the influx was far beyond the hospital's capacity to accommodate. A chaotic sea of people surged at the hospital entrance, each time a vehicle appeared carrying a wounded person, its horn blaring and lights flashing. This raging sea of humanity chanted in unison for Palestine, for the martyrs and the wounded, against the occupation and its leaders, whose actions no longer instilled fear or deterrence.

A massive contingent of soldiers advanced toward the hospital area, unleashing an astonishing volume of tear gas and live ammunition at the demonstrators. Thousands of stones rained down upon the soldiers, prompting an increase in gunfire, forcing the crowd to retreat back into the hospital. A single voice erupted, chanting loudly, "Allahu Akbar... Allahu Akbar! Khaybar, Khaybar, O Jews... The army of Muhammad will return... In the name of God, Allahu Akbar... In the name of God, Khaybar has come!" The soldiers charged after them to the hospital entrance, only for everyone to surge forward once more, armed with stones in their hands. Before this crashing tide, the occupying soldiers began to retreat. One soldier stumbled and fell to the ground, where he was overwhelmed, beaten, and kicked. They stripped him of his weapon and military attire, leaving him to flee in his underwear. They tossed aside his weapon after one wise man warned that keeping it would lead to the deaths of a thousand of their own. "Throw away his weapon!"

The morale of the masses soared as they witnessed the shattering of the Israeli army's myth before the stones of overwhelming Palestinian fury. Stories of confrontations, martyrs, the wounded, and acts of heroism spread to every home and dwelling, igniting a spirit of sacrifice and valor among the youth and young men.

That evening, Ibrahim met Sheikh Ahmad at the sheikh's home, where the sheikh dictated the text of a statement to be printed and distributed in the mosques of the sector during Friday prayers the following day.

Ibrahim set off toward the place where the original edition had been prepared. Then, the printing press—hidden within a shop that appeared to be nothing more than a storage space for old tools—began pulling thousands of copies from its machines, bundling each batch tightly before sealing it. Ibrahim loaded them into the trunk of his car and drove forward. On the main road, another car awaited him, moving ahead as a vanguard to ensure he would not suddenly find himself at a checkpoint.

The lead car emitted special lights placed on its rear window, visible to the second car, which would then stop or turn away before encountering any obstacles. As for the first car, it carried nothing incriminating, so it could pass through checkpoints without issue. The two vehicles moved through the city, distributing the leaflets—each time, Ibrahim would deposit a bundle in the corner of a mosque before swiftly continuing to the next destination. Later, a young man would retrieve the hidden leaflets, concealing them in a place only he knew, waiting until the following noon.

With the Friday prayer on (12/11), as worshippers completed their prayers and began leaving the mosques, they found stacks of leaflets scattered across the ground, each one placed atop a small stone. Everyone picked up a copy, reading as they walked home. The statement was signed by the Islamic Resistance Movement and bore the title: And I am already drowning, so why should I fear the depths?—a call that ignited the spirit of resistance and sacrifice, urging defiance against the ruthless oppressor. Crowds began to gather, their numbers swelling, voices rising in unison, thundering against the occupation and its injustices, proclaiming the people's right to sacrifice in the face of Zionist aggression and the desecration of sacred lands. Tens of thousands in every district surged into the streets of cities and refugee camps alike.

That day, we set out from the mosque in the camp, our demonstration sweeping through its streets before spilling onto the main road. With every step closer to the soldiers, and with every shot they fired, the people's fervor only grew, driving them forward with greater resolve. The soldiers, overwhelmed, were forced to retreat. As the crowd neared the Seraya compound, gunfire intensified, a barrage heavier than anything we had faced before. Overhead, a helicopter hovered, releasing thick clouds of tear gas that billowed over the demonstrators. At that moment, I felt as though most of Gaza City and its camp had been liberated—Israeli forces had been pushed back, their presence reduced to the Seraya building and its immediate surroundings. A similar scene was unfolding across much of the Strip at that very hour.

The Balata refugee camp, near the city of Nablus, had erupted in flames. For months, the camp had endured the oppressive presence of Border Guard soldiers—most of them Druze, stationed in that sector—who had taken to harassing the neighborhood's women and girls. The camp had been simmering with anger for weeks, and now, the events unfolding in Gaza had poured fuel onto the fire.

After Friday prayers, the people surged into the streets of the camp, a massive demonstration that soon escalated into violent clashes with the occupation forces. A similar scene unfolded in the Dheisheh refugee camp near Bethlehem.

Meanwhile, Birzeit University had been shut down by military order. Seizing the opportunity, Muhammad and his wife came to visit us, planning to stay in Gaza for several days. With the widespread general strikes that had paralyzed the region, many took the chance to visit their loved ones. My sister Fatima arrived as well, bringing her son and daughter, and the house filled with family.

The home was now brimming with men, women, boys, and girls—our own kin, filling every corner. I found myself remembering our childhood, when a single small room had been more than enough to hold us all. And now, in the span of just a few years, our once-small family had grown into something resembling an army. I mentioned this in jest, prompting my mother to exclaim, “Send blessings upon the Prophet!” Immediately, everyone echoed in unison, “O Allah, send Your blessings upon our Master Muhammad.”

As we gathered around what felt like a banquet, lunch stretched into a long political discussion. The debate revolved around the events unfolding—whether they held any real benefit or would merely bring suffering upon the people. Opinions diverged between staunch supporters, hesitant skeptics, and those filled with both doubt and conviction. My brother Mahmoud dismissed it all as reckless, a fleeting storm that would soon pass once people had vented their anger. He was certain that nothing lasting would come of it. Ibrahim, on the other hand, was convinced that this wave of resistance would not simply dissipate.

That evening, on the Israeli television news in Arabic, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir made a statement: the Palestinian people, he declared, would achieve nothing through violence. He vowed that Israel would meet such acts with an iron fist.

Mahmoud turned to Ibrahim, triumphant. “Do you see? Was I not right?”

Ibrahim only laughed. “My brother, the man has already retreated—his first step back. Didn't you notice? He has begun to acknowledge us as ‘the Palestinian people.’ Have you ever heard Shamir or any of the Israeli right-wing leaders call us that before? Just yesterday, we were merely ‘the inhabitants of the territories,’ ‘the residents of Gaza, Judea, and Samaria.’ But now, even to him, we are ‘the Palestinian people’—and we have barely begun.”

Feigning distraction with his young son, Mahmoud avoided further argument, unwilling to reveal even the slightest hint of defeat.



Late into the night, a group of men gathered, led by Sheikh Ahmad. They had resolved to press on, to escalate their efforts without hesitation. As the discussion unfolded, Sheikh Ahmad spoke with unwavering conviction, laying out his vision:

\*“This is a people of deep roots, a people willing to sacrifice everything, no matter how precious. Time and again, they have proven—far beyond any expectation—that they are ready to give more than anyone could imagine, not just by tens, but by hundreds of times over. My hope is that this uprising, this defiance, will not be a passing storm but a permanent state—a way of life for the Palestinian people. It must become the very axis around which our daily existence revolves. Everything else—education, work, health, all aspects of life—must bend to serve this cause until we achieve our goal: driving out the occupier and reclaiming our land.

We have begun, by the grace of God, after years of sincere work in nurturing and preparing for this stage. Now that we have set forth, we must not halt. We must never retreat. We must move forward, never backward. We must expand our efforts, not diminish them, and push from one phase to the next, until our people’s aspirations are fulfilled. And they will be fulfilled. Our people will prove themselves worthy of this mission, deserving of God’s blessing.”\*

That evening, two brothers, Hassan and Hussein, performed the Isha prayer at the neighborhood mosque. As they walked home, Hussein turned to his brother.

“Tomorrow will be just like today,” he said. “The confrontations will continue, more people will be wounded, and they will be taken to Al-Shifa Hospital. The crowds will gather there, and the occupation forces will come to disperse them.”

Hassan nodded. “That means we need to prepare now.”

Hussein glanced at him, puzzled. “Prepare? How?”

Hassan motioned for him to follow. “Come with me.”

At home, he fetched a large plastic container. They headed to a nearby fuel station, where Hassan used the money he had to purchase gasoline. Returning to an empty lot on the outskirts of the neighborhood, they began gathering empty glass bottles.

Hassan filled them one by one—forty in total. Then, he tore strips of cloth, twisting each piece tightly before inserting it into the bottle necks, letting them soak in the fuel. Once done, they packed the bottles into crates, each brother carrying one.

Under the cover of darkness, they took the back roads to Al-Shifa Hospital, carefully hiding the crates beneath an olive tree before slipping back home unnoticed.

By morning, the city was ablaze with unrest. The wounded fell, carried swiftly to Al-Shifa Hospital, while the streets roared with crowds surging toward the gates. Their voices rang out in unison, cries of "Khaybar, Khaybar, O Jews... the army of Muhammad shall return!"

By midday, large battalions of occupation soldiers began to flood the area, surrounding the hospital and launching their assault on the demonstrators. Hussein was already stationed inside, waiting for their arrival. As the troops gathered, he moved with quiet precision, distributing the glass bottles along the inner hospital wall. Nearby, he had prepared an empty barrel, positioning it close to the barrier.

The forces advanced, clashing with the protesters. Seizing the moment, Hussein dragged the barrel closer to the wall, grasped one of the bottles, and climbed atop it.

With steady hands, he lit the wick and hurled the bottle toward a jeep where soldiers had taken cover from the relentless rain of stones. The glass shattered, flames erupting over the vehicle, and the soldiers' frantic screams filled the air. The troops recoiled, firing blindly toward the source of the attack, but Hussein had already pulled the barrel back.

As they focused on the hailstorm of stones and the place where the first bottle had been thrown, he seized another, climbed up once more, lit the wick, and let it fly—this time from a different angle. Again and again, from the front, from behind, the bottles ignited, while the overwhelming force of the crowd's stones kept the soldiers disoriented.

The clashes raged long past sunset. By the end of the day, Hussein alone had thrown forty fiery bottles—without orders, without coordination, only aided by Hassan's preparations the night before.

Not far away, a young boy held his father's hammer in one hand, a handful of nails in the other. Carefully, he drove them through small wooden planks, fashioning crude spikes. He then set them in the path where military jeeps would charge after the demonstrators, ensuring the sharp tips faced skyward.

Another boy, working alongside him, hammered nails into the side of a tin can before burying it just beneath the surface of the dirt road, its metal teeth waiting to tear into enemy tires.

From a safe distance, the two boys watched, anticipation brimming in their eyes. Then, the jeeps came, speeding forward, circling to cut off the protesters—only to grind to a sudden halt. Four of them, crippled by the hidden traps, blocked the path for those behind.

Laughter burst from the boys as they leaped in triumph, singing the anthem that had swept across the entire land:

"Khaybar, Khaybar, O Jews... the army of Muhammad shall return!"

So caught up were they in their victory that they forgot to clear the nails from behind them.

Ibrahim drove his car down that dirt road in the evening when one of its tires suddenly burst. He stepped out to inspect the damage, retrieved the jack, and began fixing the punctured tire, fuming with anger and frustration. But as he lifted the tire and laid eyes on the nail lodged in a piece of wood, he suddenly burst into laughter, muttering to himself, "A mighty people! A mighty people!"

He replaced the tire and sped off to Hassan's workshop, where he ordered thousands of small, sturdy wire pieces. Each piece was cut to six centimeters in length, bent at a right angle in the middle, and then welded together in pairs at their center, forming a shape reminiscent of a bird's foot—no matter how it was thrown, one of its four ends would always stand upward while the other three pressed against the ground.

Hassan prepared a large quantity within hours. Ibrahim arrived to collect them and drive Hassan home before setting out to distribute the pieces among activists in various areas, instructing them to scatter them across roads where the occupation's military vehicles roamed, hunting for masked men.

The next day, wherever you looked, whenever you passed, you would see the enemy's vehicles tilting helplessly to one side, their tires blown out. Soldiers found themselves trapped, unable to advance in pursuit of the masked men and protesters, unable to retreat, unable to move forward in their current state. They had no choice but to call for reinforcements, which either ran into roadblocks and demonstrators or met the same fate as those they had rushed to rescue.

It was a wildly amusing day, watching their vehicles in such a pitiful state. Most of their rubber-tired vehicles had either broken down or were at risk of breaking down, forcing them to deploy their sluggish, iron-tracked tanks. This only fueled the people's spirits as they watched the enemy flounder in hysteria, emboldening them even further.

When we were children, in those days of guerrilla resistance, we had a dangerous game of our own. We would take a key—one with a hole at the end—and pack that hole with sulfur scraped from matchsticks. Then, we would tie a long string to the far end of the key, attach a nail to the other end, and gently insert it into the hole. Holding the string at its midpoint, we would swing the key back and forth until it gained speed, then hurl it against a wall. The impact would drive the nail deep into the hole, igniting the compressed sulfur within and triggering a deafening explosion.

This game was especially popular among the boys in the refugee camp. Many had been scolded by their parents for playing it, both for its danger and its nuisance. The idea was simple: igniting a quantity of sulfur in a confined space would produce an explosion. The lack of safe, clean weapons in the occupied territories drove many to devise simple explosive devices from whatever materials were readily available.

Three young men from the Jabalia camp—one of them a plumber—set themselves to the task of assembling homemade charges packed with sulfur. Through a pre-drilled hole, they carefully inserted a strip of flammable material. Dozens were prepared with extreme caution, for any misstep or excessive friction could generate enough heat to detonate the device in the hands of its makers. Once ready, they distributed them among their comrades, ensuring they would be prepared for the next day's confrontations.

Morning came as it always did—crowds gathering, protests erupting, clashes unfolding. Stones hurled through the air, bullets fired, tear gas canisters launched, Molotov cocktails thrown. Hidden behind walls, shrubs, or tombstones along the roadside, a few young men lay in wait. As a patrol vehicle passed, one of them lit the fuse dangling from a pipe and hurled it toward the vehicle. A deafening explosion followed, sometimes wounding the soldiers inside.

One evening, in the early days of the uprising, several of my brother Mahmoud's friends came to visit. Some I knew; others were strangers to me. They gathered in the guest room, and the atmosphere suggested something akin to an organizational meeting. They sat for hours, debating and arguing. At times, their voices rose—there were two opposing views: one calling for full participation in the events, the other advocating restraint. In the end, they reached a consensus—participation, but only under the condition of forming a unified national front with the factions represented in the Palestine Liberation Organization and working together as one.

Days later, another group of visitors arrived, a mix of various nationalist factions, some of whom we knew. They sat long into the night, discussing and deliberating, urging the uprising to intensify against the occupiers. By then, it was well known that two statements were set to be released—one from the Unified National Leadership, the other from the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas). Both called for escalation and continuation, yet each proposed a different course of action: one declared a general strike for Sunday, the other for Monday; one called for sit-ins on Wednesday, the other for a collective fast on Thursday in solidarity with the wounded.



With each statement released, activists from every faction rushed to distribute their respective leaflets, striving to spread them as widely as possible. On the day of each scheduled action, masked activists took to the streets, ensuring full compliance—there could be no breaches that might suggest weakness, incapacity, or indifference among the people. More than once, this led to tensions and disputes, narrowly prevented from escalating into outright brawls or clashes, with immediate interventions to contain any emerging conflicts.

The Unified Leadership considered itself the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people through the Palestine Liberation Organization and thus saw itself as the rightful authority to determine the pace of escalation and dictate the schedule of events and actions. Hamas, on the other hand, regarded itself as a powerful, influential faction—one unrepresented within the PLO—yet still entitled to chart its own course, set its own timetable, and enforce its own agenda. Ultimately, the readiness of the people, the pulse of the street, would serve as the final arbiter.

Fierce debates often erupted in our home between my brother Mahmoud and either my other brothers, Hassan or Mohammed, or our cousin Ibrahim. It was well known that Mahmoud aligned with the Unified Leadership, while Hassan, Mohammed, and Ibrahim stood on the opposite side. Heated arguments would break out over the legitimacy of one faction's actions or another's attempt to sideline and ignore its rival. Each side would present its evidence, claiming the rightful mandate, asserting itself as the mastermind of the uprising—the one that had sparked it, shaped its trajectory, and refined its methods.

With each passing week, the uprising spread to new areas, engulfing regions that had previously remained untouched. Week by week, new sectors of society joined in, until the intifada was no longer just a series of events—it became a way of life, the backbone of the Palestinian daily existence. Daily routines and social activities gradually adapted to its rhythm, ensuring its continuity while integrating it into the necessities of life and the fabric of the community.

Children attended school in the morning, then by evening, the streets ignited with protests, confrontations, and clashes. Merchants bought and sold their goods in the early hours, only for a general strike to sweep through by the afternoon. The same pattern extended across other sectors of society.

In the early months of the uprising, in the city of Hebron—where mobilization had lagged behind other regions—a crucial meeting took place, attended by several leaders of the city's Islamic movement. Among them were Jamal and Abdul Rahman. The discussion grew heated, dividing the attendees between those advocating participation and those opposing it, and the debate stretched on.

In the end, a compromise was reached—a gradual initiation of activities with only a limited number of participants, followed by an evaluation of the results. The initial actions were carried out with minimal participation, yet they were met with overwhelming acceptance and widespread engagement from the general population. This success led to the decision to establish an emergency committee, headed by Jamal, to escalate and sustain the uprising's momentum.

Before long, the movement had gained strength, with all factions entering the fray. Yet, large segments of the population remained undecided about their stance on the uprising—among them, the laborers working inside the occupied territories of 1948. Their livelihoods depended on stability, on their ability to reach their jobs. This sector, in particular, had to find a way to reconcile its obligations to its Israeli employers with the unfolding reality of the intifada, just as other groups had adjusted to the new order. As the uprising intensified, becoming an undeniable thorn in the side of the occupation, Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin decided to implement the notorious "bone-breaking policy." The rationale was simple yet brutal—if a single stone was hurled at a military patrol from within a crowd, then the entire crowd would be subjected to harsh collective punishment. This, Rabin believed, would force the people to police themselves, ensuring that no one among them dared to resist.

One day, as a patrol passed a gathering of laborers, a young man instinctively stepped forward, picked up a stone, and flung it at the soldiers. The patrol stopped abruptly. The soldiers stormed toward the crowd, kicking and striking indiscriminately. But then, something remarkable happened. A collective roar erupted. As if driven by a single force, the entire group bent down in unison, each man grabbing a stone and launching it back at the attackers.

In that moment, the laborers—who had once hesitated—became part of the uprising. They sought to reconcile the contradictions of their existence, striving to feed their children while also taking their place in this unfolding national struggle, joining the people's battle whenever and however they could.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Due to the overcrowding in the house, the family decided to build a second floor. The task primarily fell to Ibrahim, with Ali, Hassan, and me assisting him, while Mahmoud would provide guidance, oversee the engineering aspects, and gather the necessary tools. We resolved to work gradually, ensuring that life in the house would not be disrupted, as we had no other place to go.

Mahmoud designated areas for digging, and we excavated near the walls, creating a hole approximately every four meters. Ibrahim prepared iron rods shaped like cages, which we would place in the holes once they were dug. Afterward, we would mix the concrete and pour it into the holes, having previously extracted vertical reinforcements from the cages. This would fill the holes with concrete instead of sand, forming one of the foundations to support the second floor.

After a day, Ibrahim prepared the iron for the concrete columns, set up wooden formwork, and secured it to the wall from the outside. Then we poured concrete into it to a height of four meters. The next day, we removed the wood and began working on the second foundation and then the second column, and so forth until we completed all the columns—twenty-four in total.

Mahmoud borrowed a quantity of wood and support pipes from his contractor friends, enough to cover half the house. Ibrahim then started preparing the formwork for half of the roof after we removed the old asbestos ceiling. He began working with Hassan to prepare the iron reinforcements for the roof, leaving extensions to connect them to the other part of the house's roof, which would be completed later, under Mahmoud's supervision. I worked under their guidance, and Mahmoud borrowed a mixer from one of the contractors. We brought in cement, sand, and gravel, and other young men from our friends and neighbors came to help us complete the task.

On one Friday, just before the call to prayer at noon, we finished our work and prepared for prayer, agreeing that everyone would return for lunch afterward. The family lived in exceptional circumstances in the western half of the house for two weeks until the concrete in the eastern half cured. We dismantled the formwork, and Ibrahim began completing the old walls up to the roof, shortening them along with the ceiling. Whenever one of the rooms was finished, its owner would move back in until the entire family had relocated to the eastern half, allowing us to start work on completing the western half.

During the three weeks, the work was completed, with only some arrangements left concerning the flooring and tiling. This work began concurrently with the lifting of the columns and the construction of the outer walls on the second floor. It was clear that we needed to place the windows at a very high level on the second floor, above head height, to avoid revealing the neighbors' spaces.

The activities of the intifada were intensifying, and despite our heavy involvement in the construction work, we managed to maintain our roles in these events. I participated sporadically in clashes and confrontations against the occupying forces. Mahmoud and Ibrahim were still playing their prominent leadership roles, each in their own organization, particularly concerning event organization, guidance, publications, and resolving any emerging issues. It seemed that the Israeli leaders, realizing that mere repression was insufficient to halt the intifada—clearly transforming into a persistent and chronic phenomenon—decided to open the Negev detention camp, which could accommodate tens of thousands of prisoners, placing it directly under military control after the regular prisons had filled up.

The military prepared vast areas in the Negev, surrounded by barbed wire and guard towers, and began a wide-ranging campaign to arrest all activists or those suspected of having a direct or indirect role in fueling the spirit of the intifada and ensuring its continuity, imprisoning them in the camp.

Among the first batches of detainees were my brother Mahmoud and my cousin Ibrahim. A large force raided the house at night and arrested them amidst the screams of my mother, their wives, and the small children in the house—screams of fear, anger, and confusion. They were immediately subjected to administrative detention for six months without trial, by order of the military governor of the region.

The first group arrived at the detention camp, which was still merely vast stretches of land surrounded by barbed wire, with guard towers scattered around. They were greeted with an extreme welcome of beatings, kicks, and humiliation, forced to sit cross-legged on the ground with their hands tied behind their heads, bowing under the blows, kicks, and insults. Then, some groups were ordered to rise and set up large military tents. Each person was handed four blankets and distributed among the tents. Each tent housed about twenty detainees, and the flow of detainees into the camp continued every hour, with hundreds arriving day and night without pause, greeted with the same warm reception and honor upon each new arrival.



The count occurred four times a day. A soldier would announce the count over a loudspeaker, and everyone had to exit the tents and sit in the wide courtyard in front of the section, sitting cross-legged in an orderly fashion according to the numbers assigned to them. The counting would begin, with the officer stating the number, and the prisoner either saying his name or responding with "yes" if he was the first number called. The second prisoner would then say his number, and so forth. If there was any mistake, they would start over, sometimes taking an hour, two, or even three, while the group sat on the ground, rifles aimed at them through the barbed wire, and soldiers on the guard towers pointed their heavy machine guns at the crowd, surrounded by dozens of soldiers wielding batons.

The food for five or seven people was barely enough for one, and the clothes were dirty and insufficient. Most of them were excessively large, forcing the detainees to tie them around their waists with strips of fabric to keep them from falling. Water was scarce, and the bathroom was available only once a week. During those five minutes, they had to complete their business in a row of adjacent small wooden stalls set over a long pit like a trench, with no sewage system or running water.

There were no family visits or letters, and the representatives of the Red Cross who came for visits did not provide any practical help, only writing reports on the dire humanitarian situation and submitting them to higher authorities.

In the first weeks, the prisoners began to organize and arrange themselves in an attempt to improve their living conditions and demand respect from the coarse guards. Immediately, a problem arose regarding factional representation. The factions represented in the PLO—Fatah, the Popular Front, the Democratic Front, and other organizations—met and agreed not to acknowledge the existence of Islamic organizations, neither Hamas nor Jihad. They declared that individuals entering the prison must live under the responsibility of one of the PLO factions and could not exist independently.

The number of individuals affiliated with the PLO was significantly larger, and it was clear that this was enforced by force, with those who refused potentially facing violence and coercion. The few Islamists had to temporarily accept the status quo and live in silence for the time being. Ibrahim had to navigate this equation, casting long looks of disapproval at Mahmoud, who smiled, raising his hands in a gesture that seemed to say: What can we do? You have no choice but to accept the reality of living under my direct authority. Ibrahim nodded his head as if to say: Wait, wait... for every fate, there is a book.

The intense struggle was with the prison administration, as the harsh conditions did not allow for silence and demanded quick action. However, any form of protest or dissent was immediately met with severe repression and collective punishment. The detainees were gathered in the courtyards, sitting on the ground for long hours, until the prison commander, dressed in military uniform, would come, placing his hands on his hips and strutting, threatening and warning in broken Arabic.

Mohammed had been detained in Ramallah, and my brother Hassan and I had to take on the full responsibilities of the family, especially towards my mother, the wife of my brother Mahmoud, his children, and my sister Mariam, who was married to Ibrahim. The completion of the house construction had come to a halt, and the home had turned into a miserable reality filled with the cries of my mother, Mahmoud's wife, and Mariam. Whenever food was served, my mother would burst into tears, followed by the others, leading the children to cry as well. Hassan and I would try to calm everyone down, soothing their hearts and urging patience, claiming that the period wouldn't last long. Whenever one of the children needed something or asked their mother when their father would return, she would erupt into tears. Hassan and I had to rush to restore order and stability.

Suddenly... and all at once, what was unthinkable happened: they came and arrested Hassan as well. I found myself facing a humanitarian tragedy I could not bear, as Hassan's wife and children joined the side of sorrow. I had to try to console them; sometimes I succeeded, and other times I lost my temper, yelling that this sadness and crying were unjustified. Did six months of imprisonment warrant all this suffering and tears? It seemed that yelling at them was more effective in halting or concealing the grief until one of them would retreat to her room, and I could only wonder about her state. However, the collective wailing and lamentation began to diminish in the house, and it appeared they had adapted to reality after the first two months had passed.

With Hassan's arrival in the Negev, hundreds of detainees from Gaza and the West Bank joined him—activists from all factions and movements. It became evident that the number of Islamists was increasing significantly, and they began to form a noticeable and clear force. After a few days, a number of them, led by Ibrahim and Hassan, decided to end the dismissal of their existence as a group and to impose their recognition as individuals. They approached Mahmoud and several leaders of the national forces, informing them that they had to treat them as an independent force with their own identity and that they should provide them with some tents to enable them to live together like the other factions and to continue their lives in a manner that suited them.

The response was rejection, accompanied by threats of using force, and it became clear that tensions were escalating towards confrontation. These young men began imposing their demands on the ground, such as group prayers led by one of them, a Friday sermon by one of their own, and holding communal meetings. With the arrival of new detainees, including some tough individuals who refused to accept the reality, verbal disputes erupted, escalating into physical confrontations with punches and slaps, and eventually leading to stone-throwing and the use of tent poles. Several people were injured while the occupation soldiers watched without intervening until the fighting ended, after which they entered to pull out the injured and provide treatment, conveying the situation to the media in an embarrassing manner: Palestinian detainees were fighting and smashing each other's heads while their tormentors tended to their wounds.

The problem remained unresolved, with each side clinging to its stance. It seemed that some personal disputes, such as those between Mahmoud, Ibrahim, and Hassan, were mirroring themselves and intensifying ideological and factional disagreements. The atmosphere remained tense on two fronts: internally between the factions of the Liberation Organization on one side and the Islamists on the other, and externally between the groups of detainees and the administration, which treated them in the most brutal ways. Another clash occurred, though not as intense as the previous one, prompting the voices of the reasonable on both sides to rise, insisting that this situation could not continue and needed a solution to alleviate the tension. Sessions and dialogues were held, where the demands of the Islamists for recognition as an independent force, entitled to the same rights as any other faction, were met, and they were allocated special tents.

The rebellion continued to escalate, spreading in intensity and confrontation, covering the entire occupied Palestinian territories in the first months. No city, village, camp, or alley remained without its share, and every segment of society took its role in the activities according to its capacity and circumstances. The phenomenon of massive demonstration crowds began to disappear, transforming into smaller groups in every alley, street, neighborhood, and village that would ignite tires and set up barricades. If occupation forces arrived, the youths would initiate stone-throwing, firebombs, and what they had accustomed themselves to calling "the elbows." There was no way for any patrol, whether on foot or in vehicles, to pass without triggering confrontations at the end of every alley, street, or intersection they encountered.

The occupation forces continue their assaults, escalating their use of tear gas canisters, live ammunition, rubber and plastic bullets, arrests, and bone-breaking tactics. Meanwhile, the resistance activities of the uprising grow in intensity, with an increasing balance between young men and women taking part. In every alley, when the youth gather for a moment of respite, each takes turns revealing the marks left by batons that split their heads open, the stitches still fresh and visible. Those who have yet to earn such "medals" scramble to change the subject or seize the moment when a patrol vehicle approaches, rushing toward it with fervor, eager to claim their own mark of valor, for they are no less courageous or manly than their peers.

To identify key activists and those driving the events, the occupation's intelligence agencies resort to deploying informants, positioning them near clashes, confrontations, and mosque entrances. Some of these spies are already notorious for their ill repute, drawing suspicion from the people. Certain informants, utterly careless in their disguise, make their roles all too obvious—so much so that the young protesters, upon spotting them, withdraw, only to return masked, ensuring they remain unidentifiable. Their names, once recognized, would inevitably be passed to intelligence officers, leading to their arrest.

One day, following the martyrdom of a young man, his pure body was carried to the mosque in preparation for the funeral procession. A vast crowd of men, women, and children from the camp gathered, when suddenly, one of the known informants positioned himself at the street corner in a way that raised suspicion and alarmed the activists. Instinctively, they withdrew, only to return masked as the crowd swelled. Then, one of the masked youths cried out, "Why do we remain silent while these traitors watch us, reporting our names to intelligence so that soldiers can hunt us down? We are the ones who must disappear, forced into hiding, while they roam freely? It is they who should be afraid!" He urged the crowd to act, to drive the traitor away. Without hesitation, the gathering surged toward the informant, kicking and striking him. They nearly killed him before a wise elder intervened, pulling him from the chaos and shouting, "Do you want to kill him? Enough!" He dragged him away, his entire body swollen from the beating.

The phenomenon of confronting informants—what became known as "disciplining them"—spread rapidly. Many of these spies had grown accustomed to shamelessly monitoring demonstrators, sometimes even recklessly chasing masked protesters over long distances in hopes of identifying them when they removed their masks. In response, the protesters would beat them severely, and more than once, such beatings nearly ended in death.



One of these known collaborators worked as an administrative supervisor at Dar al-Shifa Hospital, which was a government hospital overseen by the health department of the civil administration. At that time, they made sure to employ their agents in such sensitive places. The man's reputation was notorious, and his collaboration was clear, as he repeatedly picked up the phone to request the arrival of the military governor or soldiers to arrest injured individuals (this was before the intifada).

When the intifada began, this collaborator was careful to hide a bit when the crowds were large and angry. On one occasion, as a huge crowd gathered, several injured people arrived, and one of the young men shouted, reminding the people of his true nature. The crowd rained stones upon him and stoned him like Satan, then the throng fell upon him, kicking and beating him with shoes and hands until his body was swollen. He miraculously escaped from the people when a large force from the occupation army stormed the place.

The appearance of notorious collaborators lessened slightly, but whenever one of them was spotted and fell into the hands of the crowds, they made him taste the bitterness of years of oppression from the occupation and its agents. It seemed that the intelligence had begun to employ smarter strategies for their agents, but the experience of the protesters was evolving in parallel.

Often, one of the collaborators was caught in the act of recording the names of demonstrators, another was caught photographing the demonstrators with a small camera disguised as a lighter or something similar, and yet another was caught recording the Friday sermon in one of the mosques with small tape recorders, which the intelligence supplied to their agents for such tasks. The crowd would descend upon the head of this or that collaborator with their sandals.

As the occupation forces, in their official uniforms, helmets, and weapons, clashed with the demonstrators who hindered their movements toward specific targets, they began to develop their tactics. They mounted iron wire mesh on the car windows to prevent shattering glass, shielding it from the stones thrown at them. They also began using special forces—soldiers dressed in civilian clothing like any Palestinian—sometimes walking on foot and sometimes moving in cars with local license plates, either taken from their owners on the roads or belonging to them, moving in this manner without raising suspicion while hiding their weapons.

When one of the masked protesters or active demonstrators approached, they would draw their weapons and point them as they captured that individual, then began firing at those around him who intervened to help. Large military forces would be nearby, for example, in a parallel street, rushing to assist them and save them from the hands and stones of the crowds that hurried to the scene. Sometimes, these forces would approach the demonstrators or the masked individuals and fire upon them to injure them, and sometimes with the intent to kill at the outset.

These forces achieved their objectives through arrests or injuries and executions on one hand, as well as instilling a sense of fear among the public regarding the masked individuals. However, it did not take long for the crowds, after some experience, to become accustomed to this and develop the ability to discern the reality of the situation. On many occasions, members of these forces found themselves among massive crowds or large groups of masked individuals, where they tasted the bitterness of the cup they had long made these youths and the masses drink. Sometimes, confusion arose when the crowds suspected a group of masked individuals among the intifada's youths, leading them to attempt to attack. The suspected individuals would then be forced to reveal their identities for fear of punishment.

Widespread rumors circulated among the public that some collaborators were participating in the special forces that attacked the youths. Some demonstrators succeeded on several occasions when these forces attacked them by unmasking one of the operatives, who was then recognized by the people who rushed to his aid. Consequently, anger toward the collaborators increased, and if one of them was caught, he faced much harsher treatment than those who had been captured previously.

The number of detainees in the Negev prison rose to thousands, and the prison became divided into sections known by numbers. The management's policy continued to follow the same pattern of oppression and violence, using force and beatings on any pretext. The designated section would be flooded with a sea of tear gas, or the prison commander would come, threatening, cursing, and raging.

On one occasion, the wait for the counting took too long. When the counting finally began, the officers made several mistakes, and each time they erred, they started over again, leading to tiredness and restlessness among the detainees. A visible murmur arose: "Who spoke?" No one answered. "Who spoke?" No one replied, as it was not the words of a specific person. The atmosphere grew tense, and a large force was mobilized. The prison commander threatened and accused those present of cowardice, claiming there were no men among them. Then he asked, "Who spoke?"

One young man stood up, shouting, "Consider me the one who spoke! Let it be known that we are all men, and your soldiers are cowards; you tremble while holding weapons!" The prison commander raised his weapon toward the young man, who did not hesitate for a moment, his eye unwavering, standing firm. The commander fired a single bullet between his eyes, and he fell, a martyr.

The sound of the gunshot and the fall of "As'ad" signaled the beginning of a massive uprising in the prison. Everyone present jumped up, grabbing whatever they could find to throw at the occupying soldiers, while the guards began firing heavily, and the soldiers in the watchtowers opened fire with their machine guns.

The prison was flooded with gas, and the detainees began tearing down the tents. They rushed towards the barbed wire surrounding the prison sections, shaking it and trying to uproot it. It became clear that the situation had spiraled beyond the control of the assigned forces, prompting the summoning of a large contingent from a nearby military camp, which arrived with tanks to surround the prison and set up heavy machine guns, fearing that the detainees might succeed in tearing down the barbed wire and escaping. It was evident that violence would not resolve the issue.

At this point, senior military leaders began attempting to open a dialogue channel with some of the detainee leaders to calm the situation, while violence continued unabated. Eventually, it was agreed to remove that commander and fundamentally change the approach to cooperation with the detainees. This included changing the counting method to be more respectful, improving the food quality, purchasing canteen supplies, protecting officials from searches, and allowing freedom of movement and assembly within the prison. The situation began to calm down and stabilize, and over the following days, conditions gradually improved in the prison.

The prison transformed into an academy teaching the culture and arts of resistance. In one tent, lessons were held on the history of the Palestinian cause; in another, sessions on security sciences and interrogation techniques; in the third, discussions on the jurisprudence of jihad and martyrdom; and in the fourth and fifth, literacy courses and Arabic calligraphy classes. A young man would enter the prison illiterate and emerge proficient in reading and writing within six months of administrative detention, having participated in various courses in multiple essential fields.

A group of friends gathered in this alley or that mosque to agree on plans for action upon their release, promising to continue and develop the uprising. As the largest gathering of Palestinian activists from all national and Islamic factions became concentrated in the Negev prison, the occupation's intelligence began to take an interest in this assembly by sending dozens of its agents into the mix. These agents pretended to be arrested for one reason or another and were placed in prison, where they were tasked with gathering information about the activists, their intentions, statements, and activities, hoping to integrate themselves into the resistance and activities once they were released from prison, allowing them to be exposed and thwarted early on.

Some of these individuals were well-known figures despised by activists from various factions, while others remained unknown. As experienced individuals, the detainees decided to initiate security operations within the prison to monitor, document, produce, follow up, and interrogate... This situation evolved into investigations with some of these collaborators or suspects, leading to frequent excessive use of violence and physical pressure, which sometimes resulted in unintentional deaths or bodily harm to some of those subjected to interrogation. Despite the negatives of this phenomenon, it uncovered many intelligence plans and programs aimed at undermining the uprising and, at times, physically eliminating certain activists.

Importantly, the Negev prison, which housed tens of thousands of detainees, transformed into a genuine academy, welcoming waves of youth who graduated with knowledge, experience, and exchanged insights.

The phenomenon of hunting down collaborators began to spread to the streets of the homeland, forming groups from all factions that started pursuing notorious collaborators, detaining or abducting them. They would take them to orchards or remote abandoned locations, subjecting them to prolonged interrogations, sometimes employing violence or even excessive force. Some of these groups would kill these collaborators, dumping their bodies in garbage dumps or public squares to instill fear and deterrence. Occasionally, a collaborator would be brought to a public square where crowds gathered; they would be tied to a utility pole and whipped, have a hand or leg amputated, or be shot. This phenomenon increased and became a competitive arena among some groups, showcasing grotesque forms of violence that were repulsive.

Undoubtedly, red lines were crossed in certain instances, leading to the exaggeration of minor issues, resulting in injustice in this case or that. However, it became clear that the phenomenon of collaboration with the occupation had weakened and been significantly struck, achieving a deterrent effect. Many collaborators disappeared, fleeing to the occupation or traveling abroad.

Due to the immense pressure on collaborators and the escape of many, often with their families, the enemy's intelligence opened a center to gather them in the Gaza Strip in an area called "Dahiniya," and another center in the West Bank called "Makhmeh." In many cases, the occupation forces did not intervene to protect their collaborators when they were killed or tortured, as their intervention would compel them to enter densely populated areas, exposing them to danger, where stones, Molotov cocktails, and homemade bombs began to fill the alleys, readily available in the hands of youths everywhere. These collaborators were originally recruited to serve the enemy, not the other way around.



Sometimes, in rare cases, to rescue a high-profile collaborator, a helicopter would descend with forces to extract him and his family from their home before the encroaching crowds could overwhelm them. However, this phenomenon diminished, and the fear of collaborators and their reports lessened. The visible manifestations of their movements and surveillance began to fade. In the camp, families celebrated the release of their sons from detention after serving their sentences, while others mourned for their sons arrested during the night. Releases and arrests occurred daily without pause.

Sajjad, Mahmoud, and Ibrahim were released, and we celebrated this occasion with neighbors and relatives. Each returned to his duties in work or study, engaging in the activities of the uprising with increased caution and care. We resumed the construction of the second floor...

Immediately after the release of Sajjad and Ibrahim, Faiz became more frequent in visiting us, closely shadowing Ibrahim, hardly leaving his side. Naturally, we took advantage of this situation in various ways; we assigned him heavy and laborious tasks in the construction of the house, which he was eager to perform diligently. He worked with all his energy, allowing us to take a break. Ibrahim often advised him to avoid involvement in the violent events of the uprising, hoping this information would reach the intelligence services and deter them from considering his arrest again.

It was not difficult for us to arrange a logical and reasonable excuse for Ibrahim to slip away from Faiz's watchful eye when he needed to undertake an important and sensitive task that we didn't want Faiz to know about.

I discussed with Ibrahim several times about Faiz and how it was acceptable to remain silent about him after confirming his betrayal and cooperation with the occupation's intelligence. He would always assure me to stay calm, saying that everything was excellent in its own time, and he did not want anything to happen to him. He believed the intelligence services would take responsibility for any issues, assuring me that a reasonable arrangement would be made for him, presenting it as an ordinary matter. Ibrahim had a remarkable ability to maintain a façade of normalcy, concealing his inner turmoil and suppressing his emotions. He could disguise himself so well that even his wife, my sister Mariam, rarely sensed any unusual movements during his involvement in the activities of the uprising, despite his being a central figure in his group, bearing significant responsibilities.

My mother sensed this with her heart, even without concrete evidence to grasp. She would approach him occasionally, saying, "Ibrahim, enough is enough! Don't get yourself and your wife and child, who your wife is carrying and whose birth is approaching, into trouble." He would laugh and tease her, assuring her that he was not doing anything to warrant concern and that he was the calmest young man in the camp, insisting he would not return to prison, prompting her to fall silent.

My mother, unable to confront him and without any evidence to support her fears and anxieties, found herself at a disadvantage. He had an incredible ability to evade serious discussions, turning conversations into jokes and laughter, often diffusing the tension. As he deflected her concerns, Mariam's face, initially pale at the start of their discussion, would flush with relief, perspiring from the strain of worry, until her laughter burst forth, calming her nerves.

My mother felt reassured regarding my brother Mahmoud, believing he wouldn't get involved in serious issues. He was older, experienced, and wise; he might participate in some matters, but she knew he wouldn't pick up a stone. Her knowledge of him allowed her to feel minimal concern. Her worries about Hasan were greater than for Mahmoud, yet they paled in comparison to her anxiety for her son-in-law Ibrahim. As for Ali, it seemed she had no worries whatsoever; she understood that my involvement in the uprising was quite limited, especially since I had no political or ideological affiliation. My brother Muhammad, by nature, was calm and focused on his studies at Birzeit University, preparing for his master's thesis.

Her expressions of worry were tied to the anticipation of our returns home and monitoring our comings and goings, particularly late-night arrivals. Often, she would conduct search operations in Mahmoud's or Hasan's room, especially in Ibrahim's room, where she would gather their three wives and enter, starting a thorough search of drawers and shelves. She would ask one of them to read every paper for fear that something prohibited had fallen from one of them, which could lead to soldiers or intelligence officers arriving for searches or arrests, potentially stumbling upon that incriminating paper.

She never found anything on Ibrahim; he was meticulous and cleaned up thoroughly behind him. Occasionally, she would discover papers belonging to Mahmoud, such as drafts of statements from the unified leadership. When he returned home, she would grill him and conduct a military-style interrogation.

On one occasion, I saw her conducting a thorough search of Ibrahim's car, as if she had discovered something. She stormed in like a raiding force while he was eating, expelling his wife from the room and shutting the door. Her voice rose at times with general reprimands, then softened when discussing what she had found in his car. It was clear he was trying to employ his usual method of downplaying the situation with jokes and laughter, but this time, he seemed unable to succeed. It appeared she had caught him in the act of a heinous crime.

The closed investigation and trial proceedings for Ibrahim lasted over half an hour. When the door opened, I glanced in to see Ibrahim's condition; he looked like someone who had been assaulted by ten interrogators in one of the harshest rounds of interrogation at the Gaza Central Prison. I smiled with a hint of malice, and he shot me a furious glance, as if to say, "I'll make you feel this instead of your mother." I desperately tried to discern what had been discovered about him, about Marium, and the others.

Marium truly did not know; had she known, she would not have been able to conceal it from me. Yet, both she and my mother dealt with me with utmost cunning and secrecy, chastising me whenever I pried into the matter to find out what had happened. It wasn't until years later that I discovered she had found a bullet from a 9mm pistol on the driver's side floor of the car. I realized then that he had a weapon hidden away, which was a danger and a calamity. But the more alarming issue was that he had warranted such stringent measures due to his negligence in allowing that bullet to fall and remain there without noticing or removing it.

A long time passed, and the events of the Intifada unfolded and escalated, extending to encompass the entire homeland. It became widely known that these events were termed the Intifada, a name that even entered other languages as is. When you listened to news broadcasts on Israeli radio or television, the word "Intifada" was frequently repeated, and the same went for news reports on foreign stations.

On one occasion, Ibrahim sat down with Fayez in my presence, attempting to persuade him to reduce his visits to us and to limit his associations with Ibrahim. He feared that some informant might take note of their connection and report it to the intelligence services, leading to their arrest under suspicion of plotting something. Fayez tried to allay Ibrahim's fears, asserting that there was no need for concern, but Ibrahim cornered him and insisted. Indeed, Fayez curtailed his visits to our home, though he did not cease altogether.

On one of the days that marked the anniversary of the Isra and Mi'raj, Hamas's statement, which had been distributed earlier, called for activities and confrontations on this day to commemorate the journey to the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the ascension to the heavens. From the morning, the youths began erecting barricades, setting tires ablaze, and throwing small homemade explosives into them to create explosions, generating an atmosphere of seriousness around the strike called for by the movement and provoking the occupying forces to come searching for the blasts, leading to confrontations. At the heads of several alleys, masked youths successfully engaged in this endeavor.

When the occupying forces arrived, they were met with stones and Molotov cocktails, which prompted them to open fire. Many homemade explosives were thrown at them, leading to considerable confusion among the occupying troops, who intensified their fire towards the protesters, who were adept at hiding behind barriers and walls.

A number of the injured fell, and on that day, "Fayez!" Ibrahim, who was beside him, screamed. "Fayez has been hit!" Other young men rushed towards them, and upon examining him, they confirmed he was dead. One of them cried out, "He has been martyred; the bullet struck his head!" Ibrahim ordered them to carry his body away to prevent it from going to the hospital, knowing that the occupying forces might scrutinize the medical reports. The camp erupted in chaos and fury, and the crowds surged forth in anger, carrying Fayez to his grave while chanting ominous vows. I had no doubt he had not been killed by the occupying forces, yet I did not dare to discuss this with Ibrahim, who would certainly not permit such a conversation. However, the eyes spoke what the tongues would not.

The closure of Palestinian universities was a series of decisions issued by the military rulers of the regions aimed at preventing large gatherings of students, which could become points of friction and explosion. It became evident that the situation would drag on indefinitely.

Yet, the academic journey had to continue. A reasonable solution was sought, and it was found in converting classrooms into mosques and public institutions. For instance, the Islamic University designated an office through which announcements were made that lectures for course number X would be held at Al-Abbas Mosque in Gaza City, and lectures for course number Y would take place at Palestine Mosque, specifying the day and time. Students would gather in the mosque, and the lecturer would come to them. Thus, the educational journey persisted, albeit with challenges and difficulties, but it adapted to the new reality like others.

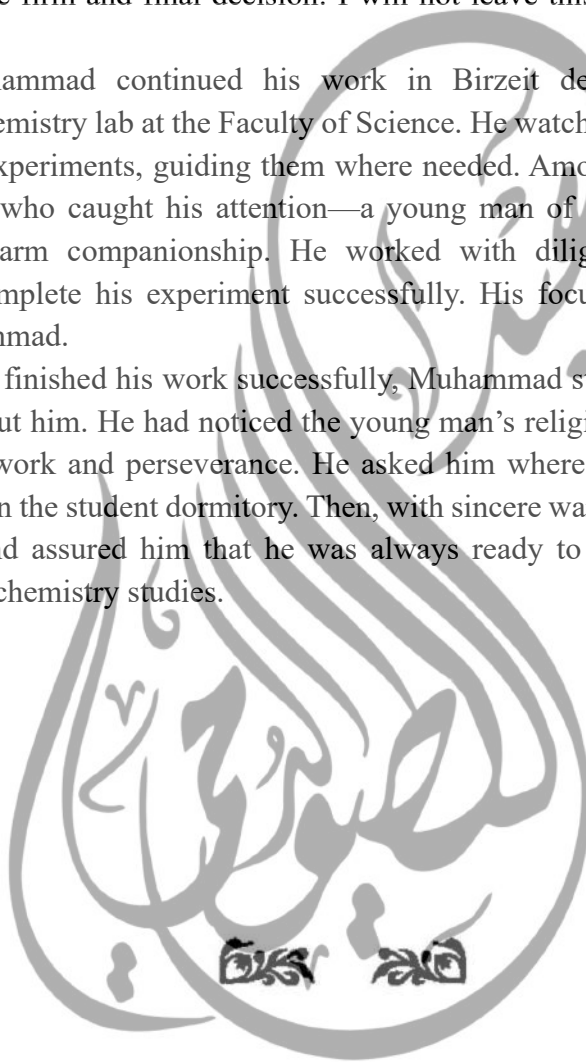
Ibrahim and I had to attend lectures and exams. Ibrahim was in his final year, while I still had another year ahead of me. Despite all the closures, sieges, and curfews, the academic journey continued, and Ibrahim graduated, earning his Bachelor's degree in Biology. He submitted his papers to work with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and awaited the approval decision.



My mother exerted all her strength to persuade him to travel abroad and submit his papers for a job in Saudi Arabia or one of the Gulf states. Yet, she found nothing but a deaf ear—one filled with clay and the other with dough—for he had made his decision resolute: he would not leave the homeland, especially in this critical and perilous stage. My mother's heart told her that this young man must leave the country, for staying would cost him dearly. She voiced this openly, and when she saw his unwavering determination to stay, she began to change her approach. She pleaded with him, begged him to travel abroad, even if only for two or three years at the very least. Yet, she was met with the same firm and final decision: I will not leave this land—not even for a moment.

Meanwhile, Muhammad continued his work in Birzeit despite the difficulties, overseeing the chemistry lab at the Faculty of Science. He watched the students as they conducted their experiments, guiding them where needed. Among those students was one in particular who caught his attention—a young man of calm demeanor, noble character, and warm companionship. He worked with diligence and dedication, determined to complete his experiment successfully. His focus and industriousness impressed Muhammad.

When the student finished his work successfully, Muhammad stood beside him, eager to learn more about him. He had noticed the young man's religious devotion and now praised his hard work and perseverance. He asked him where he lived and who his roommates were in the student dormitory. Then, with sincere warmth, he invited him to visit his home and assured him that he was always ready to help if he ever faced difficulties in his chemistry studies.



## Chapter Twenty-Two

Once again, my mother pressed Ibrahim to leave for Jordan, where he could submit his application to the Saudi embassy or any other Gulf Arab embassy. Given his qualifications, he stood a strong chance of being accepted for a job, allowing him to take his wife and start a life far from the troubles and dangers lurking in every alley of Gaza. Yet, Ibrahim would only smile and reply that such a thing was impossible. His mind was made up—he would never leave Gaza, even if he had to survive on bread alone.

He waited for a response from UNRWA regarding the job application he had submitted, hoping to secure employment within the sector. When the reply finally arrived, it was a rejection. The number of applicants in his field exceeded the available vacancies, and his turn had not come.

Seeing an opportunity once more, my mother renewed her efforts to persuade him to travel abroad. But Ibrahim reminded her that he was skilled in construction, earning a good livelihood from it, and had no real need for a formal job. Now that he had completed his studies, he could expand and develop his work, which would bring in substantial income.

Meanwhile, Maryam gave birth to their first child, a daughter whom Ibrahim named Isra (Isrā'). When I asked about the reason for this name, he said, So that every time I look at her, I will remember my duty toward the land of Isrā' and Mi'rāj, toward Al-Aqsa Mosque. Since children are often one of the reasons people hesitate to engage in jihad, naming her Isrā' will serve as a constant reminder of my obligation rather than an excuse to neglect it.

He then recalled the beautiful moments we had spent standing guard at Al-Aqsa Mosque when the Jews threatened to storm it. His eyes welled with tears.

At the same time, we continued constructing the second floor of the house. We completed the rooms and roofed them with asbestos, repurposing the old roof of the ground floor. It was during this stage that I witnessed something that deepened my understanding of Ibrahim's love for the people around him.

As we were leveling the roof of the second floor, we had initially planned to maintain the same slope as before—tilting westward. However, just as we began placing the asbestos sheets, Ibrahim suddenly stopped working. "This isn't right," he said. I looked at him, puzzled. "What isn't right?"

"The roof slanting westward." "Why?" I asked. "Because the rainwater that collects on our roof will drain onto our neighbors' roof." I shrugged. "So what? That's how it was before." He laughed and shook his head. "No, Ahmed, the situation is different now. Before, our roof wasn't three and a half meters higher than theirs. When the heavy rain pours down from this height, the noise will be unbearable, making it impossible for them to live in peace."

We found the statement to be true, and I wondered: but what should we do? He said, “We redo the work and make the roof slope eastward so that the water drains onto the street.” He began by demolishing the upper part of the wall that created the slope, then we started rebuilding it in reverse. After that, we placed the roof and laid heavy stones on top of it to keep it from being blown away by the wind.

In a short time, we completed the work on the house, turning it into four apartments, each with a degree of independence. I lived with my mother in one of them, assuming that when Muhammad returned from Ramallah, he would stay with us. Mahmoud, Hassan, and Ibrahim each settled in one of the other apartments, allowing their wives more freedom. No longer would they have to keep their headscarves on all day or feel embarrassed in front of their husbands' brothers.

Through working with Ibrahim on building the house, I learned a great deal about construction and started participating more actively. He suggested that I join him in the trade, assuring me that within a few months, I could become a skilled builder. He promised to teach me, and we could work together as partners, especially since job opportunities were scarce. His reasoning made sense—I had nothing to lose. So, I began working with him on the projects he took on.

As his work expanded, more laborers joined us. What stood out was that he often assigned us specific tasks, saying he had a quick errand to run. He would leave, get into his car, and drive off, sometimes returning after a long while, sometimes after a short one, before resuming work. I kept wondering where he went and why he left his job behind. When I asked him, he would say, “Job hunting, Ahmed. Before we finish one project, another must already be waiting for us.” I would look into his eyes, convinced that he was engaged in a different kind of work—searching for something beyond construction and building.

In the occupied territories of 1948, near a place called Sarafand, there was a large Israeli military camp. Every morning, hundreds of soldiers arrived at the site, and every evening, they left for their homes. They stood at the roadside, waiting for any passing car to stop and take them home, waving at the vehicles traveling along the main road in the biting evening cold.

Some of them start walking along the roadside, signaling to passing cars whenever a vehicle approaches. Some cars pick up this soldier or that one, carrying them a few kilometers until their paths diverge at the first junction, leaving them to seek another ride to complete their journey.

A white, modern Subaru speeds down the road, bearing a yellow (Israeli) license plate. Behind the wheel is a young man who appears to be of European descent—fair-skinned, blonde-haired, blue-eyed. Beside him sits another young man, seemingly of Iraqi origin, while in the back seat, a third man appears to have Yemeni roots. The car radio plays a Hebrew song with a soft, soothing melody.

One of the soldiers frantically waves at the car to stop. The vehicle slows, and as soon as it halts, the soldier yanks open the back door and throws himself onto the seat. He mutters something in Hebrew to the driver, who replies casually, "Beseder" (alright). The car moves forward again.

After covering some distance, the soldier suddenly turns to the young man sitting in the passenger seat. He draws a small blade, holding it up threateningly, and commands him in Hebrew, "Shum tenu'ah!"—"Don't move!" Then, addressing the young man in the back seat in Arabic, he orders, "Take his rifle." The rifle is swiftly seized. The soldier trembles, his breath turning ragged. Tears well up in his eyes as he cries out, calling for his mother in Hebrew, "Imma!" A dark stain spreads across his trousers as he loses control of his bladder.

Mohammed erupts in fury. "You come to kill us in Gaza and the West Bank. You stole our land long ago. Back there, you raise your guns and fire at children, thinking yourselves brave men. But here, you cry for your mother and wet yourself."

He pulls the trigger. One bullet to the heart.

The car swerves onto a side road. The three young men step out, retrieve digging tools from the trunk, and carve a hole into the earth. They bury the soldier, strip him of his weapon and identification, then hastily climb back into the vehicle. As the car speeds away, one of them, flipping through the soldier's documents, suddenly shouts, his voice tight with shock. "My God! This soldier belongs to the Special Forces under the Israeli General Staff—the elite unit that executes the most dangerous covert operations. And he had a Medal of Honor."

Days later, the same group captured another soldier, seizing his Galil rifle while he was returning from the Gaza Strip. After burying him in another location, they attempted to cross the barbed-wire fences separating Gaza from the territories beyond. A guard spotted them and quickly alerted the patrols securing the area.

A chase ensued. Before long, some of them were captured. Others fled, vanishing into the night. And some, slipping through the chaos, escaped across the border into Egypt.



Investigations were conducted, leading to arrests. With the two soldiers and their weapons still missing, and none of the detainees knowing their whereabouts, a full curfew was imposed on the entire Gaza Strip, and a large-scale arrest campaign began. Hamas ranks were not spared; no one suspected of affiliation remained untouched. Inevitably, my brother Hassan and my cousin Ibrahim were also taken. The interrogations revealed nothing against them, yet they were placed under administrative detention for three months and transferred to the Negev Desert Prison.

Days later, Mahmoud too was arrested under administrative detention for three months. There, in the Negev, he found Hassan and Ibrahim, their heads held high, their feet striking the earth with firm resolve as they beheld Mahmoud—the very man who had often scoffed, asking, "Where is your role in armed resistance?!"

At the first opportunity to speak privately, Ibrahim turned to him and said, "Now, Mahmoud, our role in armed resistance has begun. These are only the first steps, and what is to come—by God's will—will speak for itself." Mahmoud muttered, "Too soon to tell... too soon..." Hassan responded, "It does not matter when. What matters is that this is the beginning. What matters is what follows. And now, it's your turn to answer: where is your role in fulfilling your duty?" Mahmoud laughed. "You have done nothing of note yet, and you ask about our role? Our role is known, Hassan. For thirty years, we have been the vanguard of armed struggle. We ignited the revolution. We carried out tens of thousands of operations—" Ibrahim interrupted, "We are men of the present, Mahmoud. What matters now is who carries the banner forward, who is capable of bearing its weight and paying its price." Mahmoud nodded. "True, true... We shall see. In any case, welcome to the trenches of resistance. Now, you have taken your rightful place, with honor and respect."

Their conversation was interrupted as a group of young men approached the spot where they stood beside that tent, greeting them: "Peace be upon you, and the mercy and blessings of God." They returned the greeting. Mahmoud excused himself and left. The young men stood in introduction: "I am Ibrahim, from Beach Camp." "I am your brother, Yasser, from Khan Yunis Camp." "I am your brother, Imad, from Jabalia Camp." "I am Mahmoud, from Bureij Camp." "I am Ezzedine, from Shuja'iyya." They sat together, diving into conversation about the heroic operations their brothers had executed—how they had forced the occupiers into difficult equations, how soldiers, clad in their military uniforms—

And with their weapons, they seized soldiers—the very symbol of security, the guardians of the state. They disappeared them into the unknown. And despite all its methods, its oppression, and its ruthless measures, the state's security apparatus remained helpless in solving this enigma.

They thanked God that the doors of battle, through jihad and armed resistance, had now been flung open. The future, they believed, would shine bright and be filled with goodness—God willing.

The three months passed swiftly, and Hassan and Ibrahim returned home. Days later, Mahmoud followed. As always, their homecoming was met with joy, celebration, and warm embraces from neighbors and loved ones.

During this period, Iraqi forces swept into Kuwait, prompting a massive deployment of American and Western troops to the region in preparation for war. In response, the intensity of the uprising waned, giving way to a tense anticipation of what the coming days would unveil. The one sentiment uniting all Palestinians was the fervent hope that Saddam Hussein would fulfill his promise to erase half of Israel. Though there was sympathy for the Iraqi people, soon to face the full brunt of Western military might, the people's longing for war burned hot. They yearned to witness missiles obliterate the state of tyranny and aggression.

This anticipation was only heightened by the visible terror among the Israelis—leaders and civilians alike—who feared what awaited them. Their greatest dread lay in the rumored chemical weapons Iraq was said to possess.

The world held its breath as the news broke: the attack on Iraq had begun. Everyone's eyes turned skyward, searching for the missiles that would descend upon the accursed entity. When the air raid sirens blared across Israel for the first time, panic ensued. They scrambled for their gas masks, vanishing into their shelters. In response, the people flooded the streets, chanting, "With our blood, with our souls, we sacrifice for you, Saddam! Saddam, our beloved, strike, strike Tel Aviv!" To strike Tel Aviv was to win the hearts of a people who had endured decades of torment.

The radio announced a state of emergency, advising residents in most areas that they could remove their masks and emerge from their shelters. The missiles had landed in a limited area. They were now being examined to determine whether they carried chemical agents.

A heavy silence gripped us as we sat in the pitch-black night, awaiting the results. Time stretched unbearably. Then, the announcement came: the missiles contained only conventional explosives—no chemical weapons detected.

It was as if we had been doused in ice water. The silence lingered until Mahmoud finally broke it, murmuring, "Perhaps it's just a deception—to lower their guard."

And they did not wear masks, so the devastating blow came. We responded, God willing, God willing.

Hassan spoke with strange confidence, “People, Saddam does not have chemical weapons. He will not strike Israel, and even if he does, he will not wipe it out.” Mahmoud replied irritably, “And why these dark speculations?” Hassan, still confident, answered, “Because the one who will remove Israel must have well-known qualities, and those are not found in...” Mahmoud cut him off, shouting, “Brother, I don’t know where you come up with these ideas and statements!” Ibrahim intervened, trying to mediate, “In any case, God willing, he has chemical weapons and will strike them. There is still time, and it is too early to judge matters now.”

As the war raged on and Iraqi missiles continued to rain down on Israel, the people’s joy reached its peak. True, Israel had not been wiped off the map, but for the first time, it was being struck deep within. They all rushed into their shelters like terrified rats or wore the masks that choked them—some even died of sheer panic upon hearing the sirens. That alone was enough to bring the crowds out, watching the missiles streak toward the entity of usurpation. The crowds surged, cheering, ululating, and singing, even though many already knew the likely outcome. Yet, when the battle concluded as it did, disappointment gripped many.

This frustration and despair—one of the war’s consequences for Iraq—only added fuel to an already blazing fire. The sight of panic gripping the depths of the usurping entity further convinced people of the enemy’s fragility. With the war’s end and the fighting halted, the uprising erupted with greater intensity and ferocity. It became clear that a wide segment of active forces in the territories had shifted toward armed resistance against the occupation. The number of martyrs had risen dramatically since the uprising began, not to mention the staggering number of wounded.

Yet, the territories were entirely devoid of weapons. For nearly two and a half decades, the occupation had systematically emptied Gaza and the West Bank of arms and ammunition, sealing off every possible entry point for smuggling them in. Severe punishments awaited anyone involved in this trade, and people had even lost the knowledge of how to use weapons should they find any. Thus, activists resorted to knives, daggers, axes, swords, and clubs. It was rare—exceptionally rare—to see a pistol or an old Carl Gustav rifle.

My mother did not relent in her inspections of Mahmoud, Hassan, and Ibrahim, searching for any contraband they might carelessly leave out during one of her raids on Ibrahim's bedroom. During her search, she pulled out the drawer from the wardrobe and rifled through it, finding nothing of interest. As she was putting it back, a thought struck her to remove the drawer entirely. Pulling it out completely, she discovered a small cardboard box secured inside. Upon opening the box, she found a gun, and she nearly fainted. However, she regained her composure, mustered her resolve, and hid the gun to prevent Meryem from seeing it.

Ibrahim was not home, so she began an impromptu investigation with his wife. Where did her husband hide his belongings? Where and how? Meryem knew nothing and was bewildered by my mother's approach to her.

When Ibrahim returned home, she chose not to bring it up and treated him normally. That evening, we heard Meryem's screams, but we couldn't tell what was happening. Upon hearing the commotion, she rushed up the stairs to the second floor. When she entered the room where they were arguing, Meryem turned to them, crying out, "I don't know what's going on here! Earlier today, my mother interrogated me about something I know nothing about, and now my husband is questioning me about something else I'm equally in the dark about. I feel like a deaf person at a wedding! Can someone please explain what's happening in my room?" She broke down in tears.

Her crying was the spark of joy that opened a floodgate for Ibrahim, drawing a significant portion of my mother's attention towards soothing and reconciling with her. Ibrahim realized that it was indeed his mother who had uncovered his hidden stash, and he remained silent, waiting for her to speak first. She then turned to him, saying, "Didn't I tell you that you need to leave this country?"

Ibrahim smiled and replied, "Aunt, it seems it's time for me to say what I've tried for years not to say. Listen, you too, Meryem," as I arrived and noticed the door was ajar, prompting me to call out. He continued, "And you listen too, Ahmad. I have chosen my path, not just today, but for many years. I chose my path the day I heard my brother Hassan married a Jewish woman and settled in Tel Aviv. I have chosen the path of jihad and resistance, and I have walked it, and I will continue to do so. Nothing will deter me from this path. That's why I chose to study at the Islamic University, rather than any other institution, which upset Mahmoud back then. I also chose to work in construction in Gaza instead of taking a job in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, which disheartened my aunt."



I have chosen my path, and I will not abandon it. God is my witness that I love you all, and I love you more than anything in this world. But if you wish to prevent me from continuing on my path, I will relinquish my love for all of you, even for Meryem and Israa, and I will leave you to follow my path and fulfill my duty.

Tears welled in his eyes, and Israa's cries rose from her little bed, while Meryem and my mother wept silently. I could not hold back; hot tears streamed down my cheeks. My mother, battling her own tears, said, "You are free, Ibrahim, and no one can stop you from doing what you want. May God protect you, may God protect you." She then took his hand and walked with him downstairs, handing him his gun wrapped in a piece of cloth.

In one of the houses in the city of Hebron, the emergency committee of Hamas gathers, headed by Jamal, with Abdul Rahman sitting on his right as they plan and arrange to escalate the uprising and confrontations in the city and the surrounding towns and villages. They agree to work in two directions: first, activating the events and activities wing of the uprising, and second, beginning to establish armed groups and cells and collecting weapons for them.

One of those present sets off to meet three young men to announce to them the formation of the core of the armed movement and that they need to start searching for weapons, preparing hideouts and shelters, and nominating names of those willing to work in this field. At the same time, dozens of activists move in various directions to mobilize individuals and supporters to distribute leaflets, write slogans on walls, and erect barricades on the roads to obstruct the movement of the occupation soldiers and settlers, luring them to suitable locations to throw stones at them, allowing the young men to conceal themselves, withdraw, and maneuver.

Abdul Rahim, who was in the early days of his youth, meets two of his friends at the mosque in the town of Surif. They sit and arrange the activities for the following day in the town. Just before dawn, they set out to distribute leaflets among the homes and shops of the town, writing slogans on the walls. Then they begin to set up barricades and ignite tires, as today is a strike day according to the resistance statement, and they carry out their actions while masked.

One of their colleagues came running after them, urging them to come and see what was happening. They wondered: "What is happening?"

He said: "Come and see!" They found that the slogans they had written had been erased, and the name "Hamas" was crossed out with the words "Beware of the agents, Hamas is an agent of the occupation" written underneath. They asked: "Who is doing this?" He replied: "Come on, follow me." They ran after him and saw three leftist youths doing the deed. A scuffle broke out, and fearing that their identity would be exposed, they grabbed sticks and clubs and set off towards their target. They found the three there, slapped each of them several times, and the three fled. They chased them to their neighborhood, surrounding it in an intense scene as they waited for one of them to emerge. The elders of the family came out and reconciled with the youths on the condition that their children would not do that again.

From the town of Soreef, two buses filled with workers who worked for the Jerusalem municipality in cleaning, gardening, maintenance, and other jobs left daily. The two buses were Israeli, and the youths decided to target them. In the morning, they lay in wait for them, and upon their arrival, they bombarded them with stones, shattering their windows and forcing them to return without the workers.

After this happened several days in a row, and with the municipality of Jerusalem unable to do without the workers, two military jeeps came along with the buses to protect them, one in the front and the other in the back. This provided a better opportunity for the youths to attack the soldiers.

Thus, confrontations began daily at six o'clock and sometimes lasted for hours. Finally, it seemed that the Israeli company operating the buses refused to continue after two of their buses were burned. Two buses were rented from an Arab company, and the stone-throwing continued, forcing them to bring in military protection since the municipality needed the work, and the confrontations continued.

Sometimes, when Abd al-Rahim and his brothers were not satisfied with that, they headed to the main road leading to the town of Beit Shemesh, where they began throwing stones at Israeli cars, breaking their windows and disrupting traffic on the road. The occupying army would come to confront them, and they would retaliate with stones before fleeing to the mountains they knew as well as they knew their own homes, spending the rest of their day playing and running there.

The confrontations increased, the actions escalated, martyrs fell, and their numbers grew, while the injured exceeded all imagination. The occupation did not relent, and the world remained unmoved.

In one of the demonstrations that took place at Al-Aqsa Mosque, the occupation forces attacked the protesters using heavy machine guns and helicopters, resulting in dozens of martyrs and hundreds of injured. A curfew was imposed on the areas out of fear of widespread backlash.

During the curfew, a young man, not yet twenty, resolved in his heart to take revenge. He sharpened his knife and waited. On the first day the curfew was lifted, he took a knife with his food and boarded the bus as usual when going to work in Jerusalem. He got off far from his workplace to look for a suitable target, and his feet led him to one of the synagogues, where a number of Jewish worshippers were present. At first, it crossed his mind that the response here would be the most fitting retaliation for the massacre at Al-Aqsa, aimed at the worshippers, but he hesitated; he was not one to invade a place of worship to kill the worshippers.

He walked forward and found a man pulling out a knife and stabbing him several times, causing him to fall dead. He moved ahead and spotted a female soldier in her military uniform, stabbing her several times until she collapsed. He advanced, aware that people were noticing him, gathering, and screaming for help. A soldier in special forces gear aimed his weapon at him, brandishing his gun and shouting for him to stop and drop the knife. Yet he continued to advance, his hand trembling that held the gun. He gripped it with both hands, shaking, and fired, hitting him in the legs. He had aimed for his chest, but he continued to advance toward him. His feet felt heavy; each was hit by three bullets, bleeding profusely, but he pressed on. The soldier, burdened by his weapon and uniform, could no longer stand and collapsed.

Just two or three steps remained until he reached Amer, who pushed his legs as if they were planted in the ground. He attempted to take a second step to reach him but couldn't. The soldier was trembling and shaking. When Amer was sure he could not move forward anymore, he threw all his weight forward and stabbed the soldier once, twice, and a third time, causing him to fall dead despite the weight of his weapon. Amer stood tall, head held high, as he was arrested.

Two young men in their early twenties came to the camp mosque looking for Ibrahim. They sat with him in one corner of the mosque, speaking quietly for a while before parting ways. Early in the morning, he waited for them in his car to take them to the parking lot headed for work inside. He handed each of them a bag containing their food and got out to bid them farewell, reminding them to be cautious. The two young men boarded another of the buses that transported workers into the occupied territories of 1948, reaching the workshop gate where one of them worked. They sat waiting for the workshop owner and the other workers. One of them arrived to open the gate.

They entered behind him, pulled out their knives, and began to stab him. The second worker stepped forward, and they killed her too. The workshop owner approached, and they killed him as well. Before deciding to leave the scene, one of them wrote on the wall inside with spray paint, "On the occasion of the anniversary of Hamas's founding, dedicated to the souls of our heroic martyrs." They then departed from the location.

A young man made an agreement with one of his cousins, who stole cars from the Jews, to bring him a large, heavy vehicle. He would receive it after dawn prayers and set off for the area of Tel Aviv in front of Tel Hashomer Hospital. A large number of soldiers were stationed at one of the passenger stops. He accelerated the truck to its maximum speed and then veered toward the stop, killing three soldiers and injuring dozens, with such incidents repeating themselves.

One young man attacked a number of people sitting at a bus stop, killing four. Another attacked students leaving their school with a cleaver, killing one and injuring many others. A third and a fourth... dozens of incidents followed, prompting Israeli politicians and security officials to speak of a knife war, leaving the streets in a state of panic and terror. A few individuals managed to bring the battle into enemy residential areas, seeking to inflict casualties among their ranks rather than simply accepting the martyrdom of their own, all while waiting for the world's conscience to awaken from the filth that had accumulated upon it. The pursuit of weapons never ceased, becoming the main concern for many.

One of the youths conveyed information to Ibrahim that one of the collaborators, who had not fled and lived on the outskirts of one of the towns, possessed a weapon. He would leave with it and return daily at specific times. The suggestion was made to attack him with knives, kill him, and seize his weapon, emphasizing that an ambush could be set, and the youths were ready to carry out the plan.

Ibrahim asked him to wait until he could secure a pistol, as another group had taken the gun to carry out one of the operations. Seven masked youths armed with knives lay in ambush for the collaborator as he passed in his car at the designated spot. They blocked his path with a vehicle, stopping him, and at that moment, several of them lunged at him with their knives, wounding him. However, he quickly reacted, pulling out the Uzi rifle he carried in one hand and began firing at the youths while driving his car recklessly with the other, maneuvering wildly away from the ambush and the attackers. One of the youths fell as a martyr.

And "Imad," whom Ibrahim had met...



His eyes filled with tears as he recalled his time in the Negev prison, and he vowed not to sleep that night until he had secured weapons for them.

He got into his car and sped off to Rafah, where he met one of the youths and inquired about the others. This third young man asked him to wait and returned after an hour with something wrapped in a burlap sack. He entered the car and, upon unwrapping it, discovered an AK-47 rifle. He kissed it between the eyes and headed back, where he found Imad waiting for him. He handed him the burlap sack, saying, "Now you can work safely." Imad took it and rushed to his friends, almost flying as his feet barely touched the ground. They took the Kalashnikov to a remote, empty area to test it and learn how to use it; it was the first time they held a rifle. They tried and tried but without success. Imad returned to Ibrahim, complaining that the rifle was faulty. Ibrahim took it and drove to one of the youths who knew weapons and had experience with them. The young man examined the rifle once, twice, and then disassembled it, saying to Ibrahim, "It's true that the rifle is damaged; its firing pin is bent, and it needs a new one." Ibrahim wondered where they could get a new pin. The young man replied, "You need a lathe workshop to make a new one." Ibrahim thanked him and set off; the solution was easy since Hassan had a workshop that could handle the task.

He took Hassan to the workshop after hiding the rifle and removing the part that needed repair. After much effort, the new firing pin was made. It was tested, but it still proved unsuitable. It was late, and going back to the workshop might raise suspicion and cause problems, so they decided to wait until the next day.

The following day brought another attempt and experiment, requiring further adjustments. Thus, they moved from the workshop to the testing location dozens of times until it became suitable. However, a new problem arose: the bullets they had were insufficient for training or for use in an operation. This was the only rifle, exchanged among dozens of hands through several groups in various areas of the southern, central, and northern Gaza Strip.

With the only pistol in Ibrahim's possession, two young men set off—one driving a Peugeot 404, a common model in the area, while the other sat beside him on the main road in the central Gaza Strip, west of the entrance to Deir al-Balah, near the settlement of Kfar Darom. One of the senior settlers drove his car to inspect the agricultural land belonging to the settlement. He stopped at a traffic signal, and the two young men sped towards him, stopping beside him. From about thirty centimeters away, his companion fired a single shot at his head, killing him instantly, and the car sped off.

On the opposite side, dozens of military jeep vehicles arrived to encircle the area, unaware that the perpetrators had passed among them just moments before...!!

Ibrahim and others searched for any lead or rumor about someone who might have a piece of weaponry, no matter how old. They received news that an old man had a Carl Gustav rifle, which he had hidden since the day of the Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip. They approached him, pleading with all their might, and Ibrahim kissed his head and hands, offering him any amount he desired, but the man denied having anything of the sort.

As they turned to leave, the man called them back and accompanied them to one of the nearby orchards. He dug into the ground beneath one of the trees, unearthing a concrete pipe filled with dirt. He emptied the dirt and revealed something wrapped in plastic. He tore through the plastic to find a burlap sack, then lifted the sack to uncover fabric, and finally, beneath the fabric, there was a roll that bound the rifle with a long strip of cloth. It had been coated with grease to prevent rust and moisture from reaching it. Despite this, after being buried for over two and a half decades, rust had begun to eat away at it, but it was still in good condition... in fact, excellent.

“What do you want in exchange for it? What price do you ask, O Elder?” The man looked at them, saying, “Its price is very high!!!” Ibrahim, exasperated, asked, “How much do you want?” A tear glistened in the old man's eye as he replied, “That you use it in the name of God to resist the occupation. I have paid the price of keeping it hidden and not turning it over to the intelligence services for many months during that damned interrogation and years in prison.” Ibrahim fell to the ground, kissed his head, and promised him that, God willing, they would do just that. He asked him to pray for them, and they set off while the man raised his eyes to the sky, saying, “O Allah, grant them victory and guide their aim.”

A new round of searching for ammunition began, from one person to another, leading to a third, then a fourth, and finally to a fifth, where they found about ten rounds of ammunition. They continued this process, moving from person to person, until they found five rounds at the fourth. In this way, they collected enough ammunition to fill one and a half magazines.

Then the search turned to finding someone who knew how to use the weapon well. Eventually, they met a young man who had recently returned from studying abroad and had received military training during that time. He showed readiness to train and participate. They agreed to meet the next day on Omar Mukhtar Street at the Unknown Soldier Monument. Ibrahim picked him up from there and took him to one of the orchards, where four other youths were waiting for training. He stood explaining shooting positions and related matters.

Amad held the Karl Gustav, turning it over in his hands, feeling as if the world could hardly contain him. A young man stepped forward to mark a target on the trunk of one of the lemon trees for them to aim at. Amad took hold of the rifle, aimed, and accidentally released several rounds that whizzed past the head of the young instructor, nearly taking his life. This caused confusion and raised the tension in the air, but after a while, calm returned. The instructor resumed their training with heightened precautions—each person allowed to fire just one shot only, as the rounds were limited, and they had already lost several from the earlier mishap. However, it was acceptable; the practical training would take place in the field, and now they were prepared as a group armed with knives, with one carrying a submachine gun for emergency use, which marked a significant leap forward.

Several youths from the same groups were busy cutting the heads off matchsticks with nail clippers and stacking them in a box. Another brought a new metal container, carefully sawing it lengthwise and crosswise with a metal saw, attempting to weaken its structure to turn it into pieces that would scatter easily upon explosion. They filled it with the matchstick heads and placed inside it a tungsten ignition wire from a light bulb, carefully breaking its glass. After connecting the ends of the wires to the ignition wire, they closed the container and headed out to plant it on one of the dirt roads while one of them held the two ends of the wire and a battery.

Meanwhile, others were igniting several tires and began setting up barricades tens of meters in front of the bomb site. A patrol car arrived, and they began to confront it, throwing stones as gunfire erupted against them. They started to withdraw as the patrol moved closer to the bomb site. Amad connected the wires to the battery terminals, and the sound of a massive explosion erupted, sending thick smoke into the air along with the screams of the soldiers rising above. The youths quickly retreated from the area as reinforcements arrived, accompanied by ambulances to transport the wounded, their wailing and cries echoing in the chaos.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

After the first moments of seeing Israa, Ibrahim's daughter, and Mariam, the light of life, I noticed that my mother treated her with a special love and care much more than she did with Mahmoud and Hassan's children. I did not understand the reason behind this special affection; perhaps it stemmed from her feelings for Ibrahim, whom she had taken in and raised like one of us since he was a child. This love was intensified by the fact that Israa was also her granddaughter through her daughter, as if she had gained two loves from her, unlike any of the other grandchildren. Thus, she felt a particular attachment to her because she was the daughter of her daughter, as well as the daughter of her son. To be honest, if it weren't for my own deep love and respect for Ibrahim, along with my conviction that he deserved this affection, I would have envied him for the special attention my mother showed him, despite him not being her son like I was. She would often take Israa into her arms, rocking and playing with her, singing improvised songs that women usually chanted while soothing their babies to sleep or calming their cries. Frequently, she would sing the refrain: "Bring me my handkerchief, O you standing at the door... Bring me my handkerchief, so my country returns to me, O you standing at the door... So my country returns... and I see my loved ones, O you standing at the door... and I see my loved ones." She would continue to improvise on this melody and rhythm.

However, after the incident with Ibrahim, she replaced the word "handkerchief" in her song with "baroudi," so she would always sing the refrain: "Bring me the baroudi, O you standing at the door... Bring me the baroudi, to free my country, O you standing at the door... To free my country, O pride of my loved ones, O you standing at the door... O pride of my loved ones."

I loved those songs that my mother sang, feeling that she was expressing all of her hopes and dreams, as well as ours, through them. I would often go up to the second floor after finding a reason and bring Israa to her so she could start her song while I listened, letting the words caress my spirit, pretending to be busy with something I was doing or a book I was reading.

Ibrahim was sitting with several young men, including Amad, planning to attack one of the vegetable packaging and fruit processing factories east of Al-Shuja'iyya, where dozens of Arab workers were employed under the command of the two Jewish owners, who felt secure and at ease.



The young men boarded the white Peugeot 504. One of them carried the Carl Gustav rifle, its magazine holding only a handful of bullets—there was nothing else. Two others clutched commando knives, while the fourth took the wheel, steering them toward Al-Shuja'iyya, then past it until they reached the factory gates. Inside, a vast yard bustled with workers and goods. The car stormed into the premises and came to an abrupt halt. The three leapt out—one brandishing the rifle, ordering the Arab workers to stand aside and not interfere, shouting at them to obey, and they complied. The other two fell upon the Jewish owners with their knives, stabbing relentlessly as their screams of agony and desperate pleas for mercy filled the air. The task was done in two or three minutes. They hurried back into the car, which sped away. Before long, large forces arrived to sweep the area and interrogate those present. Hours later, a statement was released, declaring that the operation was a gift to the new Israeli Chief of Staff, Ehud Barak, in celebration of his appointment.

Days later, new intelligence reached Ibrahim: a Jewish man regularly came to collect vegetables from the farmlands north of Gaza City. The information was verified, and the group set out to eliminate him, armed with all the firearms they had—a Carl Gustav rifle and a pistol. They waited for him to arrive at the usual time. He stopped by the roadside, waiting for the farmers to bring their produce, which he bought for the lowest prices. One of the young men approached and called his name—"Cohen." He turned, replying in broken Arabic, "Yes?" Three bullets pierced his head, ending him instantly. The young man jumped into the waiting car, which sped away. A long distance down the road, they saw, in the opposite direction, dozens of military vehicles racing toward the scene of the attack.

A similar incident followed. Then another. And then another. News of such operations spread across the wounded homeland, and the masses erupted in the streets, chanting in praise of the battalions: "Izz al-Din Brigades... Battalions, battalions... Battalions, battalions!" The enemy's leaders convened in rage. The losses in lives had begun to mount, driving them mad. Each of them slammed the table, shouting at their subordinates that these men must be stopped—captured or killed—and that this bloodshed must end. But given the nature of the region and the conflict, the responsibility fell entirely on the intelligence apparatus, tasked with finding these young men among a people as tightly knit as threads in a tapestry, as impossible to trace as a needle in a haystack. And so, they set their agents in motion, gathering even the smallest scraps of information—anything that might form the thread leading to them. Or to some of them.

Dozens of military vehicles, packed with occupation soldiers, tore through the streets toward the Sabra neighborhood in Gaza City. They surrounded a house, evacuating the area of its residents, and began broadcasting through loudspeakers, ordering those inside to leave immediately. A helicopter hovered overhead. Inside the house, three young men—wanted by the occupation forces—hid in one of the rooms, while a Palestinian family carried on their daily life in the rest of the home.

The head of the household rushed to them, breathless. "What should we do?" One of the young men responded, "You must leave the house. We'll handle it." The man cried out, "How can we leave when you're here?" The three young men exchanged a smile. "Do not worry about us," one of them reassured him, gripping a homemade explosive pipe stuffed with matchstick heads. Another held a pistol. "Go, so the women and children don't get hurt. We'll take care of the rest." They urged him toward the door, and he finally stepped out, gathering his children and family. His voice trembled with supplication: There is no power nor strength except in Allah. He then recited, **"And We placed before them a barrier and behind them a barrier, and covered them so they do not see"**<sup>6</sup>.

As soon as they stepped outside, occupation soldiers seized them, their rifles aimed at their faces. The adults were taken aside for interrogation, while the children were confined in another location. Inside, the three young men positioned themselves—one gripping his pistol, the others each holding a matchstick explosive in one hand and a lighter in the other, awaiting the assault.

Outside, dozens of heavily armed soldiers prepared to storm the house. They forced the door open, and as the first wave rushed in, one of the young men ignited his explosive and hurled it toward the entrance. A deafening blast erupted, sending soldiers reeling, their screams piercing the air as the wounded collapsed. Those unscathed retreated momentarily, dragging the injured back. Then, they launched another assault under a storm of gunfire, pulling their wounded comrade out before pushing forward.

The gunfire suddenly ceased. A single, distinct shot rang out—it was from a pistol. A soldier fell, lifeless. Instantly, dozens of rifles turned toward the shooter, unleashing a relentless hail of bullets. Another explosive was thrown. Another explosion. More screams. Then, a torrent of gunfire.

Time passed. The soldiers finally emerged, carrying more wounded, then the lifeless bodies of the young men. They also took the head of the household with them—for detention.

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<sup>6</sup> Surah Ya-Sin, The verse(9)

After a while, the white Peugeot 504 sped away from the entrance of the Israeli police headquarters in Gaza City. From within, a hand hurled an explosive device toward the entrance, followed by a burst of fire from a Carl Gustav submachine gun and several shots from a pistol. The shouts of the guards rose in alarm, and then bullets poured heavily after the fleeing car as it disappeared into the distance.

The occupation's intelligence services and military forces intensified their efforts to track down the mujahideen. Another wave of assassinations and liquidations followed, undoubtedly fueled by extensive intelligence operations, much of which relied on informants. Widespread arrests swept through the city, targeting anyone suspected of even the slightest connection to the resistance or its operatives, or those accused of offering aid. Occupation soldiers in large numbers would surround entire neighborhoods, storming homes where some of the fighters were believed to be hiding. Special forces would lie in wait among the alleyways or within orchards, ambushing and assassinating their targets. It had become painfully clear that the situation could not continue as it was—limited weapons on one hand and relentless pursuit by occupation forces on the other.

During one of the gatherings that brought Ibrahim together with some of the fighters, someone suggested that those who could should escape across the border into Egypt. Staying in the city, he argued, was no different from walking toward death. But Ibrahim, along with most of those present, strongly opposed the idea of leaving the occupied land.

Under mounting pressure to find another way, Ibrahim proposed a different plan: they could move as many fighters as possible to the West Bank. There, they could regroup, carry out operations, and even find some respite before returning to Gaza. The West Bank, he reasoned, might also offer better access to weapons than the besieged streets of Gaza. Still, some insisted on the escape to Egypt. In the end, they agreed—whoever wished to leave could do so if the opportunity arose.

Several forged identity cards were prepared, enabling some of the fighters to slip out of Gaza into the West Bank. Eight of the most well-known and highly sought figures made their way to Ramallah. There, university and college students assisted them in renting apartments under the guise of being students themselves, allowing them to settle in without drawing unwanted attention.

Others struggled to make their way across the border into Egypt. Smugglers led them into the territories occupied since 1948, where a Bedouin guide awaited them. He would take them deep into the Negev Desert, eastward, where the border security was less stringent, and from there, he would slip them into Egypt. Some succeeded in making the journey, only to be caught by Egyptian security forces and taken to prison. After some time, they were released on the condition that they leave Egypt immediately. Their journey did not end there—they made their way to Sudan. Meanwhile, those who had reached the West Bank began working with students to establish contact with mujahideen across the region. One connection led to another, and soon, Imad, Bashar, and Muhammad found themselves among a group of well-known students from Hebron University. These were the same faces often seen in study circles led by Jamal, Abdul Rahman, Yusuf, Yaqub, Abed, and Saif—men who were already organizing themselves for armed resistance in the southern West Bank.

At their very first meeting, Imad wasted no time. "Is there any weaponry here?" he asked bluntly. The young men smiled. "Finding weapons is not difficult," one of them replied. Imad nearly shouted, "Then we need them immediately!" Laughter broke the tension. "Easy, easy," someone said. "You Gazans are always burning hot with urgency."

The young men from Gaza's refugee camps wandered the streets of Ramallah and Hebron, struggling to believe their own eyes—grand stone houses, luxurious like palaces. One of them exclaimed, "Allahu Akbar! The stones decorating this mansion could feed our entire camp for six months!" Yaqub chuckled. "Life is good here. The economy is strong." A black Mercedes, model 1992, passed by. Imad stared at it, squinting to catch a glimpse of the driver—a boy, barely visible behind the wheel. "How does his father allow him to drive without supervision?" he muttered. Yaqub grinned. "That's not his father's car. It's his own." Imad's voice rose, "Allahu Akbar! The price of that car could buy ten Kalashnikov rifles—enough to shake the world!" Yaqub smirked. "There are dozens of millionaires here—some don't even know how much money they have." Imad sighed. "If only we could just take a little from one of them to buy weapons." Yaqub burst into laughter. "You think of nothing but weapons!" Imad's face darkened. "You don't understand. Our brothers have been attacked by the occupation forces time and time again, and they had no weapons to defend themselves. I swear, if just one of them had held a rifle, he could have taken down dozens before falling."



A few days later, at the gates of the Ibrahimi Mosque, two occupying soldiers stood guard, watching over the settlers who came to pray. Imad and Yaqub appeared, each gripping an automatic rifle. Without hesitation, they unleashed bursts of gunfire, cutting the soldiers down before slipping away into the shadows. Reinforcements arrived swiftly, the city was locked down, and a curfew was imposed for several days.

Some time later, a group of young men, including Imad, set off in their car, armed with rifles purchased from weapon brokers—middlemen who traded with Jewish merchants and even soldiers, driven by greed. They took the road leading out of Hebron, searching for a settlers' vehicle or a military transport to ambush. Soon, a military jeep appeared in the opposite direction. Their driver quickly turned the car around, trailing the jeep as it re-entered the city. The chase intensified, and as they overtook the jeep, three automatic rifles erupted in unison, striking the soldiers inside. Not long after, they spotted another military officers' car. As they passed it, they opened fire, causing the vehicle to veer off the road, flipping onto its side after its occupants were either killed or wounded.

Hebron ignited, becoming a thorn in the occupiers' side after years of quiet submission. In response, mass arrests swept through the city, young men were thrown into prisons and detention centers, and chaos reigned. Imad, still unknown to the occupation forces, returned to Gaza—but this time, he carried an M16 automatic rifle and several loaded magazines. Soon, another fighter made the journey back to Hebron, smuggling another rifle with him. Now, resistance in Gaza could take on a new form—a true armed struggle.

Ibrahim monitored the situation, scouting for suitable Israeli targets. Reports soon reached him of a military jeep patrolling the main road east of Al-Shuja'iyya. Hundreds, if not thousands, of laborers traveled this road daily, heading into the occupied territories for work. The patrol moved back and forth before dawn, securing the route. Inside the jeep, three soldiers manned their positions: one at the wheel, another stationed behind a heavy machine gun, and the third wielding a powerful spotlight, sweeping its blinding beam over the workers, the drivers, and the roadside.

A white Peugeot 404 followed at a distance. Inside sat three fighters—Imad, Jamil, and the driver. The two in the back gripped M16 rifles, waiting for the perfect moment. As their car pulled level with the jeep, they opened fire in a sudden, ruthless burst. The three soldiers collapsed instantly, and their vehicle swerved violently, crashing onto the roadside. The fighters withdrew with ease, their escape route carefully planned in advance.

Reinforcements arrived, encircled the area, carried out arrests, and launched investigations. The next day, the enemy's press was ablaze with headlines, speaking of an unprecedented audacity—of soldiers sitting in Gaza like mere training dummies.

Days later, the fighters set out on a new mission. A bus carrying Israeli workers returning from the customs checkpoint at Rafah crossed their path. They drove alongside it, unleashing a burst of gunfire. A few days later, they targeted another military jeep. Curfews were imposed, mass arrests and interrogations ensued, but no leads emerged. The moment the curfew was lifted, the fighters watched for another target and struck again. Israeli analysts soon declared that Gaza had become a black hole in Israel's head, a growing crisis with no solution. Some politicians, emboldened by fear, began calling for an unconditional withdrawal—dismantling the settlements, erecting a separation wall, and abandoning Gaza altogether.

In Gaza City's Omar al-Mukhtar Street, the fighters sped through the road, only to find themselves pursued by two Border Guard vehicles. Sensing the danger, Imad instructed the driver to turn onto Wahda Street. The two Israeli cars split apart—one stayed on their tail while the other maneuvered to cut them off. This was no coincidence; it was a deliberate chase. The driver, momentarily flustered, clipped the curb. The Border Guard jeep screeched to a halt just meters away. Two soldiers leapt out, rifles raised, ordering them to step out with their hands up.

Imad, seated in the front, reacted in a flash. He grabbed his rifle and, through the rear window, fired over the heads of his companions, striking the soldiers and their vehicle. His comrades joined in, their weapons erupting in a synchronized volley. As the driver slammed the accelerator, the car lunged forward, tearing away from the trap. The fighters had escaped certain death.

Under the cover of night, three fighters crawled through the cold, soft yellow sand, rifles gripped tightly in their hands. The early morning darkness cloaked them as they neared the perimeter of Anni Tal, a settlement north of Khan Yunis. Reaching the fence, they dug beneath the barbed wire, slipping through undetected before vanishing among the greenhouses, waiting for their target.

Minutes later, a military jeep emerged, scanning the outskirts of the settlement with its powerful spotlight. The moment it reached their position, a storm of gunfire erupted. The vehicle lurched forward a few meters before grinding to a halt. The fighters advanced cautiously, ensuring the soldiers were down, seizing their weapons, then slipping away into the night—toward the waiting car that would take them to safety.

In occupied Jerusalem, four young men from the surrounding towns gathered, planning a daring operation. They set out in their car, carrying ropes and a few bladed weapons, heading toward the occupied city of Lod. Just before dawn, a Border Guard soldier walked alone along the roadside, making his way from home to his base. The driver accelerated, veering slightly to the side—just enough to strike the soldier with the car's edge, sending him crashing to the ground. The others leaped out, swiftly lifting him into the vehicle, concealing him inside before speeding away to complete their mission. They arrived at the headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross, where they left a communiqué—a media statement addressed to the Israeli government, granting it twenty-four hours to release Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and other prisoners in exchange for the soldier, Nissim Toledano, under the guarantee of European diplomats. The ultimatum sent Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin into a frenzy, along with his military and intelligence chiefs. Thousands of soldiers were deployed in a desperate, frenzied search—setting up roadblocks, combing through streets, scrutinizing every passerby with manic urgency. When twenty-four hours passed without the Israeli government complying, the young men executed the soldier, discarding his body in a nearby valley—a clear message to Rabin: when they threatened, they followed through.

The Israeli government convened an emergency session, bringing together top military and security officials to discuss the escalating crisis. Armed operations were intensifying, casualties mounting by the day. Proposals were made, strategies debated. Under the cover of night, across the West Bank and Gaza Strip—in every city, town, and village—thousands of officers, intelligence agents, and tens of thousands of soldiers descended in a massive raid. Hundreds of military vehicles, buses, and trucks rumbled through the streets as the Israeli forces launched an overwhelming wave of arrests, targeting activists from the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and Islamic Jihad.

Four hundred and fifteen leaders and operatives were rounded up, blindfolded, and shackled before being loaded onto buses. The convoy moved northward, driving for hours until it reached the Lebanese border. There, they were handed over to Lebanese military trucks operated by the South Lebanon Army, which transported them deep into southern Lebanon.

At the edge of the security zone, the detainees were ordered to step forward—threatened with gunfire should they resist. As they stood on the other side, realization struck: this was no mere arrest—it was a mass expulsion. They refused to move further. "We will not leave," they declared. "We will return home."

Huddled in the cold, exposed to rain and hunger, they stood their ground, launching a media and political battle to pressure Israel into allowing their return. As time passed, support arrived—Lebanese citizens, organizations, and parties, each bringing aid, provisions, and solidarity, ensuring that their struggle would not go unheard.

My brother Hassan was among them. They had also sought to deport Ibrahim, but he had not been home at the time, escaping both exile and arrest. Within days, news of those expelled to Marj al-Zuhur in Lebanon had spread into every Palestinian household and echoed through every gathering. Immediately, new cells of fighters began preparing for swift, retaliatory operations—to send a clear message to the Israeli government and its military leaders that their plan had failed and that the resistance still knew the paths of the homeland.

Imad and his brothers set out in their cars toward the eastern road, east of al-Shuja'iyya, where Israeli military vehicles frequently passed. There, they opened fire on an Israeli officer driving his car, watching as it veered off the road. Moments later, they spotted an Israeli bus, forcing it to halt several meters ahead. In the empty magazine of a rifle, they placed a letter addressed to Rabin—threatening more attacks, vowing that his tactics would only fuel the flames of resistance.

Meanwhile, in the northern West Bank, several young men whom the occupation forces had attempted to arrest fled into the mountains. They banded together, searching for weapons—a pursuit that tested their endurance before they finally secured a few. With those, they laid an ambush along one of the region's rugged mountain roads, where vehicles were forced to slow near the village of Burqin. When a military patrol vehicle approached, they opened fire, sending it crashing into the rocky hillside. The soldiers inside were killed, and the fighters retreated safely.

In Nablus, an Israeli observation post atop a high-rise building had been under careful surveillance. Its guard shifts had been studied—every few hours, three soldiers would arrive, replacing the three already stationed there. Three young men armed with knives and blades concealed themselves inside the building, awaiting the shift change. When the fresh unit of soldiers arrived, the previous shift descended the stairs and drove away. As the new soldiers climbed toward the rooftop, the fighters struck—knives flashing in the dim stairwell, their assault swift and deadly. The soldiers were slain, their weapons seized.

The same special unit that had once abducted the soldier Nissim Toledano now moved again, this time from Jerusalem, carrying an Uzi submachine gun and a pistol. Their target lay deeper within occupied territory, near the city of Hadera. Past midnight, an Israeli police car stood guard under the streetlights, its patrol halted by the roadside. The fighters' vehicle approached and pulled alongside it. Without hesitation, they opened fire, killing the officers inside, seizing their pistols before slipping away into the night—returning home as if nothing had happened.



The fighters had managed to acquire several weapons, yet their arsenal remained limited—far from what was truly needed. They were prepared to travel to the ends of the earth to secure more arms, willing to sacrifice everything for their purchase.

Imad heard that a certain man possessed a Kalashnikov rifle. Determined to obtain it, he sought out someone who knew the owner—a mediator who could negotiate the sale. The man, upon learning that the request came through Imad—now a symbol of jihad and resistance, his name renowned across Palestine—agreed without hesitation to sell the rifle. The mediator returned with the news: the seller was willing to part with the Kalashnikov for the exact price he had paid—without a single coin of profit—five thousand Jordanian dinars. The funds had to be raised immediately. Ibrahim turned to his wife, Maryam, asking to borrow her jewelry, while others emptied their savings, gathering every available coin. The sum was collected and handed to the mediator, who returned with the coveted Kalashnikov. The fighters embraced it, one after another, as though it were a lover—cherished by each of them and adored by them all.

Days later, by pure chance, Imad encountered a man on his way back from an operation—one that had left him and his comrades pursued by the occupation forces. The man offered them shelter until the danger passed. While they sat in his home, he recognized the Kalashnikov in Imad's hands and realized it was the very one he had sold. A casual conversation soon uncovered a troubling discrepancy. Either the mediator had deceived the fighters—pocketing fifteen hundred dinars for himself—or the seller had lied about the true price. Imad wasted no time. He sent one of his men to summon the mediator. Once the man arrived, he was ushered into a room where Imad stood, gripping a bamboo cane, swinging it lightly through the air.

“How much did you pay the man for the Kalashnikov?” Imad's voice was calm but firm. The mediator stammered, unable to form an answer. Imad's voice rose. “I said, how much did you pay?” Still, no response. The cane cracked down with a swift strike. The man flinched. “Three thousand five hundred dinars,” he finally admitted.

“And the rest?” Imad demanded. The mediator hesitated before muttering, “I needed it, so I took it.” The truth unraveled. The seller had originally bought the rifle for four thousand dinars but, upon learning it was for the fighters—and for Imad in particular—had willingly sold it at a loss, asking only three thousand five hundred out of love and respect for the resistance. Meanwhile, this opportunist, for the mere task of facilitating the sale, had seized fifteen hundred dinars—money taken from the mouths of little girls like Israa, whose fathers had sacrificed their savings to support the struggle against occupation.

Naturally, the mediator received more than a few lashes from the cane, along with a scalding torrent of rebuke and disgrace. He was given two weeks to return the stolen amount. If he failed, his skin would pay the price.

By intensifying their pursuit and relentless investigations, the enemy forced the Mujahideen to constantly change their hiding places. Some supporters devoted themselves entirely to finding homes willing to shelter the fugitives for a night, a week, or longer. One such supporter secured a safe house with a man who readily offered them refuge. They moved in, the house standing beside those of his three brothers. Their host firmly instructed his family to keep their presence a secret, for discovery could bring grave danger. From this very house, the Mujahideen launched an ambush, lying in wait for a passing patrol, opening fire, then retreating with practiced stealth, slipping back unnoticed into their sanctuary.

An hour after their return, the family's elder arrived at his son's home. His sharp senses caught the presence of strangers. The son, realizing this, quickly sought to defuse the moment. "I have guests," he said, "but only for a short time." The old man sat, his eyes studying the room. A slow smile spread across his lips. He reached up, twisting his mustache, then suddenly declared, "Take your ease, young men. You cannot conceal your truth from one like me!" The fighters exchanged wary glances, uncertainty flickering between them. The elder spared them their unease. "The scent of gunpowder lingers on your clothes—you fired your weapons no more than an hour or two ago." The young men stiffened, their minds racing, silence swallowing the room. "Do not be troubled," the old man reassured them. "By God, you are dearer to me than anything in this world." His gaze then rested on one of them. "You must be Imad—the warrior they say has seven lives, the one who has confounded the occupiers." Imad flushed, shifting awkwardly. "I am, Hajji, but—" "No 'buts,'" the elder interrupted. "Your valor is known to all. May God bless your hands. Be at ease, my sons. Be at ease."

The fighters, realizing their presence was no secret, felt a strange comfort in the old man's words. Imad, still curious, asked, "But how did you know, Hajji, so much about us?" The elder chuckled. "A man who has tasted the fire of battle and breathed the scent of gunpowder in the fields of courage never forgets. God granted me such days before our land was lost. I smelled it on your clothes. You should have changed immediately and given them to Muhammad's wife to wash. Do so next time." Imad smiled. "But how did you know I was Imad?" The elder's eyes gleamed. "I have heard of your exploits—from the boys, from the news. I imagined what the eyes of such a warrior must look like. When I saw you—when I smelled the gunpowder—I knew. The eyes do not lie, Imad. The eyes do not lie, my son."

At that moment, Mohammed rushed in. “There’s a sign the occupation forces are approaching the neighborhood.” The Mujahideen sprang to their feet. “Hand us our weapons,” they said. “We must leave at once.” But the Sheikh rose sharply, his voice ringing with authority. “Where to? Where to?” Imad answered, “We must flee far away so that the children and the buildings are not harmed.” The Sheikh’s face darkened. “Are the children and the buildings more precious than you?” he thundered. “No, by God! You will not leave! If they are truly coming, then each of you will take position in one of my four sons’ homes. Barricade yourselves inside, stand your ground, and fire every bullet you have. What will be, will be. Nothing shall unfold except what God has written.” Imad hesitated. “But, Hajji—” “Enough, Imad!” the Sheikh interrupted. “As long as I draw breath, you will not flee this house at the first sign of danger. We do not yet know if they have come for us or if it is merely a routine patrol. Sit down. Wait. We will see.” He strode outside to assess the situation. The Mujahideen remained on edge, preparing for battle. Moments later, the Sheikh returned, his expression calm. “They’ve gone. A routine patrol—it has nothing to do with you. Sit down, sit down, and tell me of your operations. Come, Imad, sit here by my side.”

Meanwhile, my brother Mohammed noticed his chemistry student flipping through his books, his movements restless, his expression troubled. Mohammed approached him. “What are you looking for?” The young man looked up, startled, avoiding his gaze. “Nothing, nothing,” he murmured. Mohammed smiled knowingly. “Come now, don’t say ‘nothing.’ Just say you don’t want my help. You’re searching for something that weighs on your mind.” The student hesitated before sighing. “You’re right. I am looking for something specific, but never mind—I’ll manage.” Mohammed’s smile deepened. “Let me make it easier for you. You’re looking for a particular equation. It’s on page 131.” The young man blinked, astonished, as he hurriedly flipped through the book. His bewilderment grew. “How—how did you know?” “Turn to the page,” Mohammed said. “See for yourself.” The student obeyed. His eyes widened as they landed on the very equation he sought. “For God’s sake, how did you know?” Mohammed chuckled. “A young man who searches so intently, who hesitates when questioned, who conceals his purpose—if it were something ordinary, you would have answered me without hesitation. And the eyes, Yahya, they do not lie. Your eyes betray what stirs within you. You may seem calm—so composed that one might think a cat could steal your food without you noticing—but inside, a storm rages.” Yahya smiled faintly, shaking his head. “Believe me, I am not like that...” Mohammed laughed. “I have spoken the truth, Yahya. I have spoken the truth.”



## Chapter Twenty-Four

I graduated from university, earning a bachelor's degree in geology from the Faculty of Science. I applied for a position at the agency and waited for their response while continuing my work in construction as a full partner to Ibrahim. He spent less time on the job than I did, yet in the few hours he dedicated, his productivity equaled my own. I was content with our partnership, not merely because he was my cousin, childhood friend, and my sister's husband, nor only because I knew that his absences were justified by his noble role in organizing, planning, and supporting the resistance. Above all, I valued his unwavering dedication. When he worked, he accomplished in an hour what would take me hours to achieve, particularly as he handled the technical and intricate tasks that made everything easier for me and the laborers working alongside us.

The job itself was not of great importance to me, for construction provided a stable and excellent income. Its only drawback was the physical effort it demanded and the perception that it was a trade for those without university degrees. However, holding a bachelor's degree in geology with high distinction softened that notion in my mind.

My brother Hassan returned from exile in Marj al-Zuhur after spending nearly a year there. An agreement had been reached to divide the exiles into two groups—the first to return after a year, the second after two. Hassan was among the first group. We welcomed him home, and waves of well-wishers arrived to congratulate us. Many of them were his friends from the mosque, greeting him with warm handshakes before pulling him into tight embraces, pressing him to their chests again and again. His children played around him, overjoyed by their father's return, clinging to him with laughter and delight. His happiness grew whenever one of his friends playfully engaged with one of the children.

A few days after Hassan's return, a clash erupted between a group of mujahideen and the occupation forces on Victory Street in Gaza City. The most significant part of this event was the martyrdom of one of the fighters. More important still was the identity of the martyr—Yasser, Ibrahim's friend, the one who had first joined him in the construction trade.

I do not know how to describe my emotions, nor Ibrahim's, nor those of everyone in the camp. It was a storm of joy and sorrow, acceptance and fury, elation and grief.



We rejoiced for a man who had chosen his path, fulfilled his duty, and won the highest and most precious reward a man in our people's condition could desire. Yet, we mourned his absence, for his departure left a void not easily filled—one that no other could replace.

The moment we heard the news, a single sharp tear fell upon Ibrahim's cheek. He wiped it away swiftly, as if to conceal it, then said, "Praise be to Allah, who honored him with martyrdom. By God, Yasser deserved it. We ask Allah to accept him among the righteous and the martyrs."

Without delay, we rushed to fulfill our duty—to stand by his family. We set up a large canopy covered with tarpaulin, arranged chairs, and sat alongside his relatives and neighbors to receive the waves of mourners. I saw his mother and wife in a strange state—tears threatened to overtake them, yet they struggled against them. My mother sat beside them, offering comfort when it should have been the other way around. One of them whispered, "Praise be to Allah, he attained the highest honor... Praise be to Allah." They recalled how he had always insisted that no one should weep for him. "Martyrs are not mourned," he would say. "No condolences should be offered for them. They are to be sent off with ululations, and their families congratulated on their martyrdom." And so, the women's ululations rang out, yet I could not hold back my tears. I marveled at their resilience—for our people had long wept for martyrs, but now, they were bidding them farewell with celebratory cries. More astonishing still, trays of baklava were being passed around to those who had come to pay their respects. The mourners hesitated, caught between words of condolence and expressions of congratulations.

While we sat in the mourning tent, a large convoy of occupation vehicles stormed the gathering. Some of their jeeps crashed through the tent, bringing it down and shattering chairs. A fierce confrontation erupted between the crowd and the soldiers. But after they withdrew, we rebuilt the tent, and the stream of mourners resumed as if uninterrupted. That day, large colored posters of the martyr were distributed, and people competed to obtain one. His image soon covered the alley walls of the camp, so that no matter where you walked, his face was there before you. Many framed the posters and hung them at the entrance of their guest rooms. But Ibrahim did not hang a picture. When I asked him why he wouldn't display an image of his dearest friend, he simply said, "It is hung deep within my soul, Ahmad."

His wife was expecting a child. He looked at me and said, "If it's a boy, I will name him Yasser, God willing."

That weekend, Yahya left Birzeit, returning to his village. After visiting his family, he went to the mosque for the afternoon prayer. There, he met a friend, and together, they set out to meet some of the pursued mujahideen who had taken refuge in the village.

They sat in that room, in the basement of one of the houses, as Yahya began to explain that after thorough research, he had discovered a way to produce a certain type of explosive... They cried out in admiration, astonishment, and even disbelief. Yahya continued, explaining that the essential materials for its preparation were readily available and easy to obtain—a type of chemical fertilizer and acetone. Without delay, some of them rushed to gather the necessary supplies. Yahya and two of his comrades devoted themselves to preparing the substance, mixing the ingredients gently. Pungent fumes rose, forcing one of them to step outside for fresh air, while Yahya remained, unwavering.

Once the materials were ready, they packed the mixture into a metal cylinder. The three of them carried it to a secluded area between the mountains. They shattered the glass of a light bulb, inserted its filament into the packed material inside the cylinder, and extended an electric wire from it. Then, they retreated dozens of meters, lowering their heads and pressing their fingers into their ears. Yahya touched the wire's ends to the battery's terminals—yet nothing happened. No grand explosion, no faint detonation.

His two companions exchanged glances before turning to him, as if to say: What happened? Where was the explosion you had been raving about? One of them rushed toward the device to kick it with his foot, but Yahya shouted at him, warning him of the gravity of the situation and urging him not to act recklessly. Disconnecting the wires from the battery, he grabbed a long branch, stripped it of its leaves, and crawled forward cautiously. Sweat dripped from his brow as he pushed at the cylinder several times, remaining flat on his stomach, never lifting his head. Only after confirming that it was inactive did he sit back.

His companions joined him, examining the device. They found that the ignition wire—the tungsten filament—had been severed. Yahya smiled, saying, “Didn’t I tell you...?” The issue, then, was merely a technical malfunction. At once, one of his comrades rushed back to town to bring not one, but two larger bulbs. They shattered the glass and positioned the filaments so that if one failed, the other would complete the circuit.

They connected the wires and retreated, lying flat behind a rocky outcrop. Yahya grinned, saying, “Now, cover your ears.” As soon as they did, he touched the wires to the battery terminals. A thunderous explosion erupted, followed by shards of rock flying in all directions. The three of them sprang to their feet, fleeing before the occupation forces and their intelligence agents could be drawn to the sound. His companions embraced him, and Zuhdi exclaimed, “Now we’ll make plenty of these and place them in the path of the patrols. We’ll make them suffer.”

Yahya smiled and said, “No, we will not place them in the path of the patrols.” Zuhdi looked at him in astonishment. “Then where will we put them? And why have we exhausted ourselves with all this effort if we’re not going to use them in our operations against the occupation?” Yahya smiled again. “This occupier, who has been killing us for years since the start of the intifada—without mercy, without regard for the blood of our martyrs, whether men or women, old or young, even sparing neither children nor infants—must now pay the highest price imaginable. He must understand that we are capable of striking deep into his core. We must land blows under the belt—on the stomach and face—not just on the armored, fortified limbs.” Zuhdi hesitated before asking, “Do you mean operations inside?” Yahya’s smile widened. “Yes. Precision operations. Strong, decisive strikes that balance the years of killings they have committed while we had nothing but stones and sticks.”

Yahya immersed himself in preparing the materials, while Zuhdi searched for a target. Eventually, he found a group of young men who knew of a nightclub where hundreds of Israelis gathered on Friday nights—many of them returning from their military units stationed in the occupied territories. The charges were assembled, loaded into a car, and two young men set off to deliver them to the target. As they neared the location, they encountered an accident scene—police officers swarming the area, their movements unusual. The driver panicked, believing the commotion was aimed at them. Suddenly, the police appeared, and a chase erupted through the streets. Abdel Raouf cried out, “If only the explosives were ready to detonate right now!” His companion shouted back, “The important thing is that we escape—or at least one of us does!” Then he yelled, “At the first turn, I’ll slow down. Open the door and throw yourself out—pretend you were just walking along the roadside.” Abdel Raouf screamed, “And you?” “You have to survive! If at least one of us makes it, that’s enough!”

The prisons and detention centers overflowed with captives, forcing the occupation authorities to open even more. One of these was Al-Dhahiriya Prison, surrounded by barbed wire, watchtowers, rifles, and heavy machine guns. Its tents teemed with detainees, all burning with the desire for freedom, longing to return to the intifada and the resistance beyond its walls. Not far from the prison, a young man crouched behind an embankment, pulling a wire cutter from his pocket. He tied it to a thin yet sturdy rope about a meter long. Gripping one end of the rope, he let the cutter dangle from the other, then began whirling it in swift circles, just like a slingshot. As its speed increased, the cutter gained momentum, hurtling toward the prison’s courtyard—until, finally, he let go. The wire cutter flew through the air, landing beyond the fence, deep inside the compound...

From inside one of the tents, a pair of eyes watched intently, filled with caution and determination, awaiting the signal from outside to complete the mission. In the pitch darkness, a faint light flickered twice. The owner of those eyes brought a hand to his mouth, muffling a whisper filled with quiet ecstasy: “Praise be to Allah, praise be to Allah.”

At dawn, Jihad sat upright on his cot. He had not slept the entire night, though he had feigned slumber. His eyes never left the courtyard. As the morning count ended and the detainees streamed outside to relieve themselves and wash their faces, he was the first to reach the yard. His gaze swept over the ground until he spotted the wire cutter. He bent down, picked it up, concealed it beneath his clothing, and melted into the gathering. When night fell, he crawled toward a secluded section of the fence, a spot not easily visible from the nearby watchtower.

Reaching for the cutter tucked into his belt, he carefully severed the barbed wire, creating a gap just wide enough to slip through. He moved swiftly, his breath steady, his hands sure. Four others followed, sliding into the night. Just a few more feet separated them from freedom. They crawled in silence until they were far enough from the prison wall, then one by one, they leapt to their feet, embracing each other, inhaling the crisp air of liberation.

Before dawn, three of them reached the outskirts of Hebron, where they found a trusted acquaintance who ushered them to a hiding place, securing food, water, and blankets before hurrying off to locate their missing comrades—those scattered in the chaos of the occupation’s pursuit. By nightfall, the brothers had reunited in their hideout, rifles clutched in their hands. They embraced one another with fervor, and then, with even greater fervor, they embraced their weapons. They sat together, preparing for what lay ahead.

The execution of collaborators—those suspected of working with the occupation’s intelligence—continued. Every so often, another body was found, abandoned or displayed in the streets. Some were tied up and whipped in the public squares, while others were executed outright. Voices among intellectuals began calling for a reassessment of this practice, urging its reconsideration or cessation. Yet among the resistance fighters, there was no doubt about its necessity. Some saw it as a matter of justice—those who aided the enemy had to be eliminated. Others viewed it as a strategic imperative—resistance and survival depended on purging the community of informants. Put simply, the success of the struggle hinged on uprooting the eyes through which the occupier spied upon them from within.



A great deal of controversy erupted in various circles surrounding this issue. The supportive side presents the aforementioned considerations, while the opposition believes that there is significant exaggeration and that this is an internal decay that must be halted. As voices rose demanding an end to the intifada, it became difficult to distinguish between these two voices; they seemed to blend into one. It appeared that some adopted the viewpoint of stopping the intifada while simultaneously halting the phenomenon of killings under the pretext of collaboration with the occupation.

Such debates often arose during my brother Mahmoud's meetings with his friends, which took place in our guest room. In truth, there was a clear excess in this phenomenon, and what was more alarming was the absence of a national reference; in most cases, there were no organizational references to issue decisions. Decisions remained in the hands of groups of mostly enthusiastic youths, without any oversight from higher responsible authorities. Furthermore, any oversight of a judicial, legal, or human rights nature was entirely absent from the matter. Some knowledgeable and informed individuals, like Mahmoud, raised such ideas, but it was evident that implementing them was closer to impossible due to subjective considerations in the resistance—its factions, cells, and differences—and objective considerations related to the circumstances imposed by the occupation, along with associated arrests, assassinations, and the disappearance of opinion holders into prisons or exile. However, it was undeniably clear that continuing this phenomenon without regulation was a significant error. There was no doubt that efforts were not made by officials, intellectuals, and legal experts to find the optimal solution for the regulated continuation of addressing the phenomenon with the least possible degree of killings and avoiding the ugly and repulsive image that emerged from it.

The name "Imad" became on everyone's lips, turning into a symbol of heroism and resistance, so much so that Israeli media began to take special interest in him. The Israeli Prime Minister, Rabin, referred to him as "the ghost" and pressured his military and security leaders to bring his head.

In contrast, the occupying forces began to implement new security measures to maintain their safety and security. It was announced that no vehicle driven by an Arab should overtake any Israeli military vehicle or approach it, maintaining a distance of no less than fifty meters. If Arab vehicles attempted to approach or overtake, they would be met with firearms and fired upon. Additionally, no Israeli vehicle was allowed to move in the Gaza Strip without military escort.

Then, the movement of any military vehicle alone was prohibited, with the minimum movement requiring at least two military vehicles, along with various forms of oppression against the citizens, arrests, raids, and gunfire at the slightest suspicion or even less.

Information reached about a military patrol consisting of two jeeps moving in the Jabalia camp next to the cemetery towards the army camp in the area, around the time near the beginning of the night. Imad and his brothers planned the operation and ambushed the jeeps in the alleys of the camp. One was positioned in an advanced alley toward the convoy, while two were in a rear alley, both overlooking the road usually taken by the vehicles. They allowed the first vehicle to pass, bypassing the entrance to the alleys, and just before the second vehicle reached the entrance of the second alley, the first of the three emerged, firing at the back of the first jeep. The other two opened fire on the second jeep face-to-face, stepping onto the road and beginning to shoot, just three meters away from the jeep. The soldiers were unable to return fire, not even a single shot. The three soldiers in the second vehicle, which veered off the road, were killed, and the soldiers in the first vehicle were injured. The three then retreated through the narrow alleys to a waiting car on the other side, which drove them away from the camp.

The reinforcements, curfews, arrests, and investigations continued as usual, yielding no results. Rabin was forced to cut his visit to Washington short and returned immediately upon hearing news of the operation. The fighters retreated to Al-Nasr Street in Gaza, where Ibrahim was waiting for them in his car. They got into his car after hiding the one used for the operation, and he drove them to a new house they would take refuge in, located in the Shuja'iyya neighborhood, east of Gaza City. Ibrahim got out and knocked on the door, which was opened by a young boy. Upon seeing Ibrahim, he asked, "Did they come with you?" Ibrahim replied, "Yes," and the boy rushed into the house before returning after a minute, saying, "Please, come in... welcome, welcome!" His face flushed with excitement as time passed. He ran out again, returned running, and welcomed them once more, clearly unsure of what to do due to his overwhelming emotion, while Ibrahim looked at his brothers and smiled, and they smiled back.

The boy sat next to them on the mat spread out on the floor and said, "I'm Nidal. Welcome, you have honored us." Ibrahim replied, "May God increase your honor. You know I'm Ibrahim, and this is Ahmad, this is Khalid, and this is Imad." The boy became excited again and said, "You're Imad! Welcome, welcome!" He added, "My mother is

To come and get to know you, the fighters looked at Ibrahim, for he was the one who knew the people and held the decision. He nodded affirmatively. Nidal ran off and returned with his father and mother following him. The father was tall and robust, with kindness evident on his face; he greeted the group with peace as he entered, shaking hands with the young men. The mother stood by the door, wrapped in her white garments, covering her head, radiating dignity. She did not shake hands but welcomed them with boundless words of hospitality.

Nidal began to introduce her to the guests, nearly bursting with pride over his distinguished visitors. The parents welcomed the guests warmly. Nidal's mother took a step back, saying, "I will go finish preparing dinner. Make yourselves comfortable, my children. Consider yourselves at home, and whatever food or drink comes to mind, just ask... May God protect and care for you." She left, while Nidal's father sat down, welcoming the young men and getting to know them.

After a while, Nidal's mother returned, carrying a tray of food, with small squabs perched atop the rice. Nidal jumped up to take some food and placed it before the young men, saying, "Please, help yourselves!" Nidal's mother exited, exclaiming, "Enjoy your meal!" and the gathering began to eat. The food was not only delicious but also infused with the love that filled the hearts of this middle-class Palestinian family, just like many others in their support for the resistance and its men. Whenever one of the young men showed a desire to stop eating, Nidal's father offered him another bite, pressing him to eat more and more. They were soon full and got up to wash their hands, while Nidal carried the tray outside to place it before his siblings and mother, who were sitting in another room enjoying their dinner as well.

The interrogation cells at the Moskobiya detention center in Jerusalem were bustling with detainees, with guards pulling one man to the interrogation room and returning another from a different room. The interrogators asked questions, struck, tortured, and threatened to extract any information about the fighters, activists of the uprising, or any piece of weaponry.

In one of the rooms, an interrogating officer was negotiating with one of the young men, promising him that if he agreed to cooperate with them, he would be released from prison immediately. They would drop the sentence that the court would impose if he went there, and after his brothers testified against him, he could face ten years in prison. The officer began to pressure him, alternating between intimidation and incentives, as the young man's face flushed redder and redder. A young man in the early stages of life, with limited experience, was a target for recruitment as an Israeli intelligence agent, but the young man refused. Finally, the intelligence officer pressured him until the young man announced his agreement. The officer shook his hand, assuring him that they were now friends.

He went out to prepare plates of fruit and sweets, placing them in front of the young man and inviting him to eat with his close friend, while a third friend filmed the young man as he enjoyed the fruit beside the officer, who joked and laughed with him. The officer then told him that after a few days, he would be taken to court, and from there, the judge would decide to release him, making everything appear reasonable and avoiding any suspicions.

He provided him with a phone number to call if necessary and informed him of an apartment address in Jerusalem, instructing him to come there at ten in the morning at the beginning of the next month. He returned to his home in the Aida refugee camp near Bethlehem, where family, neighbors, and friends came to greet him and congratulate him on his safety.

As soon as the greetings and congratulations ended, he went to his sheikh and mentor at the mosque to inform him of the situation, asserting that he had only done this to teach that fool a lesson he would never forget. The sheikh nodded in agreement. Maher then went to his cousins, Nasser and Mahmoud, to share the plan and seek their assistance in carrying it out. They asked him about the location, time, and necessary details, and the three of them committed to doing it at the scheduled time.

Maher carried a hammer, while the others hid kitchen knives in their clothing. They set off for Jerusalem, reaching the building and entering until they stood at the door of the apartment. Maher stood in front of the door, with Nasser to his right and Mahmoud to his left. Maher pressed the doorbell, and the intelligence officer opened the door with a smile, saying, "Come in, come in," while turning inside and instructing them to close the door behind them.

Maher pulled the hammer from behind his back and struck the officer at the back of his head, causing him to collapse. The three of them then jumped on him, beating and stabbing him before quietly leaving the scene.

Maher fled far from home, fully aware that they would come to arrest him. As evening fell, the camp was besieged, and a wave of arrests began, following the announcement of the intelligence officer's death.

Large forces from the occupying army, led by several intelligence officers, raided the village of Rafat, surrounding Abu Yahya's house and storming it while shouting, "Where is Yahya?" Yahya was not home; after hearing the news about what had happened, he stopped sleeping at the house and rarely visited, leaving quickly whenever he did. The soldiers searched the house, turning it upside down, seizing all his books, papers, and equipment, and took his father for questioning.



After days of investigation, he was released. As for Yahya, he moved to Nablus, disappearing among some of his brothers until the storm calmed down. He then began contacting many young men to form them into resistance cells, starting his work in the cities and towns of northern West Bank—one group in Nablus, another in Anabta, a third in Tubas, and a fourth in Jenin.

Since he was wanted by the occupation forces, he agreed with the leaders of the groups one by one to contact him through dead drops. They would coordinate a specific location for exchanging written messages, which a young man, who was neither known nor wanted by the occupation forces, would deliver to him.

In the southern West Bank, the al-Arroub camp lies along the main road connecting Bethlehem to Hebron. The camp's youth gather at the home of one of their own, "Mohammed," to celebrate his release after a period of detention in the Negev prison. They congratulate and bless him. As soon as the visitors leave and the house empties, and the movement of people in the camp subsides, Mohammed puts on his winter jacket, covers his head with a red keffiyeh, and sneaks out of the house. Once outside, he tries to hide his face in case he encounters anyone on the way.

He arrives at one of the houses and knocks gently on the door in a steady rhythm. The door opens, and "Khaled," a young man in his twenties with a light beard that adds an extra touch of elegance, appears. Khaled asks if he has taken the car out, to which Mohammed responds, "Yes, quickly, we don't have much time." Khaled takes out his car, and Mohammed sits beside him. The car takes off towards the south, heading for Hebron, passing through the center of Hebron before continuing west, leaving Hebron for the town of Beit Awwa.

Khaled stops at one of the houses and gets out to knock on the door. A young man answers, and Khaled speaks a few words with him. Another man emerges from the house, greeting Khaled and conversing briefly, before getting into the car with him. They drive off, and the man directs them to the road they should take. He points to a nearby house, saying, "Stop here," then gets out of the car, telling them to wait a moment while he goes down to the house. As he examines the surroundings, he knocks on the door, and a person answers. After speaking with him, he returns to the car, asking Khaled and Mohammed to get out and accompany him to the house.

They enter a room where five young men are sitting, two of whom escaped from Megiddo prison some time ago. Upon seeing Mohammed, they jump to their feet to greet him with hugs. Everyone sits down, and one of them asks, "When were you released?" Khaled replies, "Today." Laughter fills the room, and one of them remarks, "Mohammed is like fire; he couldn't wait until tomorrow!" Mohammed smiles and responds, "How could I bear to wait? I swear, if it weren't for my love for the people..."

And my appreciation for them and their coming to greet me made me leave the house immediately after greeting my father and brothers. The young men laughed, and one of them said, "Take it easy, O Abu Rushdi." Mohammed replied, "What's important is that, thank God, I found you right away. What's the news? What do you have? How many fighters do we have with us? What's the status of the ammunition? The shelters? How prepared are the people to host you? Are there any targeted objectives? What? How? When?" The young men smiled, waiting for him to pause from his questions. One of the young men, with a smile that never left his lips, said, "Our situation is good, O Leader. Our situation is good; we were just waiting for your joining us." He began to share the latest updates they had.

I received the acceptance for the job at the preparatory school for refugees, where I started working right away. My mother immediately began talking to me about marriage. Instantly, the image of that girl I had started to love crossed my mind, the one I used to watch on the way to the university. I had stopped thinking about her since Ibrahim spoke to me about the one true love. I wondered to myself: Is she still available, not married, and hasn't anyone proposed to her? I needed to check on that because if she was still as she was, my wish would come true. I prayed to God in my heart to make her mine.

We had begun spending the early part of our night in my mother's room. Anyone among us who was at home in the evening would come to the mother's room, bringing their wives, who of course covered their heads, except for Mariam, who was with her husband and siblings. They came with their children, both boys and girls. Sometimes we all gathered together, and sometimes only a few of us would come. We would sit, talk, and watch the news on television, discussing it, enjoying sunflower seeds, and sometimes someone would bring some fruits or sweets. One of the women would get up to make us tea or sahlab. We spent our evenings together, debating and sometimes arguing, differing at times, and rarely agreeing on the same stance regarding the same issue amid the ideological contradictions in the house. After a while, each of us would return to our apartments, usually carrying the children who had fallen asleep in their fathers' arms or in their mothers' laps.

A large force from the army, led by the intelligence officers of Hebron, arrived to close the homes of the cell that had previously been arrested in Hebron following military operations against the occupation soldiers. They came to Um Jamil's house, stormed it, and began throwing the family's belongings outside while some soldiers sealed the windows and doors. An intelligence officer shoved Um Jamil, who was trying to hold onto her home and refusing to leave. He pushed her hard, causing her to fall to the ground. She raised her hand to the sky, saying in a voice loud enough for God to hear, "May it be the last days of your life, and God willing, the youth of the brigades will kill you."

After a few days, an intelligence officer sped through the terrain in his modern car, while a speeding vehicle, carrying a number of fighters with their rifles ready, attempted to overtake him. As the second car advanced, three machine guns opened fire from it, turning the vehicle and its occupants into a mass of destruction.

Days later, the fighters lay in ambush for a settler rabbi's car in Hebron and its surroundings. As it approached, they sprayed it with gunfire, causing it to overturn in the valley, killing him and injuring his companion before the fighters fled to hide.

The operations of the fighters continued in the Hebron area and the surrounding villages. Whenever they received information about a target belonging to the occupying army or the settlers, they would lie in wait behind the scattered rocks along the roads or quickly overtake a vehicle passing within mere centimeters of them, transforming it into a mass of flames, death, and suffering. They attacked numerous military jeeps, many ordinary settler vehicles, and various buses transporting settlers or soldiers between settlements and Jerusalem.

Every day, there were shooting incidents and casualties, and not a few days passed without the occupation forces receiving a blow here or a strike there. They were hit in the south, prompting them to mobilize forces there, closing off areas, besieging, arresting, and imposing curfews. When they received a blow in the north, they rushed to the north; then came hits from the east or west—dozens of operations resulting in numerous fatalities. The fighters had split into two groups: one in Hebron and the southern villages, and the other in Hebron and the northern villages. The strikes came in rapid succession, with each team continuing the work of their brothers in the other team.

There, in the al-Merj al-Zuhur camp in southern Lebanon, Jamal lay on his bed, one leg crossed over the other, his foot shaking with delight as he listened to the news, chuckling softly with confidence. He addressed his friend Abdul Rahman, “Didn’t I tell you? Didn’t I tell you?” Abdul Rahman asked, “What did you say, Sheikh Jamal?” Jamal replied, “Do you remember that story I told you on the mountainside in Suweif when we came to visit you, and your older brother brought us food and sat talking with us?” Abdul Rahman responded, “I vaguely recall the incident, but I don't remember the story unless you mention it. What is the story, and what did you say?” Jamal said, smiling, “The story I told you that day is about when I was a child, and the Jews occupied Hebron in 1967, moving through the city freely, without any objections or confrontations. I picked up a stone from the ground and threw it at one of the Jews before fleeing behind the apple trees.”

After a while, I heard one of the neighborhood boys calling me, asking me to come out, saying that the Jew had left the area. When I stepped outside, I found... Abdul Rahman interrupted, "I remember! When you went out, you found the Jew brandishing his pistol, threatening you and scaring you." Jamal replied, "Exactly."

Abdul Rahman asked, "What reminded you of that?" Jamal responded, "What reminds me is what we are witnessing in Hebron these days—continuous acts of resistance that seem never-ending, despite the martyrs, the siege, the curfews, and the collective punishments."

"Hebron today is not the Hebron of twenty-five years ago. That Hebron wanted to live in peace, to earn a living, and to build wealth. It was careful not to clash with the occupation or the settlers, even though they left no one of us in peace. As for today's Hebron, it is Hebron of jihad, resistance, and martyrdom..." He sighed, saying, "Do you see, Jamal, how steady work, patience, and a small flame can ripen matters and bring about change?" Abdul Rahman smiled and said, "You are right, and thank God that our efforts have not been in vain. Do you not see the fighting generation ready to sacrifice? Praise be to God." Jamal smiled and said, "What comes next, Abdul Rahman? What do you foresee? This is just the beginning, and by God's will, what is to come will be much greater. I truly see the coming days, with our land ablaze under the feet of the occupiers, and I see them cursing the day they set foot on our land and occupied our sanctities."





## Chapter Twenty-Five

One evening, while we were chatting in my mother's room, Ibrahim said, "I'm thinking of going with Maryam and the kids for a week to Ramallah, to visit Muhammad and change the atmosphere!" Mahmoud and Hassan's wives replied in unison that it was a great idea, while Mahmoud and Hassan remained silent. My mother, however, was watching Ibrahim's face closely, trying to read what his unspoken words revealed. It was as if he sensed her concerns and spoke directly to her, "What do you think, Aunt? How about you come with us? We can visit them for a few days, enjoy our time in Ramallah and the West Bank, and then return." She seemed reassured by his invitation and replied, "I'm too old and not able to travel anymore, so you all go if you want." Maryam encouraged her, saying, "Come on, Mom, it's not tiring at all. The car will take you right from our doorstep to theirs." Then she turned to Ibrahim, asking, "We're going in our car, right, Ibrahim?" He answered, "Whenever you want, tomorrow if you like, or any time you prefer—after a day or a week." She replied, "Let me think until morning, and I'll let you know then."

The next day, my mother declined the invitation to go, wishing them well on their journey as Ibrahim, his wife, and daughter set off for Ramallah. Along the way, Ibrahim pointed out the areas they passed through to Maryam and Esra. They stopped on the road, where he got out of the car holding Yasser, explaining to him and his mother and sister, "This is the land of our homeland from which my grandfather, father, and uncle were displaced—the land of our town, Falouja." They lingered for a while before resuming their drive, eventually arriving in Ramallah, where Muhammad and his wife welcomed them warmly. They spent their first night enjoying each other's company before going to bed. The next morning, Ibrahim offered to drive Muhammad to university, despite Muhammad's attempts to dissuade him. Ibrahim insisted, justifying that it would give him a chance to see and familiarize himself with the university.

Muhammad got out of the car to go to his classes. Ibrahim parked the car, locked it, and began to stroll among the students, examining their faces. He spotted a young man whom he believed might help him find what he was looking for. After asking the student for directions, he was guided toward a specific area. He entered one of the cafeterias and approached a table where some young men were sitting, some of whom had beards. He greeted them and inquired about his purpose. One of them stood up to guide him. Ibrahim followed him until he was led to a young man he clearly recognized. As soon as he saw him, he thanked the young man and approached "Salah," who received him with great warmth. They spoke for a while before parting ways, with the hope that Salah would join him shortly at his car. Ibrahim returned to his car and waited inside.

After a short while, Salah returned with another young man, who entered the car beside him while the other sat in the back. The car set off at a slow speed, as the conversation inside was the main purpose, rather than traveling to a specific destination. After about half an hour of discussion, Ibrahim handed the new young man, Mo'men, a bundle of cash. Mo'men took it and concealed it in his pocket, then Ibrahim turned the car around and headed back to the university, where he dropped off the two young men before returning to Ramallah, where he strolled around until Muhammad came back from the university and then went home.

Mo'men finished his school day and drove back to his home in the town of Beit Hanina, near Jerusalem. In the evening, he went to the mosque to pray the Maghrib prayer, where he met one of his friends. They spoke privately about a topic that seemed very serious. Afterward, Mo'men headed to visit another friend. He knocked on the door, and that friend came out, and they walked together in the quiet street, with Mo'men speaking earnestly and with great concern, while his friend listened attentively and nodded in agreement.

The next day, Mo'men went to the university, where he met Salah and told him that he was ready. The cell was now prepared to operate since he had confirmed his companions' readiness to work. Salah then headed to Ramallah to inform Ibrahim of this. Ibrahim drove with him to Birzeit, where they met Mo'men. Ibrahim handed Mo'men a small box, shook his hand, and wished him good luck and success.

In the evening, Mo'men and his two friends took one of their cars, owned by the company where one of them worked in Jerusalem, an Israeli company that had Hebrew writings on it. They set out on a reconnaissance mission on the public roads around the city of Jerusalem. On the first day, they headed north, and on the second day, they went south, checking the level of security measures taken by the occupation forces and police, the flow of vehicles and pedestrians, and the presence of solitary soldiers by the roadside and at bus stops. Whenever one of them noticed something along the way, he would alert the others.

Days later, the three set out in the car again, with Mo'men sitting in the back seat, one of his friends behind the wheel, and the other beside him in the front seat. The car drove from Beit Hanina southward, moving away from the Arab area. Each of them pulled out a small cap from his pocket, the kind worn by Jews and religious individuals, and placed it on their heads as they set out in search of a suitable target. By the roadside stood a soldier in his military uniform.

With a rifle in hand, he signals to passing cars, hoping one will take him along. Mu'min rests his head against the seat, appearing as though he is asleep from exhaustion.

When a car stops, the soldier leans out from the front window, asking the driver in Hebrew about the designated checkpoint, to which Hassan replies in Hebrew, "Get in." He opens the back door and enters the vehicle. After a few minutes of driving, as the radio plays Hebrew songs, Mu'min draws his gun and points it at the soldier, his hand on his weapon to prevent its use. Abdul Karim turns towards him, brandishing a knife, urging him not to move for his own safety. Yet, he attempts to break free, trying to seize the rifle. Mu'min fires several shots at him, and Abdul Karim stabs him multiple times. They take his automatic M16 rifle and place a large paper on his waist declaring the battalions' responsibility for his abduction and killing, then throw him by the roadside where he rolls into one of the ravines.

Abdul Rahim recognizes Muhammad Abu Roshdi, the commander of the battalions in the southern West Bank regions of Hebron, Bethlehem, and Fureidis. Abdul Rahim heads to his hometown, Surif, feeling as though the world no longer has room for him. He counts the hours and minutes until the week passes, hoping for a practical meaning to his joining the ranks of the mujahideen.

The next day, clashes erupt in the town with the occupation forces who have come to arrest a young man. The townspeople respond with stones, injuring many soldiers with their projectiles. As the darkness of that night descends and envelops the town, large forces of the occupation army and intelligence arrive, beginning a widespread arrest campaign among the town's youth. A significant army unit storms my aunt's house and arrests Abdul Rahim after conducting a thorough search, finding nothing but a few papers and documents that could easily be justified as having been found in the street, just like many others.

My aunt Fathia goes frantic at the arrest of her beloved son and the light of her eyes. All her attempts to hold on to him as they dragged him from the house are in vain, but what comforts her slightly is that Abdul Rahim has become a man, and she no longer fears for him. He remained calm and composed when they arrested him, a man in every sense of the word. His words to her as he stood at the threshold of the door, "O mother, do not worry about me; I have become a man," echo in her ears, offering her solace as she prays for his safety and swift return.

Abdul Rahim was taken to the Negev detention center, where he was sentenced to six months of administrative detention. During this time, he became acquainted with many young men, sheikhs, and preachers, gaining substantial benefits from the cultural and educational magazines available, as well as from extensive reading.

Abu Roshdi and his brothers intensified their attacks on the patrols of the occupation forces and their settlers in the region. Not a single day passed without an assault on one of these patrols or settlers. Sometimes they employed the tactic of using a bypass vehicle, while at other times, they lay in ambush for their targets by the roadside, hidden behind the rocks scattered across the slopes of the mountains and the bottoms of the valleys. The occupiers would find themselves under a heavy barrage of fire from the mujahideen, with casualties here and fatalities there.

After the arrest of some mujahideen due to intense intelligence operations by the enemy and its army in the area, Abu Roshdi's name, along with that of some key brothers, became known to the occupation forces. These forces, led by intelligence officers, launched several raids on his family home in attempts to apprehend him, but to no avail. He had already bid farewell to his family, telling them that he would rarely return home and that his absence could extend for a long time. He began to move through the nearby mountains or in the villages, hiding and sleeping at the homes of friends or kind-hearted individuals who hurried to provide shelter and support to the resistance fighters, eager to earn merit and reward for their actions.

One evening, we sat in my mother's room, sipping tea and snacking on watermelon seeds while discussing various matters. When it was time for the news, Muhammad turned on the television, and the news report announced that leaked information indicated secret negotiations had been ongoing for a long time between the Palestinians, represented by delegates from the Palestine Liberation Organization, and Israel, in one of the European capitals, with both sides nearing a possible agreement.

Faiza called out to "Hassan" and began to mock the negotiators, expressing her disdain for such discussions. She firmly believed it was unacceptable to negotiate with the Jews under any circumstances, asserting that such actions would mean recognizing Israel and its right to exist on Palestinian land, insisting that no Palestinian, regardless of their identity, should engage in such actions.



Mamdouh expressed his astonishment at Hassan's position, bewildered by the inclusion of religion in such matters, which he deemed political. He believed that politicians assess situations and take necessary actions, questioning the purpose of Hassan and the Islamic movement in this intifada, along with its accompanying activities, martyrs, and sacrifices. Was this effort a futile endeavor, without aim or purpose—simply dying for the sake of dying? Or was it for a specific objective? He concluded that the intifada must have clear, defined, and reasonable political goals, and that an unpoliticized gun was a form of suicide and a pointless effort. Ibrahim asked him what he considered to be clear and reasonable objectives. Mamdouh responded that it was to implement international legitimacy resolutions calling for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the lands occupied in 1999. Hassan yelled, “Does that mean we recognize Israel’s right to more than 75% of historical Palestine in exchange for its withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the establishment of a Palestinian state there?” Mamdouh replied, “Yes, and what more do you want?” Hassan shouted, “I want more than that! Israel is an occupying state that has taken our land and must cease to exist!” Mamdouh smiled and said, “Who says Israel shouldn't disappear? But we’re not discussing grand slogans now; we’re talking about reality and the political facts of the stage we’re in. The reality is that the world is not serious about resolving our issue justly, achieving our goals, and the Arabs are unable to do anything decisive. As Palestinians, we lack the capacity to...” Hassan interjected angrily, “Who says we lack the capacity? Don’t you see that in two years we’ve killed hundreds of them?” Mamdouh laughed, “And what does killing hundreds mean? They’ve killed many more of us!” Hassan shouted, “The important thing is that they’re now ready to change their stance! Didn’t you hear their politicians’ recent statements about their willingness to leave Gaza?” Mamdouh replied, “I’ve heard, and that’s what will happen. They’ll leave Gaza and the West Bank, and we’ll establish a Palestinian state there.” Ibrahim chimed in, “The problem, Mamdouh, isn’t in establishing a Palestinian state; there isn’t a single Palestinian who doesn’t want it. The problem lies in the price we’ll pay as a Palestinian people for the establishment of that state.” Mamdouh smirked sarcastically, “So, philosopher of the stage, do you think it’s possible to establish a state without recognizing Israel?” Ibrahim smiled and replied, “Yes.” Mamdouh yelled, “How? Who...?” Ibrahim interrupted, “It’s clear that the continuation of resistance and military actions causing human losses to the occupation, along with the popular intifada that inflicts political and media damage, will force it to withdraw from Gaza and the West Bank. Then we can establish a state on any piece of land from which the enemy withdraws.” Mamdouh once again smiled mockingly, “What’s the difference, philosopher?” Maryam shouted, “Why do you talk to him like that?” Before Mamdouh could respond, Ibrahim calmed her, saying, “Don’t be angry with Mamdouh. Let him act as he pleases; he’s like our father to us all.”

Mahmoud looked away in embarrassment and asked, “What’s the difference, Ibrahim?” Ibrahim responded, “The difference between Israel withdrawing from the West Bank and Gaza or any part of it, with or without an agreement, is significant. If they withdraw with an agreement, it means we, as Palestinians, will be obliged to commitments, at least recognizing their rights to the remaining parts of our land. However, if they withdraw without an agreement under the pressure of resistance, it means we haven’t committed to anything, and the door remains open for us to continue immediately or at a later time, when we find it suitable.” Mahmoud interjected, “This is how you think things are progressing. This is a political shortcoming; you don’t understand anything about politics or the reality surrounding us, our cause, or the entire Arab context. You know nothing about our subjective or objective conditions.”

Hassan jumped in, “You’re always like this, Mahmoud, attacking, generalizing, and using grand terms inappropriately. Our subjective, objective, dramatic, and ‘watermelon’ conditions!” Mahmoud laughed, “That’s exactly what I say, that you are politically ignorant, thinking about things too simply.” Hassan shouted, “Don’t call us ignorant or attack us; discuss respectfully without hostility.” At that moment, my mother intervened, saying, “Enough for tonight; go to your rooms. I want to sleep, and you’ve opened our heads with your political discussions.”

Yahya was hiding at a friend’s house in the village of Qarawat Bani Hassan, in the northern West Bank. During his time in hiding, he prepared some explosive devices, which were transported by some of his aides to the groups he had organized and agreed to work with. These groups would set them up along the routes of patrols or settlers, achieving some limited successes. However, this undoubtedly introduced a new component into the tools of battle. At the same time, the occupation forces would raid the family home from time to time, searching for Yahya in vain, turning everything in the house upside down, destroying and breaking things, and interrogating the parents, who had nothing to say about their son.

In ordinary times, away from the corner of the street overlooking the house, one of the young men stood suspiciously, watching the house most of the time, pretending to be occupied with something else, in a blatant manner. Yahya would sneak in from the back, entering the house through the window, kissing the hands and heads of his parents, greeting his infant child, and saying hello to his wife. He would then take a shower, change his clothes, and quickly return to his hiding place and work...

In Gaza, Ibrahim meets Imad and two other mujahideen at Abu Nidal's house. They sit alone in the room, where Nidal serves them tea before leaving, allowing them to discuss their private matters.

Ibrahim delivers a report on a dual patrol of the occupation forces, consisting of two jeep vehicles moving daily between six and seven in the morning along Al-Nasr Street, near Al-Shati Camp. He places a sheet of paper on the mat before them, displaying a rough sketch of the street and its branches. Holding a pen, he begins pointing: "This branch is blocked by concrete barrels set up by the occupation forces. This one could be used for a vehicle's retreat. This path is unpaved, unsuitable for cars. The patrol usually comes from the north and heads south, but sometimes, it moves in the opposite direction."

Ammar takes the pen from Ibrahim's hand and says, "There must be someone to signal the patrol's arrival and direction. We will divide into two groups: the first group will position itself here"—he marks a side branch leading west—"and the second group will be here," pointing to another branch further south. "The signaler will move along the main road between the two points, staying alert for the patrol's arrival and direction, relaying the information immediately, especially to the second group, which is farther from the patrol's entry point. Once the patrol arrives, the first group will allow the vehicles to pass, letting the first one through. The moment the second vehicle crosses, they will open fire on it. By then, the first vehicle will have reached the second group, which will attack it in turn. This way, both vehicles will be caught in the ambush, unable to support each other, each engulfed in the fire we unleash upon them."

"Today, we scout the location and identify escape routes. Tomorrow morning, we carry out the operation, God willing."

"Insha'Allah," they reply.

Ibrahim resumes, but Imad interrupts, "Tomorrow, I must join you. I can no longer bear intelligence work alone. I need to take part in some operations."

One of the men begins to protest, but Imad cuts him off, "No worries, Ibrahim. No worries. Meet us at five-thirty tomorrow morning."

At dawn, precisely on schedule, two men lie in wait at the first branch, two at the second, while a young man paces along the main road, pretending to wait for a ride to work. At the end of each side branch, a car sits idling, its driver behind the wheel, engine running, ready to move at a moment's notice.

The signaler finally announces the patrol's arrival: it is coming from the north.

And so, he joined the second group, making it five rifles now poised and ready. The first jeep passed in front of the first side street. As the second one reached the ambush point, two mujahideen sprang forward, sprinting toward the road's edge, unleashing a torrent of gunfire upon the vehicle as they ran behind it.

At the same moment, the three others emerged from the second branch onto the main street, where they confronted the first jeep and opened fire with their rifles. Each of the five fighters swapped out their magazines, unleashing a fresh barrage. The patrol's return fire was scattered, hurried—a handful of shots fired wildly. Both vehicles lurched, crashing into a wall. As the soldiers of the occupation bled out, the mujahideen retreated swiftly to their waiting cars, which glided away from the scene with unhurried ease.

Reinforcements arrived in force—troops, officers, intelligence agents, and medics flooding the street to assess the situation. Yet, beneath a small shrub in an orchard nearby, a young man lay in wait. From his concealed position, he hurled two hand grenades. The explosions ripped through the gathering, leaving behind a new toll of wounded.

Israeli political, military, and security leaders were in a frenzy. A commander slammed his fist onto the table, barking orders at his subordinate. "I want Imad's head, and I want it now! No delays! Every resource must be focused. Double the work hours, double the teams. Activate every asset. I want Imad Aqel's head on a platter!"

Meanwhile, Ibrahim went to his construction site, working alongside the laborers as if nothing had happened mere hours ago. He completed his shift by late afternoon, returned home, washed, changed his clothes, ate his meal, and played with his son and daughter. At sunset, he left for the mosque to perform the Maghrib prayer. Later, he drove away for a while before returning home sometime after the Isha prayer.

That night, in the National Conference Room at Umm's house, the conversation revolved around the morning's fedayeen operation. The name Imad was at the center of every whisper—his leadership, his audacity, the sheer courage of the fighters. Ibrahim sat silent, utterly detached, as if the matter had nothing to do with him.

When Mahmoud switched on the television for the news, the operation took center stage. Israeli officials made their statements—some spitting threats and vows of vengeance, others speaking of withdrawing from Gaza altogether, of abandoning it to its endless misfortunes.



Then came the next piece of news: reports of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations had been confirmed. Anonymous but well-informed sources stated that an agreement between the two sides was nearly finalized and ready for signing. The negotiations had taken place in the Norwegian capital, Oslo, under a veil of secrecy, and a transitional agreement was expected to be signed soon. Ibrahim remarked, "Don't you think you're being a bit too hasty and optimistic? Let's see the agreement first—if there even is one—before we judge it and form an opinion." Mahmoud responded, "Your stance has been clear from the beginning. You reject everything, whether it's right or wrong. That has been your position since the very start—opposing and refusing everything outright. I already know you'll reject any deal, any agreement. Opposition is all you know how to do."

When the news spoke of the soon-to-be-signed Oslo Accord—commonly referred to as "Gaza and Jericho First"—the Palestinian street split into two camps: supporters and opponents. Two massive demonstrations erupted in the refugee camp. Leading the pro-agreement march was my brother Mahmoud and his friends, while my brother Hassan and his companions headed the opposition rally. The demonstrators in support chanted, "Gaza and Jericho, the beginning... In Jerusalem, the end!" Meanwhile, the opposition thundered back, "Gaza and Jericho, a disgrace! The stench of betrayal fills the place!" The two protests surged in opposite directions, passing by the occupation forces' patrols, which stood watching the camp's upheaval unfold. The supporters threw olive branches at the jeeps while the soldiers held their rifles at the ready, wary that an opponent might have infiltrated the crowd—someone who could hurl a grenade, plant an explosive, or open fire. When the opposition protest passed, its participants pelted the patrols with stones, their chants swelling in defiance: "With our souls, with our blood, we sacrifice for you, Palestine!" "Jerusalem is ours—no to tyranny!" "Woe to them when the battle comes!" The soldiers retaliated, firing tear gas, rubber bullets, and plastic rounds.

At the moment when the two protests met, Mahmoud was hoisted onto shoulders in one march, while Hassan was carried aloft in the other. Each led their side's chants—one in support, the other in rejection. For a fleeting moment, their eyes locked across the crowd. The slogans grew fiercer, the voices thundered louder, and minor skirmishes broke out between some demonstrators on both sides. Meanwhile, on television screens across the world, the images of leaders signing the agreement in Oslo flickered into history.

On the rooftop of Musab bin Umair Mosque in the Zaytoun neighborhood of Gaza, a young boy—barely twenty—lay in wait, watching the road. Nearby, in an abandoned house close to the mosque, Imad and Ibrahim were concealed, waiting for the boy's signal. In Imad's hands rested a short-barreled M16 rifle, while Ibrahim held a Kalashnikov. Spare magazines were strapped to their sides. From a distance, an Israeli army jeep appeared, carrying three soldiers. The boy gave his first whistle—Imad and Ibrahim readied themselves. Then came the second whistle—the jeep had reached the abandoned house. They let it move forward another meter before unleashing a barrage of automatic fire.

The three soldiers collapsed forward onto their faces, while the jeep, still rolling, continued until it crashed into the doors of a storage facility across the road. Imad and Ibrahim dashed forward, swapping out their magazines for the second time as they ran, continuing to fire. By the time the vehicle came to a halt, they had reached it. Imad yanked one of the soldiers out of the jeep, pressed his foot against his throat, and fired a final shot into his head. Meanwhile, Ibrahim captured the scene—three shots, three images. They seized three new rifles before their getaway car arrived. They jumped in, and the vehicle sped away.

At the same time, on the main road between Hebron and Bethlehem, four fighters—led by Abu Rushdi—lay in wait behind a cluster of rocks. Each of them clutched an automatic rifle, poised for the arrival of any Israeli vehicle. A military bus, packed with soldiers, came into view. The moment it drew level with them, their rifles erupted in unison, unleashing an inferno of bullets. The bus lurched forward for several dozen meters before gradually veering to the side of the road. Their escape vehicle arrived at that very moment. The fighters clambered in, and the car shot off down a winding dirt path between the mountains. It traveled a great distance away from the site of the attack. Then, at a sharp curve in the rugged road, they spotted an Israeli checkpoint ahead—four soldiers standing guard, rifles raised, signaling for the approaching car to stop.

Khaled, the driver, turned his head. "What should I do?" Abu Rushdi's voice was firm. "Pretend to slow down. Once you're close enough—hit the gas. Each of us will take aim at the soldier nearest to him. We raise our rifles and fire all at once—exactly five meters away. Ready?" They answered in unison, "Ready, by the will of God."

The car slowed down, a Palestinian flag fluttering on its roof beside an olive branch—a deception. Khaled smiled at the soldiers, and they smiled back. Then, Abu Rushdi shouted, “Now!” Four rifles rose at once, unleashing a storm of bullets like hellfire upon the soldiers, who collapsed to the ground without firing a single shot in return. Khaled slammed the accelerator, speeding away. One of the rifles kept firing, its rounds whizzing past his head.

After the car had covered several hundred meters, Abu Rushdi shouted, “Turn back! We need to make sure they’re dead—and take their weapons. There are four rifles.” Khaled jerked the steering wheel, the vehicle still moving at high speed. It swerved violently, lost control, then overturned, rolling down into the valley. The twisted metal trapped Abu Rushdi’s leg, while the others suffered bruises and wounds across their heads and bodies.

The roar of approaching Israeli reinforcements grew louder. The whirring of a helicopter filled the sky, its sound rising ominously. The fighters, shaken from the crash, struggled to free themselves from the wreck. With great difficulty, they pulled their leader from the wreckage, supporting him as they moved forward. The sound of helicopters and soldiers filled the air—it was clear that a massive sweep of the area was imminent.

Abu Rushdi suddenly stopped. “Give me all your ammunition,” he said, pointing to the slope of the nearby mountain. “Head in that direction. I will take cover behind the rocks and engage them for as long as God allows. You must go.”

But they refused to move, answering in unison, “How can we leave you, Abu Rushdi? That will never happen. Either we all survive, or we all become martyrs together.”

Abu Rushdi laughed. “Fools! There is much work ahead of you. Now go! Hand over the ammunition and move! This is an order—you must obey it. Go, go!”

With heavy hearts, they placed their ammunition in his hands, their eyes brimming with tears. Then, reluctantly, they turned and fled into the wilderness. Khaled shouted, “Each of us must take a different path. If one is captured, the others must escape.”

A large force of Israeli soldiers arrived, closing in from all directions. Abu Rushdi opened fire from behind the rocks, shifting positions whenever possible, trying to make it seem as though multiple fighters were attacking. His relentless maneuvering kept the enemy at bay for over an hour and a half.

But then, the helicopter above pinpointed his location. A barrage of missiles rained down upon him, and his pure soul ascended to its Creator—to a paradise as vast as the heavens and the earth.

Khaled reached the edge of a nearby village, where he met a local resident who hid him in his home, quickly tending to his wounds and providing him with food and drink, surrounded by warmth and love. Abdul Rahman made his way to one of the settlements in the area, where construction tools were located. He lay flat on the ground, upending the mixer they used for cement. After propping one side up with a stone to breathe and observe what was happening, he blended into his surroundings. Meanwhile, Muhammad climbed an ancient olive tree and lay across one of its thick branches as the clash between Abu Rushdi and the Israeli forces continued.

After shelling the fortified position, the soldiers began sweeping the mountain, finding no one but him. They started to comb the area again, more meticulously this time, in other directions. The soldiers stood beneath the tree where Muhammad lay, completely unseen, as if blinded by God. They did not approach the paths leading to the settlement, for no one could assume that a fighter would dare to hide in such a place.

Tension enveloped our home during the following days. Both Mahmoud and Hassan avoided each other, refraining from sitting and chatting in my mother's room for several days. Whenever they did meet, they averted their gazes, and if one had to greet the other, they muttered incomprehensible words. The other responded with vague, cryptic phrases.

Ibrahim and I continued to sit with our mother, following the news and events. I expressed my astonishment and excitement at the operations being carried out whenever they were mentioned in the news. Ibrahim, however, maintained a face as rigid as stone, uttering no comments, yet he criticized those who signed the Oslo Agreement without resorting to insults.

One of Mahmoud's friends, who had come from abroad with the arrival of the Authority's forces into Gaza, came to visit us bearing two pieces of news: one was that we had two brothers from our father—Majid and Khalid—who would arrive with the forces coming into the territory. Mahmoud shouted when he heard this, "What? I have brothers I don't know, Majid and Khalid? They will come with the troops, which means they're older!" "Yes, they're in their early twenties," replied the visitor. "And our father? What about our father?" Mahmoud cried out. The visitor replied, "That's the bad news. It seems he passed away in Jordan after your brothers were born due to the clashes that occurred there." When my mother heard this, she collapsed onto the ground, fainting. We rushed to revive her, holding a bottle of cologne to her nose, feeling as though we had been struck on the back of the head with a hammer.





## Chapter Twenty-Six

The news of my father's death in Jordan and of the two young brothers we had never heard of before took up a considerable amount of our time and conversations, as well as our attention at home. It became clear that when the West Bank and Gaza Strip were occupied in 1967, my father had left alive for Egypt, and from there he settled in Jordan, where he married a Palestinian woman in the Al-Baq'a camp and had twin sons, Majid and Khalid. Shortly after, my father was martyred in the clashes that occurred there, and Khalid and Majid grew up with their mother in Jordan. Their mother had passed away years ago, and they would be coming with the Palestinian forces allowed to enter Gaza and Jericho as part of the agreement.

Before these days, we had not heard anything about our father since the occupation, and we thought he had been martyred. Suddenly, we discover that we have two young brothers who are coming to Gaza, which means they would join the family in one way or another. My mother remained in a state resembling hysteria for several days, appearing to live through a psychological and emotional shock that was hard to overcome. All our efforts were focused on comforting her and trying to alleviate her distress. Despite my father's absence for so many years, nearly three decades, she still held onto the hope of seeing him alive one day walking through our door. The news of his marriage to another woman, his lack of contact with us for about four years from the time he left until his death, the existence of children from another marriage, and the news of his death in this manner were all too much for her to bear.

We tried to convince her that those early years after the war were difficult, and that he certainly couldn't have contacted us. May God have mercy on him; he has gone to meet his Lord. We, thank God, as you can see, have grown into men, and we fill her sight and hearing, lacking nothing. We bring her stories and the tragedies of others, comparing our situation with that of others, and assuring her that we are in good health. Gradually, her condition began to improve slightly, but it was clear that she had received a devastating blow, as she no longer possessed the vitality and energy she once had.

One of the topics that occupied part of our attention at home and in the Palestinian street during these days was the fact that the three soldiers killed in the recent operation in the Al-Zeitoun neighborhood of Gaza were Druze. A large number of young Druze had joined the Border Guard, the police, or the Israeli prison administration, and in their duties, they performed their roles as effectively as the Jews.

And the Druze soldiers often engaged in violent and abusive practices against protesters or against the mujahideen; some even exceeded the limits of decency and morality, confronting women and young girls, attempting to assault their dignity. This created an atmosphere of resentment and anger towards them.

However, this never reached a point where the resistance fighters considered targeting these Druze soldiers specifically. The feeling that they were part of our Palestinian Arab people continued to accompany everyone, despite all that had happened. The operation in Al-Zeitoun occurred without it being known that they were Druze; the clear and defined target was to attack an occupation patrol, a military jeep with soldiers dressed in the uniform of the occupation forces, armed and speaking their language, carrying out their duties thoroughly and without favoritism. This is what was specifically targeted.

Whenever it was mentioned that they were Druze, I could see the meanings of sorrow and pain in Ibrahim's eyes, and there was no doubt that he was saying to himself, "Oh, if only they had been Jews!" When we saw the images of their wives, mothers, and sisters crying for their deaths on television screens, Ibrahim could not suppress a burning sigh that escaped from his chest in the form of a painful groan. At the same time, the voices of many nationalistic Druze intellectuals rose, calling for the need to convince young Druze to avoid service in the occupation army and to work against their people in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Some gatherings advocating for this cause began to take shape.

The discussion on this matter reminded us of another aspect, which is the issue of many Bedouin and Circassian youths serving in the Israeli army, where the Bedouins work as trackers in the Israeli army and provide significant services, undertaking dangerous tasks against the resistance in Palestine and southern Lebanon. Without a doubt, the issue of the Bedouins is more sensitive than that of the Druze, and it creates significant crises for the resistance fighters when they find that their operations have claimed the lives of some of them instead of taking the lives of the occupying Jewish soldiers.

Many discussions with conflicting viewpoints often arose between us as we discussed these issues, especially following news that carried something of this nature, but in the end, everyone was united in their resolve.

It concludes with the truth that anyone who wears the Israeli army's uniform, carries its weapon, and performs its duties can be legitimately targeted in resistance operations.

What complicated the dilemma further was the significant contradiction within the Bedouin community in the occupied territories of 1948. The mosque imams refused to pray for these slain individuals or to attend their funerals, and many families rejected wrapping their sons' coffins in the Israeli flag or conducting official military funerals for them. In light of all this, Ibrahim would repeat his usual phrase: "Look how successful the Jews have been in recruiting a part of our people for their security."

Once again, the minds of the Israeli leaders were blown by the audacity and power with which Imad operated, causing them great embarrassment. It made them appear as if they were fleeing Gaza out of fear of the resistance rather than exiting according to a political agreement with an official party. The commander of the southern region gathered his army and intelligence officers and banged on the table, saying, "I want Imad's head. All efforts must focus on that," and everyone sprang into action.

Thousands of images of Imad—some with a beard and some without, some with a keffiyeh and some without, some with long hair and some with short hair, with glasses and without—were distributed to the soldiers who set up hundreds of checkpoints throughout the sector, searching, probing, and raiding houses, led by intelligence officers. The intelligence officers, on the other hand, contacted their informants. Some were summoned to their offices, while others met them on the sides of remote roads. They showed the various images of Imad and asked them to monitor activists believed to be associated with him or who frequented him, reporting immediately on any movement or information.

Many activists fell under constant surveillance. We noticed that two were taking turns watching the front door, and many houses believed or assumed that Imad might visit were placed under watch.

One informant was surveilling Abu Nidal's house in Al-Shuja'iyya. It seemed they suspected the house, or perhaps a word had slipped from one of the small children in the house to a friend, boasting about Imad's upcoming visit. One evening, Imad quietly slipped into Abu Nidal's house, where the family welcomed him with love and loyalty, as usual. Um Nidal hurried to prepare food for him, as he was fasting that day. As the call to prayer for sunset echoed, Imad lifted the clay pitcher to his mouth to sip some water.

\*\*\*With drops of water at his lips, he said: 'O Allah, for You I have fasted, and upon Your sustenance...' Suddenly, he was startled by Nidal's voice rushing into the alley, announcing that a large army force had surrounded the area. Imad set the pitcher down without tasting the water, saying: 'There is no evading God's decree; this may be a routine matter, but let us wait and see without panicking.' He climbed up to survey the surroundings from above.

The special forces of the occupation army began to surround the house specifically, with hundreds of gun barrels pointed at them. Behind them were hundreds more soldiers, and the loudspeaker blared, calling on Imad to surrender, stating that his cover had been blown, and that there was no need for resistance. Imad smiled, repeating:

**'From which day of death shall I flee?**

**A day that is not destined, I do not fear.**

**A day that is destined or a day of destiny,**

**And from what is destined, caution cannot escape.'**

He drew his pistol from his side and prepared to fire, lying in wait on the roof, observing their advance when he saw a soldier approaching the house in a position within his firing range. He aimed his pistol at him and fired a shot that struck him between the eyes. Instantly, hundreds of machine guns opened fire from the location where he shot, and a complete silence fell over the area. Everyone assumed that Imad had passed on to the higher realm.

They advanced again, and he leaped off the roof, firing his weapon while shouting in exaltation: 'Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!' Once more, gunfire erupted around him, his pure body drenched in sacred blood. The gates of heaven opened to welcome one of the most prominent symbols of Palestinian resistance in the 1990s. The soldiers watched him from a distance, not daring to advance even a single step. A voice from the loudspeaker called out to 'Abu Nidal,' urging him to exit the house. He emerged, instructed to raise his hands high, but he did not comply. They ordered him to approach Imad, who lay on the ground for inspection. He came closer, bending over him as tears streamed from his eyes, with guns aimed at him and the floodlights illuminating the area as bright as day.

Abu Nidal turned over Imad's pure body, which the bullets had rendered as if devoured by locusts, and found his sacred blood flowing, nourishing the earth beneath the olive tree, whose branches hung over him with tenderness and love, trying to shield him from the night's whispers, its darkness, and the cruelty of the criminal enemy.

The news spread throughout the homeland like fire through dry brush. People poured into the alleys, streets, and squares, protesting and chanting: 'With our souls and our blood, we sacrifice for you, O Palestine! With our souls and our blood, we sacrifice for you, O martyr! With our souls and our blood, we sacrifice for you, O Imad!' All the squares of the homeland opened in a fierce confrontation with the occupation forces. Farewell to the spirit of the heroic fighter, Imad Hussein Aql.



The news reached our home, just as it did to every other household, late that evening, and tears glistened in everyone's eyes except for Ibrahim, whose eyes froze, his face changed, and he stood up, trembling. My sister Maryam stood at the door of the room, tears welling in her eyes, while Yasser was in her arms, and Israa was beside her, looking at her husband, who shouted, "Bring the weapon, Maryam!" His words were like a thunderclap, for this was the first time Ibrahim had revealed his true self so clearly.

Maryam handed me her son Yasser and quickly ascended the stairs, returning with an AK-47 and several magazines filled with bullets, which she handed to Ibrahim while wiping her tears with the edge of her handkerchief and smiling.

Ibrahim took the rifle, bent down to kiss Israa's forehead, then kissed Yasser's head, wiped another tear from Maryam's cheek, and rushed out of the house with our hearts praying for God's protection over him, guiding his steps. At that moment, I remembered my mother shaking Israa's crib, repeating, "Bring me my handkerchief, O you standing at the door... Bring me my handkerchief, bring me my weapon, O you standing at the door... Bring me my weapon." Then I recalled her image as I crawled beside her while she rocked Maryam's crib, repeating the same words. I realized how much those words meant, words we absorbed with our mothers' milk, words that became embedded in our souls and mingled with our blood cells.

I remembered that as I watched Maryam, that flower we feared might be crushed by the breezes of youth, wiping her tears as she parted from the knight of her dreams, her man, and the father of her children. She handed him the weapon while wiping her tears without a quiver of her eyelid, without uttering a word of hesitation, fear, or worry. I was certain then that we were a strong and great people who could not be broken or retreat, and that a strange spirit, the nature of which I did not know, coursed through our veins, instilling in us a strange readiness for sacrifice and giving our lives for what we hold dear. My mother's voice echoed in my ears: "Bring me my weapon, O you standing at the door... Bring me my weapon. Never will I rest, O heartbeat of my heart... Never will I rest, until I carry my weapon and slay my oppressor and achieve my success with my blood and fire... Bring me my weapon, bring me my weapon, O you standing at the door... Bring me my weapon."

The vehicles of senior officers, intelligence personnel, and administrators of the occupation forces in the Gaza Strip had changed their routes for entering and exiting Gaza. Instead of taking the central road through the city toward the east, which passed through densely populated areas bustling with activity in the heart of the city and its eastern side, they began to move toward the west, passing through Victory Street, until they reached the Sudanese junction, heading west toward the coast. Ibrahim received information about the movement of one of the occupation forces' leaders along this road at a specific time in the early night, on a regular basis, so he decided to target him as a swift initial retaliation for the martyrdom of Imad.

At the end of Victory Street, where a road branches eastward toward Jabalia and westward toward the Sudanese checkpoint on the seashore, the occupation forces had placed several concrete blocks, forcing passing vehicles to stop and give priority to their patrols. They had also demolished the walls and fences surrounding the orchards at the junction, enforcing a curfew from early evening.

The occupation vehicles either approached from the south, slowing down upon reaching the junction before turning westward, or they came from the west, also slowing as they reached the junction before heading south along Victory Street into the heart of the city. Behind the trees and among the orange groves, sixteen eyes gleamed—two for each fighter—peering from behind the trunks in a single row, concealed in the darkness. Eight muzzles of Kalashnikovs and M16 rifles lay poised, their owners lying flat on their stomachs, fingers on the triggers, waiting for their target.

A military jeep from a routine patrol approached from the west, slowing as it turned southward, its floodlights sweeping over the trees where the fighters lay hidden, momentarily turning night into day and setting their hearts pounding so fiercely that the sound could almost be heard in the stillness. This was not the intended target, but had the soldiers noticed the glint of a fighter's eyes or the faint sheen of a rifle's barrel, they would have unleashed fire upon the trees, jeopardizing the entire operation. But by the grace of God, the patrol vehicle veered away, disappearing into the distance.

Minutes later, the roar of approaching engines tore through the night, and the screech of brakes signaled the arrival of two military jeeps at the junction. The first was a modern command vehicle, typically used by high-ranking officers, followed closely by a standard escort jeep. Both vehicles slowed, and in that moment, Ibrahim's voice rang out: "Allahu Akbar! In the name of God... Allahu Akbar!" Instantly, eight rifles erupted in unison, unleashing hellfire upon the jeeps.

The eight fighters swiftly reloaded their rifles, rising to their feet and advancing at a run, raining another barrage of bullets upon the vehicles. The lead jeep crashed into the concrete blocks and came to a halt, while the second slammed into the first, its momentum bringing both to a standstill. The only response from within was a single soldier in the second jeep, who managed to crack open the rear door and peer out with his rifle, but he never got the chance to fire a single shot.

The fighters split into two groups. The first withdrew northward along a narrow agricultural path, where a waiting vehicle picked them up and sped toward Jabalia. Meanwhile, up ahead, a patrol jeep had halted at a bend in the road, its occupants setting up a checkpoint and signaling the approaching escape vehicle to stop.

Ibrahim shouted at the driver, "Pretend you're stopping. As soon as you get close, speed up as fast as you can. The rest of you—fire on the patrol!"

As the car neared the checkpoint, the muzzles of their rifles emerged from the shattered windows, spraying bullets at the soldiers. Screams of terror erupted from the patrol as they fell, dead and wounded, while the car roared away at full speed.

One soldier, hidden behind the jeep, opened fire as they passed. Bullets shattered the rear windshield, forcing everyone inside to duck. One round grazed Ibrahim's head, burning through his hair. The driver veered into a side street, only to find it blocked by concrete barrels. In his panic, he tried to reverse, but Ibrahim barked, "Stop! Get out! We'll cross the barrier on foot."

They leaped out, scaled the barrels, and landed on the other side near the entrance of a luxurious house. Just then, a sleek car pulled up, and an elderly man stepped out with his wife. The fighters rushed toward him, demanding his car keys, promising to return the vehicle. The old man trembled before the four armed men, but before he could respond, the driver snatched the keys from his hand and sped off, leaving the elderly man to collapse to the ground, his legs unable to hold him.

After some distance, one of the fighters placed a heavy Samsonite bag on his lap. "This thing is heavy," he muttered before opening it—only to find it stuffed with bundles of US dollars, tens of thousands in each stack. "A million dollars at least," he estimated. Ibrahim chuckled. "We can't go back now. The occupation forces will be swarming that place. The old man will have to wait until morning."

With the first light of dawn, one of the young men returned to the man's house. He rang the bell, and when the old man opened the door, the fighter greeted him with a peaceful nod and handed him the car keys. "The fighters thank you deeply and apologize for the trouble—they had no other choice. The bag is still in the car. Go and check its contents." The old man, stunned, whispered, "Praise be to the Lord above. Who are you? Who are you? May God protect and guide you. By God, you deserve His victory! Wait, son, wait!" But the young man was already disappearing down the street, not looking back. By midday, a statement was issued claiming responsibility for the retaliatory strike for the heroic martyr. Radio broadcasts confirmed the deaths of several occupation soldiers, including the commander of the special forces in Gaza, Colonel Mathir Fitz. Crowds erupted in chants: "Glory to the brigades... 'Izz al-Din Brigades!"

Three Islamic Jihad fighters planted an explosive device on a road frequently used by occupation forces and settlers near the village of 'Anza in the West Bank. They vanished into the darkness, waiting for their target to pass. A GMC vehicle approached, and Issam pressed the electric wire to the battery terminal. The explosion thundered through the night, igniting the fuel tank. Three of the occupiers were killed, and the fighters withdrew.

Days later, investigations led to the identification of the perpetrators. Two were arrested, but Issam managed to escape, continuing his operations and activities.

After some time, occupation forces received intelligence on his whereabouts. A large force rushed to besiege the location, calling on him to surrender. Silence. They stormed the place, and Issam opened fire, killing and wounding several before they retreated, dragging their dead and injured. Then the shelling began, leveling the building. As they advanced again, he unleashed another burst of gunfire, forcing them back once more. The house was reduced to rubble. Amid the ruins, Issam's pure soul ascended to the Gardens of Paradise.

Three fighters boarded a crowded Israeli bus in Jerusalem. They brandished their weapons and explosives, declaring the bus hijacked. Their goal: negotiating the release of Palestinian prisoners from occupation prisons.

A gunshot rang out from an unknown source, striking one of the fighters. He collapsed onto the bus floor. Panic erupted. The bus swerved and crashed into an electricity pole. The remaining two fighters opened fire, killing and wounding several before disembarking. They stopped a passing car, seized it along with its driver, and ordered him to head south, toward the military checkpoint at the exit from Jerusalem, leading to Beit Jala and Bethlehem.

Before they could reach it, occupation soldiers rained missiles upon the vehicle, annihilating everyone inside.

Meanwhile, Ibrahim devised a plan to travel and reach Ramallah. There, he met with fellow fighters. Without delay, he and two others set out in a car toward the Ofer military camp near Ramallah. They spotted a settlers' vehicle and sped past it, opening fire. The passengers were killed instantly. The fighters withdrew and vanished, while occupation forces rushed to besiege and search the area—without success.

Days later, they set off along the Jerusalem-Ramallah road, searching for a new target. A settlers' car had pulled over due to a flat tire. Its three occupants stood by the vehicle, changing it. The fighters drove past, unleashing a hail of bullets. All three settlers fell dead. The fighters sped away before the occupation forces imposed a curfew on the area.

Frenzied, the intelligence services launched a sweeping wave of arrests among activists, desperate for a clue that would lead them to the perpetrators.



One of the detainees was Abdul Munim, a young man in his early twenties—active and engaged in the intifada. In recent days, he had met Ibrahim and his fellow fighters, who had trained him in weaponry, preparing him to embark on his jihadist mission in the coming days. However, some of his fellow detainees had fallen into the traps of the spies during interrogations, confessing not only to their own actions but also implicating him in activities that could result in a prison sentence of no less than ten years.

The interrogators pressed Abdul Munim, confronting him with his companions' confessions, but he denied everything. They took him to the asafeer—the informant cells—but failed to deceive him. They placed him among his fellow prisoners, wiring the room with surveillance devices, but to no avail. He remained vigilant. The moment one of his companions began speaking to him about anything, he would immediately shout at him, vehemently denying any knowledge of the matter.

The pressure on him escalated, yet he did not waver. One of the interrogators entered his cell and began bargaining with him. He told Abdul Munim that he understood why he refused to confess—it was because he did not want to remain in prison. But the interrogator insisted that his fate was already sealed: his companions had implicated him, and he would spend fifteen years behind bars, whether he confessed or not. Then he offered him a way out—if he agreed to work with them, they would secure his release. The interrogator left him alone to think about his decision.

Abdul Munim sat in his cell, lost in thought. Allahu Akbar! The moment had come—to take up arms, to begin the armed struggle, to fulfill his duty and quench his burning thirst for justice. Yet before he could take a single step, this imprisonment had come, unannounced, at the worst possible time. Ya Allah, Ya Allah, what is happening to me? Should he accept their offer to escape prison? Of course, he would rush to forge his own path, the one he had chosen! He pondered once, twice, countless times—and then, he made his decision.

When the interrogator returned to ask for his answer, Abdul Munim gave his consent. The interrogator, feigning camaraderie, explained that the arrangement would be finalized only after a few days, when Abdul Munim would appear before the military court. There, a formal decision for his release would be issued—to dispel any suspicions about him and to enable him to carry out his new "mission."

Days later, the prison doors swung open. Abdul Munim stepped outside, inhaling the fresh air. He swore by Allah—he would not betray, he would not falter, he would not compromise. He headed straight to a trusted home, informing its owner that he urgently needed to meet with one of the fighters as soon as possible.

Hours later, the man returned with instructions: Abdul Munim was to wait on a specific street at a designated hour in the evening. He stood there, waiting. Soon, a car arrived—inside were Ibrahim and Abdul Rahman. The vehicle sped away.

He recounted everything to them. There was a meeting scheduled. A meeting with the intelligence officer. Wednesday. Five o'clock in the evening. A specific street in Beitunia. That was where they were supposed to pick him up.

He would negotiate with him about the required tasks to be accomplished, suggesting that they set a trap for him there, where they would open fire on him and his companions.

At the designated time, Abdul Munim was pacing back and forth on the street behind the low wall of an abandoned house. Ibrahim and Abdul Rahman were lying in wait, each armed with an AK-47, anticipating the arrival of the intelligence vehicle. On the opposite side of the back street, a car was waiting with its driver ready for a swift getaway. A Mercedes, displaying an Arabic license plate, emerged from the beginning of the street. Abdul Munim hurried his steps to reach the vehicle at the ambush prepared by his comrades.

The car stopped in front of him, and the door opened for him to enter. Abdul Munim approached the vehicle, and the plan was that when the car stopped and he reached its side, he should crouch down to the ground, at which point both AKs would open fire on the vehicle. However, he didn't hesitate and continued walking until he reached the car. He reached for his belt, drew his pistol, and fired directly at the intelligence officer's head, shattering it, then aimed at his companion. But the driver accelerated the vehicle, speeding away. At that moment, Ibrahim and Abdul Rahman unleashed a hail of bullets, and the three of them rushed to flee the scene in their speeding car.

Abdul Munim vanished into a nearby village, while Ibrahim and Abdul Rahman made their way towards Hebron and its surroundings. The intelligence forces were driven mad by the blow they had received, which shook their image and wounded their pride. Their operatives scrambled to do everything possible to capture or eliminate Abdul Munim and his accomplices.

Abdul Munim was a well-known name to them. They distributed his picture among their soldiers, checkpoints, and collaborators, launching a search operation to track him down. One of the informants succeeded in identifying him in a nearby town and contacted his handlers in the intelligence agency, who rushed to capture their prey. A medium-sized truck loaded with vegetables, driven by a man dressed in traditional Arab attire, approached. A second individual, similarly dressed, sat next to him.

The bus in which Abdul Munim and his friend Zuhair were traveling stopped at a station in the town of Al-Ram. Abdul Munim and his companion disembarked. Suddenly, the truck came to a halt, and around ten special forces soldiers jumped out from behind the vegetable crates, brandishing their weapons and demanding that Abdul Munim and his companion surrender and raise their hands. Instead, they drew their weapons and opened fire. The bullets from the occupying forces struck them, and they fell as martyrs, their souls rising to the eternal gardens in the seat of truth with the Almighty King. At that time, Ibrahim was with the fighters in Hebron, preparing to execute an operation.

In another operation, upon hearing the news, they got into their car and set off towards a road leading to Jerusalem, where the movement of settlers' vehicles and occupation patrols was frequent, particularly near the crossroads of Kharsina Hill, which leads to Kiryat Arba.

On the way, a settler stopped his car, and he and his children got out, waiting for one of the vehicles heading to Jerusalem to take one of his children to the religious institute where he studied. The Mujahideen's vehicle approached, and they opened fire on the settlers with their rifles, causing them to collapse, drowning in their blood. The settler and two others were killed, while two others were wounded. The Mujahideen quickly fled the scene, heading to a nearby village to hide until the search operations subsided. The occupation forces rushed to the area, cordoning it off and imposing a curfew. Hebron remained restless during this period; whenever the curfew was lifted, and the Mujahideen managed to move, they spotted new targets and launched attacks. Not a week or two would pass without them killing and wounding the soldiers of the occupation and its settlers.



## Chapter Twenty-Seven

The crescent of Ramadan appeared, and with its arrival, the spirit of purity and worship spread, as the number of those frequenting mosques, especially for the Fajr prayer, increased. People would emerge for prayer after having their pre-dawn meal.

Large numbers of worshipers gathered at the Ibrahimi Mosque, assembling in the sacred space in preparation for prayer. The muezzin completed the call to prayer, and the worshipers stood to perform the two Sunnah rak'ahs of Fajr. After waiting a moment, the imam began, and the muezzin pronounced the Iqamah. The people aligned their rows and stood firm before God. The imam began with the Takbir al-Ihram, and the worshipers responded with Takbir. The imam's voice rose in recitation of Al-Fatiha: <sup>7</sup>**"The path of those upon whom You have bestowed favor, not of those who have evoked [Your] anger or of those who are astray."** The congregation responded with a thunderous "Ameen," followed by a profound silence. The imam then recited verses from the beginning of Surah Al-Isra: <sup>8</sup>**"And We decreed to the Children of Israel, 'You will surely cause corruption on the earth twice and you will surely reach a degree of great haughtiness.'"** The imam then performed the bowing, raised from it, and prostrated.

As all the worshipers were prostrating before God, a tall settler with disheveled hair stealthily entered through the mosque door. He raised his rifle and began firing at the heads and backs of the worshipers in prostration before God Almighty. He fired once, twice, and thrice, the sound of gunfire escalating as dozens of worshipers met their Lord while in prostration. Their pure souls ascended to the highest ranks, leaving behind a scene of bloodied wounded.

Some young men awoke from the shock, leaping towards a metal fire extinguisher, which one of them grabbed and hurled towards the wicked shooter, striking him on the head and shattering his skull. Voices of Takbir erupted, and the process of evacuating the wounded and the martyrs began.

The entire nation mourned the martyrs of the Ibrahimi Mosque, and crowds poured into the streets to protest the heinous massacre, only to find themselves met with the gunfire of the occupation forces in every alley and street of the homeland.

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<sup>7</sup> Surat Al-Fatihah, verse (7)

<sup>8</sup> Surah Al-Isra, verse (4)



The occupation army had forgotten that its government had signed an agreement with the Palestinian side just a few weeks earlier, which stipulated the beginning of its withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho as a precursor to peace agreements. The bullets of the occupation army were claiming the lives of dozens, injuring hundreds, and darkness loomed over Palestine, which was already scarred by wounds and pain.

At the same time, in one of the houses in the village of Ya'bad and in one of the houses in the town of Qabatiya, three young men in each house placed their hands on the Qur'an, pledging and swearing that they would not rest until they avenged the blood of the martyrs in the Ibrahimi Mosque. After a few days, a private car approached a bus filled with passengers in the city of Afula, within the Green Line, and collided violently with it. The car exploded with a tremendous blast, shattering the bus, killing five passengers, injuring dozens, and causing severe damage to the area.

A few days later, a young man wearing a suicide belt approached a bus station in the city of Hadera and detonated himself among the crowd, killing several and injuring many, causing significant destruction. Statements were released confirming that this was part of the response to the massacre at the Ibrahimi Mosque and the killing of worshipers in prostration before God Almighty, assuring that more would follow.

In the city of Hebron, several fighters withdrew after ambushing one of the settlers' cars and opening fire on it. They retreated to hide in an apartment within a large residential building in Hebron. The occupation forces and their intelligence were on high alert after the severe and consecutive blows dealt to them by the fighters. One of the informants saw the fighters enter the building, and within moments, hundreds of occupation soldiers, led by senior military and security commanders, surrounded the building while thousands of soldiers spread throughout the city. Loudspeakers began calling for the fighters to come out and surrender, but there was no response.

The occupation forces demanded that the residents evacuate the building. As they exited, the identity of each person was checked, and some were detained. The forces called again for the fighters in the building to come out, but received no answer. Ground troops advanced to begin a sweep of the building and opened heavy fire on them. The soldiers' cries rose as some were injured, and the response came with intense gunfire from hundreds of barrels aimed at the building, after which silence fell.

The occupation forces waited for some time and then advanced another unit towards the building, opening fire on it once again. The screams rose, and they responded with hellish gunfire before silence fell. The occupation forces summoned one of their massive bulldozers, which moved towards the house to begin demolishing it after an intense bombing. The bulldozer advanced and started grinding the walls, when suddenly, in a flash, one of the fighters appeared from among the rubble, aimed his rifle at the bulldozer driver, and shot him in the head. The bulldozer stopped, and before the soldiers and their leaders realized what had happened, the ground opened up and swallowed him.

Machine gun fire and rocket shells rained down on the building once again. The siege and the back-and-forth struggle continued for three days and nights. Every time the occupation forces got closer to the building, they were met with renewed gunfire. Eventually, they completely destroyed the building, leaving no stone unturned. Then the bulldozers came to search for the bodies of the fighters to confirm their deaths.

Ibrahim returned to Gaza in the final days before the official handover of the territory, as the presence of Israeli forces diminished. Gaza became almost free of the occupiers, their forces, and their institutions, as the security situation stabilized, and the fear of pursuing their forces and monitoring their agents significantly decreased. We welcomed him home with open arms and tearful eyes of joy for his safe return.

Upon Ibrahim's return, Maryam was a different person than the one who had bid him farewell. It was as if she had bottled up her tenderness, emotions, and feelings until his return, at which point she burst into tears, her legs no longer able to support her. She tried to lean against the walls and then collapsed onto the ground. My mother broke her isolation and silence, rushing out to greet Ibrahim, kissing him and feeling his body as he bent down to kiss her hands.

From that night, we resumed gathering in my mother's room, convening there in a natural manner. That night, we discussed the return of our brothers Majid and Khaled, and how and where we would welcome them. We were hesitant to bring this up in front of my mother, but it was the first time we had gathered in such a way since we received the news. We felt awkward, and our conversation about it was fragmented; none of us could articulate a complete and clear thought. My mother smiled and said, "As if you think I don't want them here at home. I have no objection to welcoming them here and having them with us. They are just like any of you, and this house is spacious."

My mother's words lifted a weight from our hearts that only God knows. We feared she would refuse, feeling that part of her isolation stemmed from the sudden presence of her stepchildren in her home among her own children. We agreed to temporarily vacate my rooms for them, and I would stay with my mother in her room until we could sort things out better. We also discussed the authority's arrival, its legitimacy, and how the opposing forces would interact with it.

Of course, Mahmoud held a clear and decisive viewpoint that this authority was an offshoot of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. This meant there must be one authority to which everyone adheres, with its decisions, policies, and agreements binding on all. Here, Hassan became heated in his argument, asserting that the Oslo Accords were rejected by many sectors and forces within the Palestinian people. He viewed it as a betrayal of Palestinian national constants, stating that it does not obligate anyone except those who choose to abide by it. He insisted that resistance was a matter of choice, as no one consulted the opposition factions regarding this agreement, nor were there elections or a public referendum for Palestinians inside and outside regarding such an agreement. He questioned how Mahmoud could demand respect and adherence to an agreement that many forces viewed as a betrayal of rights and constants.

Mahmoud interrupted him, stating that the Oslo Agreement was a temporary arrangement, and Gaza and Jericho were just the beginning. He emphasized that this agreement had international witnesses, and it was not in our interest as Palestinians, while seeking international respect and sympathy, to appear as if we do not respect agreements or abide by them.

Hassan retorted that those who signed the agreement could respect and abide by it, but for those who did not sign and were not consulted, there was nothing to compel them to comply. Mahmoud smiled, saying that the days would impose upon them adherence and respect for the authority and the agreements they had signed. Hassan declared that no one could impose that on them, and Mahmoud laughed, remarking that if they did not comply with the stick of Moses, they would comply with the stick of Pharaoh tomorrow when tens of thousands of fighters arrived from abroad and tens of thousands more were handed over from within. We would see who could defy the decisions. Hassan shouted, "So, those who come from abroad will suppress the resistance and stop operations against Israel."

Mahmoud laughed, saying, "You can call things whatever you wish; we call it a higher national interest and a historic opportunity for us as Palestinians to have a political entity after decades of occupation. This opportunity and this higher interest must be protected and enforced, even if some of the zealous ones, who cannot see beyond the ends of their noses, will trade on this opportunity and gamble with this interest. We will find the moral justification and the means to control and prevent them from doing so." Hassan lamented, "What a pity... what a pity; here is Israel succeeding in fragmenting our Palestinian ranks once again, after years of unity during the Intifada."

Mahmoud shouted, "You are the ones who want to fracture our Palestinian unity! Why not give the leadership a chance in this project?" Hassan interrupted, "What chance? A chance for the Jews to escape the pressure of the resistance, which has begun to force them to pay a heavy price every day in the lives of their soldiers and settlers, and to divide internally..." Mahmoud interjected, "And how long will this resistance last? How long?" Ibrahim calmly and confidently replied, "Until the occupation is forced to leave without conditions, without obligations from our side, Mahmoud, without becoming partners with the occupiers in agreements that recognize their legitimacy and existence on our land."

Mahmoud shouted, "This is all temporary and does not bind us when the balance of power changes..." Ibrahim calmly interrupted, "But what is the need for agreements? You know, and I know, and every observer knows that if Israel does not find a party to agree with to take responsibility in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and with the continued resistance and the heavy costs of remaining here, it will leave in haste. So, what is the agreement with them? Why grant them a safe exit? And most importantly, why these constraints placed on the authority—security cooperation, joint coordination, joint patrols, and ties? Why all this when we can impose other rules for the equation? They can leave fleeing under the blows of resistance, while we remain free from all obligations and all these formations, names, and complexities."

At that point, Mahmoud asked, "Isn't it enough that the agreement will allow the return of tens of thousands of refugees from the resistance forces and their families?" Ibrahim responded, "That is a good thing, and you know that every Palestinian is happy to see every refugee return to their homeland. We will place each of them in the corners of our eyes, and we would cut the bread from our mouths to provide them with the opportunity to live on our land. However, this cannot be the price for such a heavy cost, providing a safe exit for the occupation under a bright agreement instead of a shameful escape under the blows of resistance, along with the signed agreements witnessed by international parties that recognize the Zionist entity and its right to the larger part of our land."



Mahmoud said, "But all of this is just the beginning. During this period, negotiations will take place for a permanent solution. You know that any agreements signed today from a position of weakness cannot bind us in the future when the balance of power shifts."

At that moment, Maryam stood up, saying, "Thank God we have gathered again, dear mother, so we can hear your political discussions anew. Let me go prepare some tea." Then Hassan said, "My brother, I cannot understand one issue: why do you insist on talking about negotiations? You even speak of negotiations for a permanent solution, which means you will only negotiate with the Jews, and that the negotiations will be about implementing Resolution 242."

"This means that the Jews have guaranteed the borders of their state as they were before June 5, 1967, and they will concoct negotiations on implementing the resolution. It means they will negotiate with us over Al-Quds Al-Sharif, the return of the refugees, the dismantling of settlements, and the borders. It means they have secured more than 75% of the historical land of Palestine, and they will start disputing our land in the West Bank and Gaza Strip..." Mahmoud interrupted, "No, this is not correct. All of this is stipulated in Resolution 242, which is guaranteed, and even this is temporary until the balance of power changes..." Ibrahim interjected, "That's true, may God open your heart. The Intifada and the resistance are capable of forcing Israel to withdraw without obligations from us, neither by recognizing it nor by security cooperation, coordination, and ties, nor by turning the battle from our struggle as Palestinians with them to an internal struggle."

Mahmoud responded, "All of this now will not be useful. What is required now from everyone is to commit to the unity of authority, to give a chance for what has happened so we can see the results." Ibrahim laughed and said, "And the fate of the people and the future of the cause is a field of experiments where we give a chance and wait to see the results? Things do not work this way. We are gambling with the sacrifices and blood of the martyrs in a gamble whose results are known and predetermined. The Jews will not give us anything unless our boots are on their necks and the rifles of resistance are reaping them." Mahmoud shouted, "What are you saying, man? If the calculations are this way, then Israel is capable of crushing us in minutes." Ibrahim laughed and said, "So why hasn't it crushed us? The components of the equation are not purely material military components, Mahmoud. Israel knows that behind us is an Arab and Islamic nation. True, it is fragmented, but if it uses excessive force against us, the balance of the universe will shift. Israel is unable to crush us because it realizes that it is governed by many equations, and breaking any one of them means it will be crushed as well."

The waves of arrivals from abroad, consisting of the resistance and Palestinian revolutionaries, began to enter the Gaza Strip, particularly through the border crossing with Egypt. The joy of everyone at the return of the arrivals overshadowed their political and ideological differences. Cheers and ululations erupted in many Palestinian homes as fathers and sons returned after long years of exile and wandering between countries and regions. We shared in the neighbors' happiness at the return of their children, eagerly awaiting the return of our brothers Majid and Khalid, who were among the last to arrive.

We prepared the house to welcome them, moving my belongings to my mother's room and setting up two beds along with the necessary tools and clothing. Then we went out to greet them at the appointed time on the Palestinian side of the border with Egypt. We waited for their exit, unsure of whom exactly we were waiting for since we had no pictures of them. However, we quickly recognized them through the bus window that brought them, as their being twins made it easy to assume a resemblance, in addition to the features that distinguished us all and created a common bond of similarity.

I shouted when I spotted them, "Khalid! Majid!" We embraced, and I raised my hand in a wave, calling to my brothers and Ibrahim, "Here they are!" I dashed toward the bus, clinging to them, while Mahmoud, Hassan, and Ibrahim followed behind, all extending our hands to greet them as they leaned out of the windows, their eyes shimmering with tears. Finally, after years of wandering, orphanhood, and separation, their family welcomed them with all love and affection. My heart was pounding strongly, and for a moment, I felt as if I might faint while shouting, "I'm Ahmed!" Each of the others introduced themselves, "I'm Mahmoud, I'm Hassan, I'm Muhammad, I'm your cousin Ibrahim." Just before the bus sped away, Ibrahim shouted, "We'll beat you to the car, and by the time you arrive at the Seraya, we'll be with you, God willing." They waved their hands, and we hurried to the car to catch up with the bus.

As one entered his apartment, he carried bedding, blankets, food, and drink, asking Ibrahim to take him to the Seraya building to deliver these items to the new fighters from the Authority's forces. They might stay at the Seraya for work or those without families to return to their homes. Ibrahim also entered his apartment and emerged loaded, while Mahmoud came out carrying all of it in Ibrahim's car, which sped off toward the Seraya. There, at the Seraya, hundreds, even thousands, of citizens were bringing bedding, blankets, and food, entering to deliver them to the men who were awestruck by the generosity of their people, their eyes overflowing with tears.

The Palestinian Authority began to take charge of affairs in the Gaza Strip, gradually organizing its matters. Meanwhile, Israel started releasing a number of Palestinian prisoners who had been held in its jails for years, but the numbers were much lower than expected. The Israeli authorities also began to speak about categorizing prisoners into different groups: those affiliated with the Oslo Accords and those opposed to them; those with blood on their hands and those without. Anyone with blood on their hands would not be released.

These classifications became common parlance among every Palestinian, as every Palestinian household had a prisoner or detainee in the occupation's jails. Everyone had hoped that their son would be released upon the signing of the agreements, but the numbers released were limited.

Ibrahim agreed with "Salah," who was still studying at Birzeit University, on a plan of action to try to solve part of this problem. Salah traveled to the West Bank, to Nablus, where he met with the hidden fighters there, led by Yahya, and the two who had survived the clash in Jerusalem a few months earlier. He discussed the plan with them. One of them, "Hassan," found the implementation of the plan possible and requested to call in two acquaintances from Jerusalem to assist them, who arrived after a few hours. One of them, "Zaki," confirmed he had a villa far from prying eyes, suitable for holding the soldier they intended to capture, and the ones who would stay with him during his captivity. He assured them that he could frequently visit the house without raising any suspicion to provide them with food and news. Another fighter confirmed the ease of obtaining a vehicle for the kidnapping operation and expressed his readiness to drive it during the mission, stating he could easily acquire a car to transport them to the area of Jerusalem, where Zaki would show him the villa. Zaki and Mujahid left on Saturday evening to take them to that villa.

Indeed, on Saturday evening, Mujahid arrived driving a transport truck, where he picked up the three fighters: Salah, Hassan, and Abdul Karim, along with their weapons and some belongings, and set off towards Jerusalem, to the quiet, tranquil town of Bir Nabala, where the villa was located. He dropped them off after providing what they needed and parted with them, hoping to return the next day to carry out the mission.

On Sunday afternoon, he returned to them with his car, where he picked them up along with their light weapons and drove them toward nearby Jerusalem. On the way, one of the soldiers signaled to the passing cars, asking for a ride to his neighborhood. The vehicle stopped, and he asked if they were heading toward his residential area. They answered him in Hebrew.

In the affirmative, they invited him to get in, and he climbed into the car. After driving a few meters, more than one pistol was pointed at his face, and he was asked to remain silent for his own safety, as the goal was not to kill him, but to keep him alive for a prisoner exchange. They urged him not to act recklessly, as it could lead to his own demise.

The car turned around after he was bound and his head covered, heading towards Bir Nabala, where it entered the garage of the house. The soldier was taken to a room on the second floor, where the windows were covered with thick curtains. He was filmed with a video camera while one of the fighters stood behind him, demanding that his government respond to the captors' demands. Mujahid took the tape, the soldier's rifle, and his identity card to the city of Gaza, where he placed them in an agreed-upon location, from which Ibrahim retrieved them. A video was filmed showing one of the masked fighters displaying the soldier's rifle and personal identity card, demanding the release of five hundred Palestinian prisoners from the occupation's jails, foremost among them Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. The tape was delivered to a journalist, who distributed it to news agencies.

Within an hour, television networks and news outlets broadcasted this. The next day, a second tape featuring the soldier was released, giving the Israeli government until Friday evening to meet the demands, or else the soldier would be killed. The security apparatus and occupation forces began frantic searches and raids, along with intensive intelligence operations. Since the recorded tapes originated from Gaza, the Israeli government turned to the Palestinian Authority, demanding that it uphold its commitments and the agreements it had signed, and work to locate the soldier and return him alive, punishing his captors. After the Authority's security services conducted the required investigations and searches, they assured the Israeli government, categorically confirming that the soldier was not being held in areas under its control.

On Thursday night, as darkness fell, a large force raided Mujahid's house in the town of Beit Hanina and arrested him, transferring him to an army camp near Ramallah. There, he was subjected to extremely harsh interrogations, so severe that the head of the Shin Bet at the time approached the relevant judicial authorities to obtain permission to use all methods of physical, psychological, and nervous torture against the detainee, to force him to confess. Hell opened upon Mujahid, as they demanded an answer to one question: Where did you place the soldier? There was no room for denial or evasion; where is the soldier? After dawn and long hours of interrogation, they extracted a confession from him regarding the location where the soldier was hidden.



After sunset on Friday, and after performing the Maghrib prayer at Al-Aqsa Mosque, Zaki set off in his car. He stopped to buy some of the famous Palestinian kunafa, a delightful dessert known for its unique flavor, and took it with him as he drove towards Bir Nabala.

Upon entering the house, he brought with him a box of kunafa, which the fighters shared and also fed to the soldier they were holding captive. Zaki inquired about their needs, to which they responded with a negative shake of their heads, indicating they had no immediate requirements. After wishing them well, Zaki left and drove away.

However, a vehicle carrying several members of the special forces began to follow him. When Zaki's car stopped at the Ram checkpoint for inspection, the special forces soldiers sprang into action. They brandished their weapons, pulled him from his vehicle, and searched through everything inside for anything that could assist their operation.

Just minutes before eight o'clock, a large number of special forces personnel began to stealthily approach the house. They split into two teams: the first team started to scale the balcony that connected to the kitchen on the second floor, intending to infiltrate from that entrance. Meanwhile, the second team initiated explosions simultaneously, preparing dozens of heavily armed soldiers to storm the house from both directions.

As the explosions erupted, the soldiers charged forward with urgency. The soldiers who entered through the kitchen door found themselves closest to the room where the soldier was being held and where the fighters were stationed.

Upon their entrance, they were met with a fierce barrage of gunfire from the fighters' rifles, while the second team, breaching the ground floor, also faced heavy fire. In the ensuing chaos, the commander of the storming unit was killed, and thirteen of its members sustained injuries. Tragically, the captured soldier was also killed in the crossfire.

Due to the overwhelming gunfire and shelling inside the building, the three fighters holding their position were martyred.

A few days later, Yahya prepared a suicide belt and secured it around Saleh's waist. He set off with one of his associates, Asim, to reach the heart of Tel Aviv to carry out their plan. They boarded the bus from the central station in Tel Aviv, specifically taking bus number (5), which was headed toward the city center.

When they reached Dizengoff Street, Saleh pressed the button connected to the belt around his waist. The explosion transformed the bus into a mass of fiery debris, resulting in the deaths of more than twenty individuals and injuring dozens more. This act of violence caused significant destruction in the area.

The television networks broadcast live images from the scene of the operation shortly after it occurred. The real terror was evident in the eyes of the spectators, along with hundreds of cases of panic and nervous breakdowns. None of the occupiers could have imagined witnessing such death and destruction in the heart of Tel Aviv. They believed they could instill fear and death in our cities, villages, and refugee camps, only for the tables to turn against them. Those who sow thorns shall reap thorns.

The investigations and arrests that followed the Dizengoff operation brought Yahya's name back into the spotlight. His name became a symbol of terror for Israeli citizens, as well as a source of anxiety and fear for political, military, and security leaders. The raids on his family's home increased, and surveillance of his village intensified, targeting anyone believed to have connections to him. It became evident that Yahya's continued existence in the West Bank, still under Israeli occupation, was difficult and almost impossible. Thus, he decided to move to Gaza for a time, seeking refuge in a safe location to remain out of sight before returning later. I recognized him through Ibrahim when he would come to his apartment after dark, when the night concealed him, making it difficult for anyone to identify him.

One day, I ascended to Ibrahim's apartment seeking him out, and upon knocking on the door and entering, I found a quiet, reserved, shy young man there. He spoke very little, and when he did, his words were brief. Yet, it wasn't hard for me to discern that he was from the West Bank, not from Gaza, based on his accent. In the Gaza Strip, we pronounce the letter 'qaf' in two ways: either like the Egyptian 'jim', which is the pronunciation of the majority of Gazans, or we pronounce it like an 'hamzah', as is customary for the civilians of the major cities. In contrast, most people from the West Bank pronounce it like a 'kaf'. From the moment he uttered the first 'qaf', I identified him as being from the West Bank. I did not want to embarrass him or Ibrahim by asking about his name or where he lived, but that day, I confirmed he was indeed from the West Bank.

Later, I noticed him frequently visiting Ibrahim and spending the night at his place. After a while, his wife and son arrived, as they would stay with Ibrahim for a few days before leaving for a while and then returning. Ibrahim explained that he was a friend from the West Bank working in Gaza, and to save time and money, he sometimes had to spend the night at Ibrahim's until he sorted out his new housing situation.

Ibrahim was summoned to the office of a senior officer from the Preventive Security Service for a discussion regarding conduct and behavior under the Palestinian Authority's rule in Gaza.

The officer repeated himself dozens of times, emphasizing that the current reality was vastly different from the days of occupation. "There is now a Palestinian Authority with full jurisdiction. It is bound by agreements, signed under international supervision and with global witnesses. These agreements cannot be violated." He then added, "We know that you are an activist, that you oppose the Oslo Accords, and that you hold strong views against them and against the Authority. We are aware of all this. You are under surveillance, within the focus of our attention. We do not want any actions from you that would embarrass the Authority or make it appear as if it were breaching its commitments."

Ibrahim responded calmly, "I do not hide my opposition to the Oslo Accords and everything that resulted from them. I see it as a failure to properly invest in political opportunities. I firmly believe that signing the Oslo Accords was a strategic mistake. The real danger was in recognizing Israel in exchange for a price it would have paid anyway—without us giving away anything. All we had to do was continue resisting, and the occupation would have eventually withdrawn from our lands under pressure from the resistance."

The officer interrupted him, his tone firm. "We are not here to debate whether the agreement was right or wrong. That is not my concern. My concern is that you understand this—you must not defy the Authority's legitimacy, nor put it in a position where it appears unable to maintain security and order in the areas under its control."

Ibrahim smiled and said, "You see? In return for something Israel would have inevitably conceded under the weight of resistance, we are now expected to divide into two factions—one that wants to continue resisting and another that wants to halt resistance in the name of fulfilling agreements..."

The officer cut him off, his voice laced with frustration. "There are no longer two factions. There is one Authority, which is the sole legitimate power. And there are citizens who must abide by its decisions, because those decisions serve the supreme national interest of the Palestinian people. Everyone must comply..."

Ibrahim interrupted him with a quiet chuckle. "Take it easy. There's no need for tension—we're simply having a discussion."

The officer let out a short laugh and replied, "Yes, yes, you're right. But you understand that we are at the beginning of our journey toward achieving our national goals—establishing our independent state with Jerusalem as its capital. We must be careful to stay on this path and avoid actions that could hinder our progress."

Ibrahim smiled and said, “I hope we achieve the goals you mentioned—and all our other goals as well. But I am absolutely convinced that they will not be realized in the way you suggest—through negotiations alone. Such objectives can only be attained through the barrel of a gun. Our enemies understand nothing but the language of fire and gunpowder. Time will prove that this path is a mistake, and it won’t be long before that becomes clear. We will reach the final status negotiations...”

At that moment, the officer interrupted him. “When that time comes, only God knows what will unfold. But for now, I hope you understand why you were summoned. I ask that you comply and do not put us—and yourself—in a difficult position, caught between violating the agreements the Authority has signed and the necessity of arresting you and your friends and placing you in prison.”

Ibrahim smiled as he stood, ready to leave. As he stepped away, he murmured to himself, “May God decree what is best... May God decree what is best.”

A young man from Islamic Jihad, dressed in the uniform of the occupying army, walked steadily toward the cafeteria at the Beit Lid junction, a backpack strapped to his shoulders. The area was crowded with dozens of soldiers. He moved through them, weaving his way to the center of the gathering. Then, with unwavering resolve, he pressed the electric trigger.

A massive explosion tore through the air. The backpack detonated with a deafening roar, sending shockwaves through the scene. Soldiers fell—some dead, others wounded—while the cries of the injured pierced the chaos. Within minutes, emergency responders flooded the site—soldiers, medics, security forces, police officers, and investigators, all converging on the scene.

Amidst the commotion, another young man from Islamic Jihad, also clad in the military uniform of the occupation and carrying an identical explosive-laden backpack, approached with hurried steps. He moved toward the gathering as if he were just another medic or soldier responding to the carnage. He reached the heart of the crowd, his presence unnoticed, his disguise flawless. Then, in an instant, he, too, triggered his device.

The second explosion was even more devastating than the first. A thunderous blast filled the air, drowning out all sound. More lives were claimed, more bodies were shattered, and destruction piled upon destruction. From a distance, medics, soldiers, and security personnel stood frozen, their faces pale, their bodies trembling. They exchanged fearful glances, suspicion and dread flickering in their eyes. By the time the dust settled, twenty-five soldiers lay dead, with countless others wounded.





## Chapter Twenty-Eight

With my mother emerging from her isolation and returning to her evening chats in her room, she once again revived the topic of my marriage. I had nearly forgotten about the matter, but with her persistent insistence and repeated mentions, I finally agreed to let her search for a girl she found suitable. True to her word, every few days, she would present a new suggestion: “What do you think of so-and-so’s daughter? Or perhaps this other girl?” I knew none of them. Then, after a moment of consideration, she would answer her own question: “No, the first one is a little short,” or “The second girl’s complexion is a bit too dark.”

She resumed her near-daily outings, tirelessly searching and scrutinizing potential candidates. At last, she found a girl who captured her approval. She presented the idea to me, and together we visited her family’s home. I found myself drawn to her, and before long, we proceeded with the engagement, the formal contract, and finally, the wedding itself.

During this period, Ibrahim offered me the opportunity to share his apartment. As a result, the young man from the West Bank—Yahya—became a less frequent visitor. When I asked Ibrahim about him, he would simply say that Yahya had rented a place of his own and settled there, no longer needing to stay with him. Still, he would drop by occasionally as a guest for a few hours.

Around this time, a young man named Abdul Wahid from Nablus began frequenting the Islamic University. There, he met both Ibrahim and Yahya. Under Yahya’s guidance, Abdul Wahid learned how to prepare explosives, known by their code name at the time as Um al-Abd, as well as how to assemble belts and charges. He absorbed their teachings diligently before flying back to Nablus, where he rented an apartment, procured the necessary materials and tools, and set to work, aided by one of his brothers. Then, he began searching for a volunteer willing to carry out the mission—someone prepared for martyrdom—and for someone who could transport him deep into one of the Zionist settlements in the occupied lands of 1948.

On the afternoon of July 21, 1995, a young Palestinian boarded an Israeli bus in Ramat Gan. Shortly after the bus departed, he detonated himself, killing five and injuring thirty-three. Meanwhile, Abdul Wahid had already begun preparing the second belt, scouting for a new martyr. Everything was set—the belt, the volunteer, the means of transportation. Everything was ready for the mission.

A few days later, as Abdul Wahid stood at a public telephone making a call, special forces from the occupation army stormed the area. They ambushed him, seized him, and whisked him away to an interrogation facility.

There, the interrogation began immediately. They pressed him for every detail about the previous attack and any future plans. Hours turned into days, and the torment poured down on him relentlessly. Yet, he denied any involvement, determined to stall for time—enough time for the second martyr to carry out his mission.

As the operation neared its execution, he finally confessed to the investigators about the attack that had already taken place. They left the room in triumph, eager to report their victory to their superiors—boasting that they had extracted a confession from the mastermind behind the martyrdom operation.

They had barely stepped away when another deafening explosion rocked the city. A young man boarded a bus in Jerusalem's Ramat Eshkol and detonated himself, killing five and injuring 103. As the investigators reveled in their supposed success, their radios crackled to life with an urgent message—another suicide attack, mirroring the last.

They stormed back into Abdul Wahid's cell, raining blows upon him, kicking and striking in blind fury, while he only laughed in the depths of his heart. Their voices rose in rage: "You deceived us! You tricked us! You're behind this!" And he merely smiled, nodding in affirmation.

With these attacks striking deep inside the Zionist entity, its leaders found themselves caught between two fires. On one side, the operations were shaking their foundations, shattering their sense of security and stability. On the other, they faced mounting pressure from their own right-wing extremists, who vehemently opposed surrendering more territory to the Palestinian Authority.

Yet, they were increasingly convinced that the only way to stop the attacks was to withdraw from Palestinian population centers and hand them over to the Palestinians—who, they believed, would be better equipped to put an end to the violence. So, the entity's leaders publicly declared their commitment to continuing the peace process, as if nothing had happened.

Their stance ignited the fury of right-wing factions, sparking massive protests in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv against the government, against territorial handovers, and against what they called Palestinian terrorism. Rabbis and religious leaders emerged, issuing rulings that forbade relinquishing land to the Palestinians or ceding it to the Authority. The unrest grew fiercer by the day, while the government and security apparatus became ever more convinced that the best way to rid themselves of this burning stone was to toss it into someone else's lap—letting them deal with it.

We were sitting in my mother's room, watching television, following the latest developments. Ibrahim was smiling as he observed the news, which irritated Mahmoud. He flared up and asked, "What makes you smile? Can I understand the reason for that?" Ibrahim laughed and said, "I see the predicament our enemies have driven themselves into!"

Mahmoud frowned. "What predicament? We are the ones in a predicament!"

Ibrahim chuckled again. "We are in a predicament? What's the matter with you, man? Don't you see the terrible division that has overtaken Israeli society? The tension boiling among them, to the point where one might kill another? Their leaders, despite the ongoing operations, still come out shouting that they will persist in their so-called peace process? Do you think that if these operations weren't coming from areas still under their control—areas they cannot prevent attacks from—while the areas they withdrew from have quieted down, they would have ever left?"

Mahmoud said, "Yes, that was the agreement."

Hassan laughed. "You are deluded, my brother. You don't know these people. Since when have they ever given us our rights willingly? Since when have they even acknowledged those rights? Since when have they honored agreements and treaties? Have you not heard the verse: **'Is it not so that every time they make a covenant, a party of them throws it aside'**"<sup>9</sup>

Mahmoud shouted, "You want to take credit for everything! You want to make it seem as though every success is yours!"

Ibrahim smiled. "We are merely describing reality, Mahmoud. The intifada is what forced them to recognize us and our rights. Just days before the uprising, we were merely called 'the inhabitants of the territories.' After two months of resistance, we became 'the Palestinians of the territories.' Then, simply 'the Palestinians.' And then, they were forced to sit with the PLO, whom they had labeled as a terrorist and subversive organization. Now, they have withdrawn from Gaza, and under the blows of the resistance, they declare that they will withdraw from the West Bank as well..."

Mahmoud interrupted, "But don't you realize that this could turn everything upside down and destroy the entire peace process?"

Hassan laughed. "If only it would be destroyed and sent to hell!"

Mahmoud yelled, "This is what you want! You are gambling with the future of the cause and the supreme interests of the Palestinian people! The Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank is imminent, the declaration of the Palestinian state is near, and yet you carry out these operations just to sabotage that!"

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<sup>9</sup> "Surah Al-Baqara, Ayah (100)

Ibrahim smiled and said, “Listen, Mahmoud, we’ve discussed this matter before. We believe the Oslo Accords are a strategic objective—a ladder for the occupation to climb down from the tree it had trapped itself upon. Had you not built that ladder for them, they would have been forced to flee from Gaza and the West Bank without recognition or...” Mahmoud interrupted, “You yourself said it was merely a tactic, serving a phase where we are weak until the balance of power shifts...” Ibrahim cut him off, “We disagree with you on this and see it as a mistake. But we are now speaking from a different standpoint—not about whether Oslo was right or wrong. We are now talking about the continuation of operations in areas still under occupation, while maintaining relative calm in those they have withdrawn from and handed over to the Authority. That is the best way to pressure them into further withdrawal without delay...” Mahmoud interjected, “So you want to attribute every inch of liberated land to yourselves and your resistance, and not to the skill and expertise of the Palestinian negotiator...” Hassan interrupted, “What skill? What expertise? They were going to flee from Gaza and the West Bank anyway! Haven’t you been watching the news? Or are you living in another world?” Khaled and Majed sat together, their eyes darting between the speakers, following the movement of each mouth as one voice gave way to another. Their astonishment did not go unnoticed by Maryam, who asked, “What’s the matter with you, Khaled and Majed?” They both responded in unison, “Huh? What?” She repeated, “Why do you look so amazed? Your eyes are fixed on every speaker.” Khaled replied, “Honestly, this is the first time we’ve heard a political discussion conducted with such composure. You people in the occupied territories have an impressive level of political awareness and understanding of events.”

A Jewish extremist lay in wait for Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, a man with a long military past. His gun was loaded, ready to punish Rabin for what he saw as betrayal—handing over land to the Palestinians. Rabin emerged from a grand celebration, arranged to showcase the overwhelming public support for the peace process. Surrounded by his security guards, he stepped into the open. From among them, Yigal Amir surged forward, drew his gun, and fired. The shots rang out, and Rabin fell, lifeless.

We were about to leave our mother’s room and retire for the night—it was already late—when suddenly, the television broadcast was interrupted. A breaking news report announced that Rabin had been shot and rushed to the hospital. We sat back down, our eyes glued to the screen, watching the unfolding developments with eager anticipation. Before long, the news anchor solemnly declared his death. Not one of us felt sorrow. Rabin was one of the cruel butchers who had long inflicted suffering upon our people. No one had forgotten his recent orders during the Intifada—his infamous policy of breaking the bones of Palestinian protesters. No one had forgotten his role in the occupation of Jerusalem in 1967. His crimes against our people and our nation were etched in memory.



However, Mahmoud was deeply anxious about the future of the peace process. Rabin, with his formidable personality and long history of service to Israel, ensuring its continuity, was the most capable of steering it along the path of peace.

The assassination of Rabin overturned the results of opinion polls in Israeli society. Before the assassination, those polls indicated that the right-wing was leading over the left in the upcoming elections, which were fast approaching, making a right-wing victory seem highly probable. However, after the assassination—because the killer was affiliated with the right-wing opposition to Rabin’s policies—the Israeli public opinion shifted dramatically. The polls swung in favor of the left, now predicting a victory for Shimon Peres, Rabin’s successor, and his party in the upcoming elections.

Yahya was in hiding in one of the houses in the Beit Lahia residential project. Israeli intelligence had successfully identified the location of the house and, through one of its agents, provided the homeowner with a mobile phone. The device eventually came into Yahya’s possession, and he used it to call his family in the West Bank. When the phone malfunctioned, the owner took it for repairs before returning it to Yahya, who used it to call his father.

On Friday, January 5, 1996, as soon as he uttered his first words, the device exploded against his ear, shattering his head. With this, Israeli intelligence recorded a resounding success in its war against the resistance. The homeowner, in a state of shock, immediately contacted the fighters to inform them of the disaster. A number of them, including Ibrahim, rushed to the house in Beit Lahia to witness the tragic scene, their eyes welling with tears.

Within hours, the news had spread to every home in the nation— a nation that held Yahya close to its heart. In the depths of Palestine’s tormented soul, and across the Arab and Islamic worlds, Yahya Ayyash, the engineer, had become an icon. His actions had awakened a long-dormant sense of pride and dignity, shaking the foundations of the occupiers in their own strongholds, sowing fear and panic in their hearts, and redefining the terms of the struggle. The news spread like wildfire, and across the land, crowds poured into the streets, questioning, seeking confirmation, unable to believe what they were hearing. Yahya had become a legend. The masses cried out, chanted, and exulted. The following day, all of Gaza rose as one to bid farewell to Yahya on his final journey. The city transformed into a surging sea of people, mourning their martyr, chanting their devotion to the fallen, pledging their souls and blood in sacrifice. Their voices rang through the air—vengeance, vengeance... O Qassam Brigades!

Abdel Rahim, the son of my aunt Fathiya, had agreed with some of his brothers from the mosque's youth to form a military cell and begin resisting the occupation—continuing the path of the martyr Abu Roshdi. The assassination of the martyr had profoundly affected Abdel Rahim, for he had become a symbol and an inspiration to most of the young men. In response, they resolved to take action, seeking vengeance for his pure blood.

Their vehicles set out on the main road connecting Bethlehem and Hebron, a route heavily trafficked by military vehicles and settlers' cars. Across from the town of Beit Ummar, they spotted a white car with license plates identifying it as a military vehicle belonging to an officer. The group accelerated in pursuit, closing in swiftly. As they overtook the vehicle, Abdel Rahim unleashed a burst of fire from his Kalashnikov, while one of his comrades opened fire with a handgun. The moment they passed the car, it veered off the road and crashed against its edge. Inside, a military doctor—a colonel—was killed alongside a soldier accompanying him. At that moment, Abdel Rahim felt he had fulfilled part of his duty in avenging the martyr's blood.

In a rural house in the village of Al-Satar Al-Gharbi, near the city of Khan Younis, four fighters sat together, among them Ibrahim, planning a devastating retaliation for the crime of the occupation. On the following night, a group of fighters advanced under cover of darkness, backpacks strapped to their shoulders, dragging two long wooden ladders beside them. They approached the barbed-wire fence of the separation barrier east of Gaza—beyond which lay the occupied lands of 1948. They remained in the shadows for a long time, ensuring the area was clear of enemy ambushes.

Two of them then dashed toward the barrier, carrying the ladders. The first ladder was placed upright and held steady by one fighter, while the second began his climb, gripping the second ladder in his hands. As he reached the top, he started raising the second ladder, attempting to fling its end over the far side of the border fence. But just as he prepared to do so, the distant glow of a patrol jeep's headlights appeared. Swiftly, he pulled back the ladder. They hid the ladders in an instant, erasing their tracks with a tree branch before throwing themselves behind a sand dune—just in time, as the patrol's searchlight swept over the area.

The patrol passed and faded into the distance. At once, the fighters resumed their mission, setting up the first ladder. One of them climbed it, casting the second ladder over to the opposite side of the border. He fastened the two ladders together, forming a bridge. Then, three fighters, each carrying a heavy backpack, ascended the first ladder before disappearing into the darkness beyond. Those who remained hurriedly dismantled the ladders, erased every trace of their presence, and vanished into the night—as if nothing had ever been.

The three fighters advanced with their bags on their backs towards the west, delving deeper into the occupied territories of 1948, distancing themselves from the border strip. A car was waiting for them, which took them to a large orchard near the city of Ashdod. There, they dug and buried the bags, and two of them returned to Gaza, while the third remained wrapped in a large piece of cloth, shielding himself from the rain among the dense orange trees that bent over him, embracing him with their branches and leaves, offering love and tenderness to protect him from the eyes of the enemies. He waited for the arrival of the martyrs who were to come in the second wave.

Time passed slowly, and no one came; the appointed time had long since passed. Another day went by, and it became clear that a problem had arisen. Hassan decided to take action to complete the mission through his own efforts. He left the place for Ramallah, where he contacted some acquaintances, searching for youths willing to martyr themselves. He found two who were eager for that and then headed to Abu Dis to look for helpers to bring the bags containing the belts and to deliver the martyrs to their targets.

He found two men with two cars and set off with one of them, bringing the three bags from the orchard near Ashdod and transporting them to Ramallah, then to Abu Dis. In the early morning hours, two cars set out from Abu Dis, each carrying one martyr, who had put the belt around his waist while fasting, swearing that he would not taste any food or drink from the earth, and that his breaking of the fast would, God willing, be in the gardens of paradise with his master, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

One of them headed to the heart of West Jerusalem, making steady strides toward bus number 18, which was filled with passengers. He boarded the bus, and after it had traveled a few dozen meters, he pressed the button on the explosive belt. The explosion roared loudly, transforming the bus into a mass of burning metal pieces, scattering bodies and limbs, resulting in dozens of fatalities. Ambulances, bomb disposal experts, police, and security personnel rushed to the scene of the incident.

While they were busy with their tasks, news came of another explosion at a soldiers' waiting station at the entrance to the occupied city of Ashkelon, where many were killed and injured. The call to prayer for the Maghrib prayer rose, prompting Hassan to hurry to the adjacent room to wake "Raed" so he could break his fast, as he was still fasting. Raed leaned back, sitting in his bed, looking at Hassan, who initiated the conversation by saying: "The Maghrib prayer has been called, so get up and break your fast." Raed smiled and said: "I will not taste your food in this land."

I saw in a dream that I was boarding a bus filled with occupiers, detonating myself and killing everyone on board. Then I saw myself ascending in a beam of light to the sky. Hassan repeated, "The food is ready; let's eat." Raed rebuked him, saying: "I told you, I won't put anything from this land in my mouth." He then got up, performed ablution, and they prayed the Maghrib prayer.

In the early morning hours, Raed set off, with the explosive belt wrapped around his waist, in Kareem's car, which had taken his brother to the heart of Jerusalem the previous week. They arrived at the same location, and he stepped out of the car, walking steadily toward bus number 18. He boarded the bus, and after it had traveled a few dozen meters, he detonated himself, killing all its passengers without exception. Twenty-three people died, and dozens more were injured in the street, as Raed's spirit ascended to his Lord, having achieved what he desired.

Days later, a fighter from the Islamic Jihad Movement detonated himself in the middle of Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv, killing thirteen occupiers. The leaders of the Zionist entity went into a frenzy, and terror spread in the hearts of the people. The number of individuals on the streets, in institutions, restaurants, and cafes shrank, and buses were emptied of passengers. He slammed his hand on the table, demanding that the authority fulfill its duties and obligations to stop what he termed "terrorism" from its areas of control. Consequently, the authority's forces began a wide-ranging campaign of arrests against Islamic activists in its territories, detaining hundreds and throwing them into the depths of prisons, subjecting many of them to violent and terrifying interrogation processes.

My brother Majid came home at an unusual time, asking about Ibrahim, who was not in the house. Majid whispered in my ear that there was a decision to arrest Ibrahim and that he must disappear from sight. He then left to return to work, and I went out to look for Ibrahim to inform him of the situation. I found him at a friend's house and told him what was happening. Immediately, arrangements began for his hiding at the home of an unknown friend. I took him to that friend's house, borrowed his car, and returned home, where I informed Maryam and my mother that Ibrahim was wanted and had gone into hiding with a friend, fearing that the authority's security apparatus would arrest him until things calmed down.

In the evening, we gathered in my mother's room, where the conversation, as usual, turned to the latest topics, recent operations, the widespread arrests, and what was rumored about the violent interrogation methods against some detainees.



Hassan was in a fit of rage like I had never seen before, and my mother had to repeatedly ask him to lower his voice so that he wouldn't be overheard outside and arrested as well. He was shouting at Mahmoud, questioning how these honorable people could be arrested and imprisoned when they were the ones who had shouldered the burden of resisting the occupation over the past years and had forced it to leave.

Mahmoud laughed, saying: "This is what you and your group imagine; that's what matters. They want to sabotage the peace process and gamble with the supreme national interests of the Palestinian people, and we must put an end to that." Hassan screamed, "What interests are you talking about? What interests of the Palestinian people are served by arresting the honorable and humiliating them in interrogation cells? Is this in the interest of the Palestinian people?!" Mahmoud interrupted, saying: "The supreme national interests are the establishment of our independent Palestinian state in the coming years, after we conduct negotiations for a permanent solution." Hassan shouted, "And who started the aggression? Did we carry out operations first, or was it Israel, your peace partner, that assassinated Yahya Ayyash? What do you want us to do about that? Should we stay silent and let Israel dare to assassinate others? What did you do when they assassinated Yahya, may God have mercy on him? What did you do?"

Mahmoud replied, "You need to act with reason and wisdom. You should have given the peace process a chance, but you didn't. You carried out operations in 1995..." Hassan interrupted, "These operations happened in areas under occupation and were not handed over to the authority, so why link them?" Mahmoud interjected: "These operations pressured the Israeli government to decide to assassinate Ayyash." Hassan shouted, "Oh, so if the Israeli government is pressured by extremists, they should relieve that pressure by assassinating our struggle's symbols, and we should just watch and say, 'Let's give them a chance' and not sabotage the empty peace process? If the honorable seek revenge for the blood of the engineer, they should be arrested and beaten in cells?" Mahmoud interrupted, "No one has been beaten in cells and..." Hassan cut in, "But there have been and there are. He turned to Majid and Khaled, asking: 'Isn't that right, Majid? Isn't that right, Khaled? Haven't people been beaten and humiliated?'" Khaled and Majid nodded in agreement. Mahmoud said, "They are not beaten because they carried out operations against the occupation, but because they plan to assassinate authority leaders." Hassan yelled, "That's not true; that's a lie and pure slander! It's impossible that anyone planned assassinations. You saw with your own eyes how we welcomed the authority's men and the revolution forces that came from abroad. You saw how we respected them and opened our hearts to them, and how we..."

Mahmoud interrupted, saying, "But now you're acting in the opposite way! Don't you see how you've opened the gates of hell upon Israel? Three massive operations within eight days, dozens killed and hundreds injured. What are you thinking?! This is madness... pure madness."

Mariam interjected, "How can anyone be arrested, imprisoned, and tortured?!" Khaled and Majid jumped in, saying, "We have nothing to do with this; we are just small soldiers following orders, and we don't understand politics or..." Mahmoud cut him off, saying, "When a brother wants to sabotage what his people are planning and destroy their interests, he must be imprisoned to prevent that." Mariam shouted, "Oh man, don't you have a heart? How can you arrest your brothers for working against the occupation? How can you arrest your sister's husband and your cousin? Have you really become that cruel? God is great!" Mahmoud replied, "Mariam, this won't last long; in a few days or months, they will be released. This is just to absorb the pressure being exerted on us."

Hassan shouted, "Then why the interrogations, torture, and humiliation?" Mahmoud answered, "I told you, this is for those who prove involved in planning actions against the authority." Hassan shouted back, "This is just an excuse; it's a clear lie!" Mahmoud laughed and said, "You don't know anything about what's happening, Hassan. Your people wanted to destroy everything. You are insane; you're not thinking rationally." Hassan screamed, "We're not thinking irrationally!! We will see, Mahmoud; we will see. It won't be long before you realize that the Jews have deceived you and ensnared you in your own schemes. They have killed the innocents and fought against God and His Messenger (PBUH); they have no covenant or trust. You think that in what you call the negotiations for a permanent solution, they will concede Jerusalem or the settlements or return to the borders of June 5, or anything else? This is merely an attempt to split our Palestinian ranks, to pit us against each other, and to destroy the supreme national interest."

Mahmoud laughed, saying, "Look at you; now you're a political expert, predicting what will happen in the future after years." Hassan smiled, saying, "That's not what I'm predicting, brother; that's what God has informed us about them when we learned about them and their nature and how they deal, as they do not recognize covenants or agreements, nor can they move in the right direction unless the mountain is raised above their heads like a shadow; only then do they feel fear and terror, and they might advance." Mahmoud chuckled, saying, "You always mix your understanding of religion with politics. What does what's mentioned in the Quran about the Jews in the days of Moses have to do with what's happening now, Hassan?" Hassan smiled and replied, "Glory be to God, don't you know that history repeats itself and that the Jews are the Jews? You will see, Mahmoud; you will see, and I will remind you if we remain among the living."

A few days later, Hassan was arrested, and after a while, we were allowed to visit him. He informed us that he had not been subjected to interrogation or torture; however, he confirmed that some individuals had undergone extreme torture, resulting in physical injuries. My mother could not bear Hassan's detention by the authority. During our entrance and exit from the visit, she spared no effort in hurling insults at the guards and officers overseeing the prison, who let us in and out without responding, pretending either not to hear or feigning busyness with trivial matters. Sometimes, when the insults were directed at them, one of them would kindly respond, "Oh lady, may God seal your fate with goodness; we are ordered to do this, and it is our livelihood and that of our children," while the insults continued about their livelihoods.

One day, Majid whispered in my ear that they had instructed him and Khaled to report immediately any information they received about Ibrahim. They warned that if they failed to report any information, they would be punished, and it was essential not to embarrass them with their superiors. They emphasized that they must not hide any information about him and that we should find a suitable way to take Mariam, Israa, and Yasser to see Ibrahim from time to time. He urged that I should not take them to see him when he and Khaled were at home, but rather when they were at work, and to instruct Mariam, Israa, and Yasser not to speak of it. We needed to devise another reason for their frequent outings.

The date of the Israeli elections was approaching, and opinion polls began to show a clear increase in support for Likud party candidate Benjamin Netanyahu for Prime Minister over Labor party candidate Shimon Peres. It became apparent that those who were betting on the peace options or Oslo, and what would follow from it, were starting to feel the real danger of the elections.

We at home were keenly monitoring the situation and awaiting the results due to its significance for all of us. Mahmoud wanted the Labor party to win, as it would ensure the continuation of the peace process, enabling the authority to achieve its goals. He was extremely fearful of a victory for Benjamin Netanyahu and Likud, as it was clear they would obstruct matters. We at home were uncertain about what we exactly wanted. Mahmoud's words and analysis contained some truth; at the very least, we needed to know the end of this tunnel into which our Palestinian cause had entered, and to assess the validity of the viewpoint and position that led to Oslo, and what it had produced in terms of interests, transactions, and policies. However, there was a desire to see how matters would unfold with the right wing and Likud's victory. Therefore, our stance was not definitive or clear, but we waited and followed the news throughout the night, eventually succumbing to sleep before knowing the results. In the morning, we learned of Netanyahu's victory and that cursed Likud.

To our astonishment and the surprise of everyone, Netanyahu, the opposition leader, was not the same as Netanyahu, the Prime Minister. It appeared that the position, international relations, and diplomatic communications had a significant impact on theoretical stances. This field of interaction between ideological positions, political pressures, and realism seemed to produce pragmatic positions. ش

As a result, we followed the developments of the Israeli government's stance regarding the transfer of the city of Hebron to the Palestinian Authority. On one hand, Netanyahu was unable to disregard the previous agreement with the Authority; however, faced with political and diplomatic obligations, he committed to it in a formal manner. The agreement transformed into agreements, and new terms were invented to divide the city of Hebron or to control its areas.

Abdul Rahim, my cousin Fathia's son, had completed his limited prison term some time ago and worked in construction for a while before going to study nursing.

My brother Hassan remained imprisoned by the Authority under reasonable conditions. After the Likud's victory in the elections, they began allowing him to stay at home on weekends, spending Fridays with us at home. We no longer needed to visit him in prison. On Saturday morning, he would return to jail, and if any emergencies occurred at home, they usually allowed him to come over. Ibrahim remained in hiding the whole time, but his movement to and from home became easier since the Authority's security interest in him diminished considerably. However, he maintained a degree of secrecy and caution in his movements and the places he hid in.

My mother was pressuring me insistently about the need to consult a specialist doctor, as it had become clear that there was an issue for me or my wife regarding conception. I tried to ignore it for some time, but she was right; this matter was beginning to take up a large part of our attention.

After some time following Netanyahu's rise to power in Israel, tensions began to escalate between him and the Authority. The most prominent event in this context was related to news of a tunnel being constructed by the Israeli government beneath Al-Aqsa Mosque, threatening its collapse. This incited the streets, which erupted in anger, leading to violent clashes between Palestinian Authority forces and Israeli occupation troops at points of friction, resulting in numerous exchanges of fire.



The fire claimed the lives of many occupying soldiers, and numerous police officers were martyred. My brother Khaled took part in the clashes that erupted at the Erez border crossing, where he was stationed. He sustained a gunshot wound to his shoulder, and both his arm and shoulder were put in a cast. He took a sick leave, but what astonished us was that he was summoned during his sick leave. He was absent for a few hours, and when he returned, fury radiated from his face. He was brought before a military court and fined five hundred shekels for firing at the Erez checkpoint without prior permission.

Tensions began to escalate with the Israeli government, while, conversely, relations with the Authority regarding the opposition started to improve. Many prisoners were released, including my brother Hassan, who returned to his home, wife, and children after nearly a year.



## Chapter Twenty-Nine

In the Shuja'iyya neighborhood of Gaza City, the family of Abu Nidal, Um Nidal, Nidal, Muhammad, and two daughters sits in their home. Muhammad, who is around twenty-five years old, often eats olives in a way that catches Um Nidal's attention. She asks him, "What's wrong, Muhammad? Why do you only eat olives? Don't you like other dishes, my son?" He replies, "No, Mother, I like them all, but I love olives more. Isn't this olive from our tree that stood under which Emad was martyred?" A tear flows from Um Nidal's eye as she responds, "May God have mercy on him, yes, my son." Muhammad continues, "That's why I love it; I feel that these olives pulse with Emad's spirit, and I cherish them deeply because I love Emad."

It has become clear that the peace process, following Netanyahu's ascent to power in Israel, has sunk into the quagmire; it no longer advances, and the situation worsens day by day on the political front. This has led many opponents of the Oslo Accords to see clear evidence that their perspective—that this process is doomed to failure—is indeed true, as it continues to violate and disavow the agreements.

My brother Hassan mentioned this dialogue more than once during our gatherings in our mother's room. Mahmoud would respond that they were the ones responsible for this; had it not been for their operations, Netanyahu would not have risen to power, and the peace process would have continued as planned. Everyone agreed that the peace process had become frozen or may have come to an end.

Abdul Rahim drives with two fighters in their car on the main road near the town of Beit Shemesh, within the territories occupied since 1948, just a few kilometers from the town of Surif. They each hold an AK-47 rifle loaded with ammunition, waiting for one of the settlers' cars to pass. They notice a vehicle that crashes beside the road, killing its occupants. Days later, Abdul Rahim and his brothers sit in the town's mosque after performing the Maghrib prayer, discussing their lives. Abdul Rahim says, "Brothers, thousands of Palestinian prisoners have been released from the occupying prisons, but so far, our brothers among the prisoners opposed to Oslo have not been released."

Jamil replies, "Yes, you are right, and there are hundreds of prisoners whom the occupation authorities claim have Israeli blood on their hands and will not be released."

Abdul Rahim says, "We must..."

We must do something to free these prisoners and liberate them from the oppressive occupation prisons, the others respond: Yes... Yes, we must do something serious.

The car sets off with three fighters on the road near the Sarafand army camp, occupied territories since 1948, pretending to be among the occupiers. One soldier stands at a bus stop at that hour of dusk, having left his base on his way home, signaling for the car to stop to take him along. The fighters' vehicle stops close to the soldier, and one of the fighters pulls out his gun, firing three bullets, killing him instantly.

They lay the soldier's body in a nearby olive grove and return to Abdul Rahim, who awaited their return with a live soldier to hide him for negotiation to release several prisoners. They informed him of what had occurred, and he accompanied them to where they buried the body to ensure it wouldn't be found, as it might serve as leverage in future negotiations for the prisoners. After a few days, Abdul Rahim and several of his fellow fighters went out to the main road near Beit Shemesh, firing at a passing vehicle, killing three of its passengers before returning to the town safely at the same time.

Prime Minister Netanyahu continued to exercise a policy of arrogance and bullying, confiscating Abu Ghunaym's land in Jerusalem and initiating work to build a Jewish residential neighborhood that would separate the Arab communities from Jerusalem. This provoked a significant media and political uproar. Abdul Rahim and his brothers sat contemplating what could be done in response. Many fighters were certain that the moment of truth was approaching and that the illusion of peace with the Jews would soon fade. Signs of this were already appearing, and they began preparing for that day. In various parts of the West Bank, a military leader worked in utmost secrecy to organize new cells, train them, and gather and distribute weapons across different areas, including Jerusalem.

In the Gaza Strip, Hassan, guided by Ibrahim and advised by an expert in weapon manufacturing, utilized his tools, machinery, and workshop to create a place for manufacturing and storing hand grenades and attempted to make local rifles. Despite their limited quality, they would be better than stones and makeshift explosive devices, as had occurred before in facing the occupation.

With the developments surrounding the issue of Abu Ghunaym Mountain in Jerusalem, the military commander in the West Bank of the Al-Qassam Brigades contacted Abdul Rahim, as his cell was the only prepared and active cell at that moment for executing a major martyrdom operation deep within the Zionist entity in response to the Israeli government's actions at Abu Ghunaym Mountain. He provided them with a ready bag of explosives, with the plan being to place it in a crowded area of the occupiers and then detonate it remotely. They received the bag, which was carried by Musa and another fighter in their car as they set off for Tel Aviv, where Musa chose one of the cafes bustling with patrons.

On Friday afternoon, the plan was for the other fighter to carry the bag, descend with it, and place it under one of the tables among the crowd, pretending he wanted to get something from the café's kitchen and then exit. The explosion was to be triggered remotely. However, fate had another plan for Musa Abdul Qadir Abu Diya. He carried the bag down into the café area, and instead of placing the bag and leaving, the explosion occurred, resulting in his martyrdom, killing three others, and injuring over fifty.

The occupation government went into a frenzy, issuing threats and warnings. Once the identity of the martyr Musa was confirmed, the security services of the Authority rushed to arrest Abdul Rahim and Jamal, subjecting them to interrogation in Hebron Prison before they were incarcerated.

Aunt Fatimah was nearly driven mad by the imprisonment of her son Abdul Rahim. Whenever his father or uncle entered the house, she would fill the air with cries, insisting they must do something to secure his release. They would reassure her, leave to contact those who might intercede, but to no avail. She would visit him in prison from time to time, taking one of her daughters with her, her heart nearly breaking with pain at the sight of him in jail. He would joke with her and tease her, trying to ease her worries as if he were not the one imprisoned. After about eight months, the guards came and informed him and Jamal that they were being transferred to Jericho Prison for their trial. They were warned that this was a grave mistake, as the occupation forces might abduct them from the hands of the Palestinian police. The guards ignored this warning, and they requested to see a responsible official to alert him and hold him accountable, meeting with the prison official in Hebron, who dismissed the concern, trying to reassure them that nothing of the sort would happen.

They were handcuffed and taken by car, escorted by another police vehicle. After hours of travel, they found themselves in an ambush set up by the occupation forces, who stopped the car at gunpoint, opened the doors, and aimed their weapons at them, calling them by name to get out. They were taken to an Israeli army vehicle, which whisked them away to the interrogation center in Jerusalem.



After months, my aunt was allowed to visit her son in the prisons of the occupation. She trembled with fear and concern for her beloved child, and as soon as she saw him, tears streamed down her face. He tried to joke with her and ease her worries, sharing stories of what had transpired. Suddenly, she exclaimed, "By God, you and your friend have been handed over to the Jews!" and began to curse them from the depths of her heart. The visit ended, and my aunt left the prison, returning home to tell her family what had happened, swearing that Abdul Rahim had been delivered to the occupation forces and angrily cursing and swearing. Even today, she remains banned from visiting him and is still convinced in her heart that he was delivered to the enemies by the hands of his own people.

At our home, it was natural for us to discuss what had happened to my cousin Abdul Rahim. My mother's anger was great over what had happened to her sister's son. Mahmoud tried to justify the situation, claiming it was unintentional, that the occupation forces had committed an act of piracy, abducting Abdul Rahim and his companion. He insisted it was impossible for him to have been handed over willingly. Hassan saw this as a perfect opportunity to attack Mahmoud, questioning how such claims could possibly be true. "Why weren't those negligent individuals held accountable if this was mere negligence? How did the Jews know about the prisoners' release and their names? They called them by name! Why does Mahmoud consider this impossible? Hadn't they been detained for over eight months? Weren't hundreds of resistance youths arrested and imprisoned? Didn't people suffer torture during interrogations and in their cells?" Mahmoud remained silent until Hassan finally stopped speaking. Then he said, "You're trying to fish in troubled waters and manipulate my mother's emotions because her nephew is the prisoner. It's disgraceful for you to do that." Hassan laughed and retorted, "Is it disgraceful for me to do that? Wasn't I imprisoned for seven months under the Authority? Didn't they come to arrest Ibrahim and force him into hiding for several months? Am I trying to manipulate my mother's emotions?"

The tension was escalating between the Authority and its security apparatus on one side, and the opposing forces and groups on the other. This tension reached a peak after the assassination of the fighter Muhi al-Din Sharif in Ramallah, where Hamas accused the Authority's security forces of colluding with Israeli intelligence to eliminate him, while the Authority accused Hamas of the assassination due to internal conflicts.

The peak of tension came after one of the young men was released from the occupation prisons following a period of detention. He carried a plan to work towards the release of the Palestinian prisoners still held in the occupation's jails. The plan revolved around executing several martyrdom operations, linking them to the issue of the detainees, preparing for further operations, and demanding the release of the prisoners while threatening a series of large-scale operations. If the prisoners were not released, the operations would be carried out.

Immediately upon his release, he contacted a number of fighters and began to prepare for several operations. The first was a double operation in the Mahane Yehuda market in Jerusalem, where two suicide bombers detonated themselves in the market, causing significant casualties, destruction, and injuries. A statement was issued demanding the release of the prisoners, threatening that if they were not freed, more operations would follow. Another operation was then executed, resulting in further deaths, injuries, and devastation.

The Netanyahu government went into a frenzy, beginning to threaten and make promises of retaliation. Pressure mounted on the Authority, especially from the Americans, which intensified the tension between the Authority and the opposition. The Authority launched a new campaign of arrests against the opposition, particularly targeting Hamas, and imprisoned Sheikh Jamal and Sheikh Abdul Rahman in the newly built Beitunia prison, alongside dozens of other detainees.

Discussions became heated in our home between Mahmoud on one side and Hassan and Ibrahim on the other. These discussions sometimes escalated into accusations, nearly leading to physical confrontations, especially between Mahmoud and Hassan, causing gatherings to dissolve in conflict and tension, nearly reaching a breaking point. Days later, Hassan was arrested once again, while Ibrahim managed to go into hiding, narrowly escaping detention at the last moment.

The Likud government, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, fell due to the influence of extremists from the radical religious parties who opposed his steps towards the Authority, peace, and the symbolic withdrawal from Hebron. Preparations began for new elections in Israel, which resulted in a victory for the Labor Party candidate, Ehud Barak.

Barak's victory brought a glimmer of hope to the Authority and to the supporters of peace among our people, as it was expected he would advance the peace process without a doubt. With the onset of thawing relations between the Palestinians and Israelis, the tension between the Authority and the opposition intensified. The Authority increased its oppressive measures against the opposition forces, fearing they might sabotage the opportunity for progress in the peace process.

Information reached the security apparatus of the Authority regarding Ibrahim's hiding place, prompting a large force to surround the area. They threatened him, warning that if he did not surrender, there would be dire consequences. Ibrahim complied and was taken to prison. My mother's sorrow deepened as she mourned for her nephew, her son, and her daughter's husband. Additionally, the sadness of Hassan's wife, Maryam, and their children cast a shadow over our home, turning it once again into a mausoleum filled with silence, tears, and grief.

News began to circulate about the good intentions of the new Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, to engage in final status negotiations with the Palestinians. This was welcomed by the Authority and pushed by the Americans to make it happen. Conversations flourished about the vast prospects for a near resolution, the potential realization of Palestinian dreams for statehood with Jerusalem as its capital, and the end of occupation through an Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 borders. Indeed, negotiations commenced at Camp David between the Palestinian and Israeli sides, under the auspices of U.S. President Bill Clinton.

We followed the news of the negotiations with great seriousness and interest, often gathering at my mother's house to watch the updates on television. Despite the absence of Hassan and Ibrahim in prison, their voices of opposition to negotiation and peace with Israel were sorely missed.

My mother's sadness over Hassan and Ibrahim's imprisonment was evident, and Mahmoud repeatedly tried to comfort her, assuring her that a successful conclusion to the negotiations at Camp David would lead to the release of both Hassan and Ibrahim. He speculated that Israel would also release the prisoners held in its jails, as this was one of the issues raised by the Palestinian negotiators. Once a permanent and final agreement was signed, there would be no justification for Israel to continue holding the detainees, and at that time, Abdul Rahim would also be freed.

Days later, the negotiations collapsed, as no agreement could be reached. Israel was unwilling to engage in dialogue or offer any reasonable solutions on major outstanding issues such as the status of Jerusalem, the refugees, the borders of June 5, 1967, and the settlements.

Reports leaked about tremendous pressure being exerted on Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, even from President Bill Clinton, to concede on these issues in the face of the hardline stance.

The Israeli response was a firm rejection, prompting the negotiators to return home and leaving the region in a deadlock, clearly awaiting the match or spark that would ignite it.

The spark came with the visit of the new Likud Party leader, Ariel Sharon, who became the leader of the opposition in the occupying state. He entered the courtyard of Al-Aqsa Mosque, guarded by hundreds of soldiers and police, thereby igniting a firestorm in the area. Angry crowds erupted in protest against his visit and the desecration of the blessed Al-Aqsa Mosque. People poured into the streets of Gaza, the West Bank, and Jerusalem, confronting the occupation army at checkpoints with bare chests, engaging in fierce clashes with stones and empty bottles. Images of the first Intifada began to resurface, and it was clear that the reaction of the occupation army was violent and illogical, especially in an atmosphere characterized by a government that many described as one of peace and negotiations. However, Barak the politician was no different from Barak the military leader; rather, he became even harsher and more aggressive in the political arena, believing that the Palestinian side had pushed the masses into the streets to exert political and media pressure on him to force concessions regarding the positions he had presented at the Camp David conference.

Orders were issued to the occupation army to deal with the rebellious crowds with utmost brutality, without any mercy or compassion. The protesting youth gathered at the checkpoints and friction points, resulting in dozens of martyrs and hundreds of injuries. The enthusiasm and fervor of the crowds grew, as was their habit; the more sacrifices they made, the more fervent and impassioned they became, leading to an increase in the number of martyrs and wounded.

Some members of the Palestinian police or security forces were unable to contain their nerves as they watched their sons and brothers being mowed down by the gunfire of the occupation soldiers, or being targeted by snipers. Some became enraged and began to retaliate, leading to incidents of killing and injuries among the occupation army. It became evident that matters were spiraling into a bottleneck with no return, and what was happening was not merely a game of pushing and pulling between the Palestinian and Israeli leaderships. It was not an attempt by the Palestinian side to improve its negotiating position, as some negotiators had claimed. The situation had grown beyond control and slipped from the hands of those who wanted it to be just a paper to adjust the negotiating stance.

The number of Palestinian martyrs exceeded several hundred, while the occupation soldiers, following their leadership's directives, showed no regard for our people, inflicting death and terror upon them.



In one of the rooms of Gaza Central Prison, fifteen prisoners gathered around the television, watching the evening news bulletin reporting on the events and clashes, the falling of dozens of martyrs, and hundreds of injuries.

On this day, the report detailed the points of friction, showcasing the confrontations, clashes, martyrs, and wounded at the Salah al-Din gate in Rafah, and similar scenes at the Tuffah checkpoint west of Khan Yunis, as well as at the Kfar Darom settlement near Deir al-Balah. The situation was even more dire at the Martyrs' Junction near the Netzarim settlement, with martyrs and injuries at the Erez border crossing and eastern Shuja'iyya. Similar scenes unfolded at friction points in the West Bank, including Jerusalem and its outskirts, around Ramallah, and at the tomb of Joseph in Nablus, as well as around Jenin and its refugee camp.

An oppressive silence filled the room during the news broadcast, but once it concluded, expressions of anger erupted from those young men in that room and others across the prison. One yelled, "Allahu Akbar! What is happening, people?" Another kicked the bed in frustration, shouting, "How long will this situation last?" A third buried his head in his hands, squeezing it without uttering a word, while a fourth struck his head with his palm, each reacting with their own expressions of fury and discontent.

Ibrahim sat on the edge of the bed, his feet dangling over the floor. He rested his arms on his knees, his head in his hands, remaining silent. One of the young men turned to him and asked, "What do you think, Ibrahim?" Ibrahim looked at him and replied, "This is our condition. The lives and blood of our people have become a field for the experiments of Oslo. If it succeeds, great; if not, what prevents us from starting over? This is the solution. All the sacrifices of the first Intifada have gone to waste, and now things with the politicians and negotiators have reached a dead end. What stops us from starting the experiment anew?"

Hundreds, even thousands, of martyrs will fall, and tens of thousands will be injured. And you will find someone advocating for another journey back to Oslo, or whatever you wish to call it. Thus, after each round of struggle and resistance by our people, the politicians rush to reap the rewards, hastening to harvest the fruits before they ripen. They are punished by being deprived of them; neither do the fruits remain on the tree until they mature, nor are they beneficial when harvested prematurely. This was the fate of our first Intifada. We must start anew, only for someone to delude themselves into thinking the fruit has ripened and is ready to be picked, thereby destroying everything our people sacrificed for.

The young man asked, "So you believe that things will continue like this for a long time?" Ibrahim smiled and said, "Yes, it will continue and it will last. Don't you see that the region is entering a state of complexity and self-sabotage? Everything is packed with explosives, and everything is interconnected; one explosion leads to a chain of explosions. The occupation has no one willing or capable of responding to its demands to concede the rights of our people and our nation, neither on the issue of Jerusalem, nor the borders of 1967, nor the refugees, nor the settlements, nor water. You will not find anyone in the Palestinian people who can take a step forward as long as these matters remain unresolved. Anyone who dares to do so will find thousands screaming in their face, accusing them of betrayal.

Thus, the situation is complicated, and the wound of the youth will continue to bleed. These young men will keep throwing themselves into death before the rifles and tanks of the occupation, without any gain. This is forbidden and unacceptable; it must be stopped. Someone must have the courage to stand up and shout at them, 'Enough! This is in vain!' Ibrahim laughed and said, "No, my brother, this is not in vain. These young men attain martyrdom before God because their intentions are pure and sincere. This is a blow that must be avenged with our blood. Things will undoubtedly evolve; tomorrow you will find that the masses have become angrier, and things will escalate despite the cost. Someone will carry the flag and raise the sword against the oppressor, and the enemy will pay for the blood they have shed, for their comfort, security, stability, and economy, and for the tears of their eyes."

The young man questioned, "And how long will they keep us imprisoned, now that the illusion of peace with the abominable occupation has fallen?" Ibrahim laughed and said, "Not for long. Just a few weeks, a matter of weeks only."

The activities of the Intifada continued to escalate and intensify. The occupation forces gathered their resources and methods, and it became clear that units of snipers from the occupation forces were positioned atop watchtowers at checkpoints or settlements, taking aim at the heads of the demonstrators. Television channels reported on this, showing one soldier monitoring the protesters with a large telescope, identifying one of them and beginning to describe him to the sniper lying in wait behind his rifle. "That protester in the yellow shirt, with long hair, holding stones, here he is throwing a rock, do you see him?" The sniper replied, "Yes, yes, I can identify him." The first soldier said, "Take him out of the way," and that soldier fired a shot. The young men rushed around to carry him under a hail of bullets, as that soldier continued to describe him to his comrade, having hit another target.

This affirmed that he was a skilled sniper, possessing a high degree of efficiency and expertise. “Faced with such audacity and brutality, a greater number of Palestinian security and police officers began returning fire against the attacks directed at them, the people, and those around them. Clear sniper operations emerged, targeting armed individuals, including police officers. Soon, bombardments began, striking certain police gathering points and some of their locations.

The occupation government, along with its agencies and media, started accusing the Authority of allowing prisoners to leave its jails to plan operations against it. It became evident that these allegations were laying the groundwork for action against prisoners held by the Authority. The first attempt came with the targeting of Sinin Prison in Nablus. One of its sections was bombed by F-16 aircraft, which struck it with half-ton explosive missiles, reducing it entirely to rubble.

The target, Mahmoud Abu Hanoud, was at the far end of the section, and by divine will, he survived. However, a significant number of prison guards were killed, and many others were injured. The Authority found itself caught between two fires: the fire of continuing to detain these prisoners, in adherence to its agreements with the Israeli side, or the fire of releasing them and facing American pressure, which was always quick to intervene with threats and demands regarding such matters.

In Beitunia Prison, dozens of prisoners were held. In one of the rooms within a certain section, among the detainees were Sheikh Jamal and Sheikh Abdul Rahman. Suddenly, a young man shouted, “These are Apache helicopters circling! There they are! Don’t you see them?” He pointed towards the window. Another young man yelled, “It looks like they want to bomb us!” Chaos and uproar spread throughout the room and the other rooms. Sheikh Jamal called out to the young men, urging them to remain calm and composed. He called for the guard, who arrived after some time, walking sluggishly and hesitantly, as was the usual manner of the prison guards, heading nowhere in particular, fearing that their rooms might be bombed. Sheikh Jamal asked him to summon the officer in charge of the shift. The guard hesitated, yawned, and offered excuses. Sheikh Jamal, standing behind the iron bars, roared at him, a shout that jolted him from his lethargy and apathy. “I told you to summon the officer! Do you not understand what I am saying? The place could be bombed at any moment!”

The guard hastily responded, “Yes, yes, sir,” then hurried to the telephone at the end of the corridor, lifted the receiver, and called his superior. The officer arrived, questioning what had happened. Sheikh Jamal described the situation to him, but the officer sought to reassure him, saying, “Nothing will happen. We are here beside you.”

Sheikh Jamal clarified, “The Apache helicopters are bombing the rooms”—

Each room had a designated missile, locked onto its target. The officer kept trying to calm and reassure them, but the Sheikh shouted, "We will not remain in this room, not under any circumstances!" The officer responded, "What can I do?" The Sheikh answered, "Get us out of here—to your offices, your rooms!" The officer hesitated. "I can't. I don't have orders." The Sheikh yelled, "Call your commander! You are responsible for whatever happens to us." The officer stepped away to make the call, while the young men watched the helicopters circling the building. Jamal called out, demanding to know the response. The officer returned with a single word: "Rejected." The Sheikh repeated, "Rejected?" Then, turning to the young men, he ordered, "Break down the doors!" A group of young men lifted an iron bedframe and slammed it against the door, again and again, until the door finally gave way. They did the same with the other rooms, and soon, everyone was out in the corridor.

From the far end of the hallway, heavily armed forces emerged, wielding batons, shields, and tear gas, fully equipped for confrontation. At their head stood the site commander. The prisoners erupted into chants of "Allahu Akbar!" and cries of defiance. One young man shouted, "Aren't you ashamed of yourselves? We are caught between the missiles of the occupiers and the bullets of your rifles and batons! Shame on you!" The site commander raised his hand, ordering his soldiers to halt and pull back. Then, he turned to negotiate with Sheikh Jamal, who explained the situation. Eventually, the commander relented, allowing them to remain in the corridors and courtyards, or, if necessary, to take shelter in the police offices.

Events unfolded rapidly. In the face of the brutal repression wielded by the war machine of the occupation army, many began to think of ways to strike back—to launch an uprising that would inflict losses on the occupiers and their citizens. Several attempts at martyrdom operations were made within the heart of the Zionist entity, inside the occupied territories of 1948. Some of these efforts achieved partial success, resulting in casualties, though most inflicted only minor injuries. Yet, they sowed fear among the captives and signaled what was to come. Time and again, young men managed to infiltrate the occupied territories of 1948, armed with their rifles. They would open fire on those gathered in markets, streets, and stations—killing some, wounding many—until enemy police and security forces swarmed the scene, either killing or capturing them. Each day, massive crowds would pour into the streets, carrying the martyrs' coffins, their voices rising in furious cries for vengeance. They swore that the enemy would pay the price for its crimes.



The occupation forces, using helicopters and warplanes, intensified their targeting of security and police sites affiliated with the Authority. They would first circle overhead, prompting an evacuation, only to strike and obliterate the buildings—as if delivering a message to the Authority that its destruction was inevitable should the situation persist. Sensing the looming threat, the Authority feared what might happen should the occupation's aircraft bombard a prison housing political detainees from the opposition. In response, they began releasing some prisoners. My brother Hassan was among those set free, while others were transferred to undisclosed civilian buildings, where they were held in secrecy—just as had happened with Ibrahim.

Barak's government collapsed, and new elections were held in Israel. Ariel Sharon, the infamous butcher, ascended to the office of Prime Minister. It became evident that the situation was hurtling toward further escalation and turmoil.



## Chapter Thirty

In the first month of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, which erupted following Sharon's visit to Al-Aqsa Mosque on the twenty-eighth of September in the year two thousand, the occupation forces fired nearly a million bullets at Palestinian demonstrators in Gaza and the West Bank, according to statistics published by Israeli journalists.

The leaders of the occupation government, whether Ehud Barak or Ariel Sharon, who succeeded him, gave the green light to their military commanders to suppress the Intifada, to break it, to extinguish its roots. And these commanders, in turn, ordered their soldiers to reap the demonstrators. Yet our people did not falter, nor did they hesitate or hold back. The youth rushed forward to confront the occupation forces, bearing their souls in their hands, without a second thought or a moment's doubt.

In the face of the waves of repression, murder, and the organized terror of the occupying state and its criminal army, the fervor of many free sons of the Palestinian people was ignited—regardless of ideological beliefs, political views, or organizational affiliations. They took up arms, resolved to defend the lives of their people against the crimes of this gang-state that had long flaunted empty slogans of democracy and human rights. From Fatah to Hamas, from Jihad to the Fronts, all were united by a single burden—the injustice of the criminal occupier. They raised their rifles, determined to make the murderer taste a fraction of the bitterness he had poured upon our people in Gaza, in Ramallah, in Nablus, and in every city and village of the homeland.

Cells of young fedayeen began to form, working to ambush occupation soldiers and settlers, to inflict losses upon the enemy in lives. The forces that had opposed the Oslo Accords were still reeling from the blows inflicted upon them by the Authority before the uprising erupted. They were unable to act with full strength from the outset, but they began their operations in a modest manner—one that held the potential for growth.

As for Fatah, whose members had spread throughout the security apparatus of the Authority, it possessed the youth, the weapons, and the capability—what it lacked was the decision. But determination took root in their hearts, and they embarked once more upon the path of armed struggle against the usurping, criminal occupier.

Muhannad Abu Halawa carried out the killing of two guards at a branch of the National Bank in East Jerusalem on the thirtieth of October. The Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades claimed responsibility for the operation, thus announcing the name adopted by the factions of the Fatah movement that had embarked on armed struggle. Almost all of them operated under the banner of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades.

Hussein Abayat, through his daring and capabilities, rose to become the leader of the brigades in the Bethlehem and Beit Jala areas. Alongside dozens of fighters and resisters, he robbed the occupation soldiers and settlers of their sleep, especially in the settlement of Gilo on the outskirts of Jerusalem. He was assassinated on the ninth of November in the year two thousand.

In Gaza, the first groups of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades were formed, launching their operations against the occupation forces and their settlers. The masses, pouring into the streets across various regions—especially during the funerals of martyrs—began to chant fiercely against the symbols of the previous phase, which had ended in collaboration with Israel and the Americans. Repeatedly, these crowds stormed detention centers where opposition prisoners were held, demanding their release. At times, they shook the very walls, bringing them down, breaking into prisons, and freeing those inside.

Ibrahim and his brothers were set free, along with hundreds of other fighters in Gaza and the West Bank. Without delay, they prepared to take up their role in protecting a people subjected to a campaign of piracy waged by the occupying army.

One of these fighters, upon being informed by his guards that he was to be released, did not react with excitement nor rush to prepare for departure. He remained seated, motionless. Puzzled, they asked him why. He simply replied that he did not wish to leave and that they could keep him a while longer. They lifted him, bound his hands and feet, and placed him in the vehicle that drove him to his home. Upon arrival, they unshackled him and pushed him out of the car.

We celebrated Ibrahim's return from prison. Israa and Yasser clung to his neck, kissing and playing with him, their joy at his return evident. A great number of his friends and neighbors gathered at the house to welcome him and congratulate him on his safety. Seizing the moment, he spoke before them all of the great lie that was peace—a deception sold to our people, draining their struggle, their sacrifices, and their efforts throughout the years of the first intifada. And here stood yesterday's peace partner, now slaughtering us day and night, showing neither mercy nor compassion. Once again, he affirmed that the notion of peace with the occupiers was but a lie, one that would be marketed to our people time and again, attempting to divert them from the path of their freedom and dignity—the path of resistance. Resistance, as in Lebanon, where the occupation had been forced to flee the south under the weight of its blows.

The occupation had been ready to flee from Gaza, just as it had been ready to flee from the West Bank in 1993, when resistance had blinded it with its decisive blows. Many of its leaders had then cried out that they would do so. Yet, we, the Palestinians, had come forward and placed a ladder before our enemy, allowing it to descend from the heights of its crimes. Not only had we rescued it from its predicament, but we had ensnared ourselves in agreements—agreements in which we acknowledged its right to three-quarters of our land, agreements of security coordination and collaboration. The resistance was struck down, the honorable were arrested, thrown into prisons, subjected to torment and torture. We had, in the simplest of terms, become the protectors of the occupation's security. And what had we gained in return for all of this? Its refusal to recognize our rights.

And when we held fast to those rights, it unleashed upon us and our people the inferno of its war machine. Day after day, it reaped the lives of dozens of our martyrs, wounded and maimed hundreds more. Its American-made helicopters rained missiles upon the noble sons of our people, from all factions—upon those whose free and defiant souls refused to submit, refused to bow before the arrogance of the occupiers.

This land, dear brothers, is sacred, pure, and blessed. It is the land of which God has spoken:

**"Glory be to Him who carried His servant by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque, whose surroundings We have blessed, to show him some of Our signs. Indeed, He is the Hearing, the Seeing."<sup>10</sup>**

This land is the land of the Night Journey and Ascension, a land sanctified and consecrated. It is a land of steadfastness and struggle until the end of time, and no one shall ever put an end to that until, by God's will, our hopes are fulfilled.

The Arab and Muslim masses, stirred by the reality in Palestine, took to the streets in the capitals of their nations—from Rabat to Sana'a to Jakarta. Millions flooded the streets, chanting in support of the Intifada in Palestine, condemning the occupation's crimes and massacres, their voices thundering: "Khaybar, Khaybar, O Jews... the army of Muhammad shall return!" Their cries rose: "Vengeance, vengeance... O Al-Qassam Brigades!"

A young man in the prime of his youth steps out of a car on the Tel Aviv shore. He walks forward with steady steps, a confident smile tracing his lips, heading toward the beachfront amusement district. It is the dawn of June. A great crowd of young men and women is gathered before a nightclub. He moves among them with quiet assurance, slipping into their midst. His hand presses the electric trigger. A deafening explosion erupts. Screams and wails rise. Ambulances and security forces rush to the scene, along with police and explosives experts. Dozens lie dead. Others are wounded.

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<sup>10</sup> "Surah Al-Isra, Verse 1"



We were sitting in my mother's room, about to leave for our own, when the regular television programs were suddenly interrupted. A live broadcast from the scene began. Statements of condemnation, denunciation, and outrage poured in from all directions, decrying this so-called terrorist act.

I looked at Ibrahim as if to ask him what he thought of it all. He understood my unspoken question and replied, "Do you see this unjust world? For eight months straight, our people have been slaughtered. The occupation army rains the fire of its weapons upon our heads, unleashing its arsenal against us—its planes, its tanks, its sophisticated weaponry. And the world remains deaf and mute. But the moment we, the oppressed, the crushed, the dispossessed, take action—demanding nothing more than our right to a life of dignity, however minimal—the outcry erupts, even from within our own nation, even from among our own people. But all of this means nothing. Just days ago, millions from Rabat to Jakarta were roaring in the streets, demanding this very thing. Did the world not hear them? They chanted: 'Vengeance, vengeance... O Al-Qassam Brigades!' What vengeance did they seek if not this? If the masses of our nation desire it, if it is our right to defend ourselves, then what harm is there in that?"

In July, the occupation forces—using their helicopters, warplanes, tanks, precision missiles, special units, and the deceit of their collaborators—attempted ninety-five targeted assassinations across the West Bank and Gaza. They succeeded in nearly eighty of them, claiming the lives of dozens of activists and cadres from well-known Palestinian factions.

Rocket shells tore through the windows and offices of the Islamic Studies Center in Nablus, a building filled with residential apartments. Inside, Jamal Saleem, Jamal Mansour, and four others were killed. The streets of Nablus erupted. Cities, villages, and refugee camps across the homeland swelled with angry crowds demanding a swift retaliation against the occupation's crimes. Hundreds of thousands cried out at the top of their voices: "Vengeance, vengeance... O Al-Qassam Brigades!" The resounding chants called for an end to the massacres of an occupation that had openly embraced a grim new policy—one its leaders whispered about in secret. They called it the "Hunter's Policy," granting the occupying forces free rein to eliminate any Palestinian activist, from any faction, whose name appeared on a long and ever-growing list of targets. Anyone whose name surfaced in an occupation intelligence report, anyone mentioned in an interrogation, anyone identified by an informant—anyone at all—became a marked man.

A young Palestinian journalist set out for Jerusalem, seeking a suitable target for a major operation. She found it—one of the city's bustling restaurants. The next day, she moved toward it, carrying an explosive device concealed within a musical instrument. Walking a few steps behind her, a young man, empty-handed, followed—so as not to arouse suspicion amid the ever-watchful security forces stationed everywhere, anticipating an attack.

As she neared the restaurant, she slowed her pace while he quickened his. In a swift motion, he took the device from her and stepped inside Sbarro. Moments later, the explosion roared through the air. The force of the blast sent bodies sprawling from the restaurant's doorways. Screams and wails filled the streets. Ambulances, security forces, and bomb experts rushed to the scene. More than fifteen people were killed, and dozens more were injured.

Meanwhile, Ibrahim, Hassan, and a third young man, Adnan, worked quietly in Hassan's metalworking shop in Asqula, Gaza. Following their comrade's instructions, they carefully fashioned the casing of a mortar shell, then prepared its launcher. They packed the shell with explosives and propellant, loaded it into a box in their car, and set off toward the southern outskirts of a residential area. There, they positioned the launcher, placed the shell inside, and, as they murmured, "In the name of God, God is greatest... And you did not throw when you threw, but it was God who threw," they swiftly retreated, throwing themselves to the ground.

The launcher trembled with the force of the blast. The shell arced through the sky before crashing into the nearby settlement of Netzarim. The three fighters embraced, congratulating one another on their success, before swiftly returning to the workshop. There, they dedicated themselves to crafting more shells and simple yet effective launchers.

Once the first launcher and five mortar shells were ready, Ibrahim loaded them into his car and sped northward. In Jabalia Refugee Camp, he knocked on the door of a house. A young man stepped out and got into the car. Together, they drove toward the northern outskirts of the residential area. They set up the launcher and fired the first shell at the settlement of Nissanit. Then, without delay, they returned. Ibrahim dropped off the young man, along with the launcher and the remaining four shells, before hurrying back to the workshop.

A second launcher was now complete, along with five more shells. He loaded them into his vehicle and headed south. In Khan Yunis Refugee Camp, he knocked on another door. Another young man emerged, and together they made their way to the camp's outskirts. There, they positioned the launcher and fired the first shell before returning. The young man took the remaining shells and the launcher with him.

The occupation's leaders erupted with threats and warnings over the mortar fire targeting their settlements. Tremors of fear ran through some of those at the forefront of political life in the West Bank and Gaza. Voices of caution rang out, calling for an end to these "reckless games" that, they claimed, would bring nothing but trouble.

Ibrahim and Hassan, however, remained undeterred. As they prepared more mortars, they listened to the news and the warnings with quiet smiles. Ibrahim shook his head and said, "Strange, these people. What do they want? Do they expect us to stand idly by as the occupation slaughters us? To do nothing but wail, wave white flags, and beg for mercy from a butcher who knows no mercy?"

Work, my beloved brothers, work! This is jihad—jihad! Victory or martyrdom! We must craft our weapons, however simple they may be. We must strive to develop them every day, increasing their destructive power, extending their range, striking the enemy who holds vast military capabilities. Despite the modesty of our arms and the scarcity of our resources, we will—by God’s will—reshape the battlefield. We will forge a new equation in this conflict, a balance of terror and deterrence. They bomb us; we bomb them.

May God be pleased with Umar ibn Al-Khattab, who once said, "By God, if I had nothing but dust, I would fight them with it." And praise be to God, we have far more than dust. We must fight with everything we possess and relentlessly seek to enhance our abilities. We stand at the beginning of a battle foretold by the Messenger of God (PBUH) in an authentic narration recorded in both Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim: **"The Hour will not be established until you fight the Jews, and the stone will say, 'O Muslim! O servant of Allah! There is a Jew behind me; come and kill him.'"**

That day is coming. It is near, God willing.

Abu Ali Mustafa, the General Secretary of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, steps out of his car and ascends the stairs to his office in a building in Ramallah. Minutes after he settles into his chair, an Apache helicopter closes in, locks onto the building, and fires. A roar of protest rises, faint and timid—how could the occupation forces target a political figure, a Palestinian leader, while the so-called civilized world turns a blind eye, deaf to the crime?

Weeks later, two young men spend a week at the Hyatt Hotel in Jerusalem, where Minister Rehavam Ze’evi—a radical Jew advocating the expulsion of Palestinians, a former general in the occupation’s army, and head of the so-called anti-terrorism unit—occasionally stays. At the designated hour, just past seven in the morning, Ze’evi steps out of his room. One of the young men calls his name. The minister turns, their eyes locking for a fleeting second—then, a gun is raised. Bullets pierce the morning silence. The man who called for the expulsion of an entire people falls dead.

The two young men slip into a car in the hotel’s underground parking lot and drive away. Within minutes, chaos erupts in and around the hotel. The occupation government unleashes threats and vows of revenge.

On the Palestinian side, voices rise, calling for an end to the resistance—an end to martyrdom operations, an end to mortar fire.

Ibrahim listens to those voices, those pleas, and smiles. This will not last... This will not last. The occupation will never allow it. They will keep attacking, leaving us with only two choices: surrender entirely, relinquishing every last right—or resist. And only then, perhaps, will the conversation change.

Our ruler and our executioner are one and the same—the occupier. And because we can never bow, never surrender our rights in full, and because our enemy will accept us only if we do so, this cannot last. Our enemy will soon resume its pressure, demanding concessions. But we will not yield. And so, they will return to their cycle of killing and aggression, believing it will break our resolve. That is why we must persist in our preparation and readiness. Come, Hassan, let's go.

Ibrahim, Hassan, and their companion, Adnan, drive toward Khan Younis, where they meet with a fellow fighter. Together, they head to a metalwork and lathe shop on Jalal Street, dedicating themselves to assembling mortars and shells. They instruct the shop owner and another fighter on the process before moving on to a second workshop, then a third, a fourth, and a fifth—passing on the knowledge, expanding the effort.

A young man from the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades steps out of a car in the heart of Tel Aviv, a bag in his hand. He walks steadily toward a wedding hall filled with occupiers. He sets the bag down, unzips it, and pulls out a Kalashnikov rifle, several magazines of ammunition, and a handful of grenades. He strides closer, then opens fire, tossing grenade after grenade, the explosion of bullets and shrapnel echoing through the hall. Occupants fall. Panic spreads. Moments later, a heavy force of occupation soldiers arrives, engaging in a fierce gunfight. And when the battle ends, his soul ascends to the highest heavens—after he has slain and wounded dozens.

Advanced occupation aircraft rain down missiles upon fighters, activists, and Palestinian youth across the land. The war machine devours lives without restraint. Soldiers prowl behind tanks, helicopters, and state-of-the-art weaponry. Enormous bulldozers tear through homes, workshops, and farmlands, leaving destruction in their wake.

But the warriors and the fedayeen of Palestine remain undeterred. With raw materials—fertilizers and other compounds—they craft their explosives, fashioning belts and strapping them to their bodies. Then, they set out into the very heart of the oppressive enemy, forcing them to taste the same bitter cup they pour upon our people, night and day.

The operations intensify in major cities—Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Netanya, Ashdod—spreading fear and panic among the occupiers. Streets stand deserted save for an old man or a young passerby hurrying along to complete some urgent task. Cafés sit empty. Restaurants remain untouched. Public transportation is nearly abandoned, the buses carrying little more than a lone passenger or two alongside the driver.



In the heart of Tel Aviv and West Jerusalem, sandbags began to stack high in front of doors and storefronts—piled over a meter and a half tall, as if these were military outposts or barracks.

Thousands of soldiers filled the streets, their presence multiplying tenfold over that of civilians. Every day, or every few days, new checkpoints and barricades appeared, where troops scrutinized cars and their passengers, spurred by fresh warnings of imminent operations. Endless lines of vehicles stretched down the roads, grinding life to a halt. In front of shuttered shops, "For Sale" and "Closed Until Further Notice" signs swayed in the breeze—remnants of a collapsed economy.

Meanwhile, Apache helicopters stalked their next target, striking down one figure after another. And with each assassination, tens of thousands flooded the streets, racing toward the latest blast site, desperate to rescue the wounded—if any life remained in them. Their voices thundered through the air, demanding retaliation, demanding vengeance against the ruthless occupier.

Ibrahim, Hassan, and Adnan sat together, poring over blueprints—designs for rockets with extended range and more potent mortar shells. Ibrahim turned to Adnan. Can you build these? He studied the plans, once, twice, then a third time before nodding. Without hesitation, they sprang into action. When the work was done, they loaded their creation into the car and sped toward Beit Hanoun, where they set up the rockets, lit the fuse beneath them, and stepped back, whispering their prayers for success. A few heartbeats later, the sky roared as the missile streaked past the border. The three fighters embraced before hurrying back—to craft more, to train others in distant towns.

And soon, Qassam rockets and others began soaring by the dozens—striking back at one crime, then another. Some voices trembled in fear, dreading the occupation's retaliation as threats poured in. But Ibrahim only smiled. What more can they do that they haven't done already? Assassinations, invasions, bombings, slaughter, destruction—they have burned everything to the ground. Now, let them rebuild it, so we can tear it down once more.

Adnan exhaled sharply. Can't you see? They're betting that people are exhausted—that the people just want rest, that the price we've paid has drained them dry.

Ibrahim turned to him, his eyes gleaming. Who is exhausted? Who has grown weary? You? Me? Our mothers? Our women—who have given everything, who have paid in the lives of their children, in their homes, in all they hold dear? Have you ever heard a single one of them utter a word of surrender? Haven't you seen, time and again, how the mother of a martyr stands firm, declaring that she is ready to sacrifice her other sons—for Jerusalem, for Al-Aqsa?

And as for those who claim that our people have grown weary, they are nothing but a handful—merchants of politics and profit, a feeble few. But the steadfast masses stand unshaken, willing to sacrifice all that is dear for their dignity, their honor, their sacred land. A boy, no older than sixteen, clad in a camouflage uniform, a green cap resting on his head—its fabric stitched with the words *There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His Messenger*—The Martyr Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades. A rifle slung over his shoulder, grenades fastened to his waist, he steps out of the car, strides to Abu Nidal's house in Shuja'iyya, and pushes open the door, stepping into the courtyard.

Umm Nidal gasps, her voice trembling. My beloved son, Muhammad! What is this, my child? A smile flickers across the boy's face. I am going on a martyrdom operation, Mother. She falls silent, just for a moment. He steps closer, pointing toward the ancient olive tree. Do you remember, Mother? Do you remember this tree? The one where Imad fell, where his blood was spilled years ago? Do you remember him? Do you remember how we cherished its fruit, believing his soul had seeped into its roots? Do you remember how you raised us, how you nurtured in us the love of Palestine, of Jerusalem, of jihad, of sacrifice? He takes a breath, his voice steady. The time has come, Mother. I saw it in my dreams—I saw myself storming their outpost, cutting them down like sheep before I fell, before I ascended to the gardens of bliss. I saw myself standing before the Messenger of Allah (PBUH), and he called to me—"Welcome, Muhammad! Welcome!"

Tears glisten in his mother's eyes. She lifts a corner of her headscarf, dabbing them away before they can trail down her cheeks. Then, she places her hands upon his shoulders, her voice firm. May Allah grant you victory, my son. May He guide your aim. She pulls him into an embrace, kissing his forehead, his hands, his rifle. *And remember—when you charge forward, do not hesitate. Do not look back. Show no mercy, for there is no mercy in the law of God, my beloved. We shall meet again, in the eternal gardens of paradise, with the beloved Prophet (PBUH). We shall meet again, O piece of my soul, O light of my heart.*

Muhammad bows, pressing his lips to her forehead, then her hand. He turns to leave, calling over his shoulder, *Keep the phone close, Mother. Keep it by your side. I will bid you my final farewell from there. And then he is gone.* Umm Nidal sinks onto her prayer rug, hands lifted, her whispered supplications flowing from the depths of her soul. Muhammad slithers through the barbed-wire fence surrounding the Gush Etzion settlement, crawling forward toward the military religious academy within. He retrieves his phone, presses a single button. From her mat, Umm Nidal snatches the device. *I am here, O light of my heart! His voice comes through—calm, unwavering. And I am here, Mother. I have reached my target, my dearest one. Farewell, Mother. We shall meet in the gardens of bliss. Farewell, my love. , I will leave the line open so you can hear the battle.* He secures the phone to his belt, steps forward, and storms the building, his voice thundering: *Allahu Akbar! Khyber has returned! One by one, his grenades tear through the air, bursting like lightning upon stone. He pushes onward, ramming through the doors of the main hall, rifle spitting fire. And back in her home, Umm Nidal closes her eyes, murmuring prayers between trembling lips.*

She hears his voice through the open line. O Allah, guide my aim. Strike, for You are the true Striker, and Your strike never fails, O Lord of the worlds. Gunfire erupts, bullets ripping through the air as forces rush to the scene. Muhammad falls, his lips moving with his final breath: I bear witness that there is no god but Allah, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. A piercing zaghrouta bursts from Umm Muhammad's lips, her voice soaring in exultation. Praise be to Allah, Who has honored me with his martyrdom! I ask Allah to unite us once more in the abode of His mercy. People gather, their whispers filling the air. A neighbor approaches her, eyes brimming with astonishment. You bade him farewell, knowing he was going to his death? Umm Muhammad's voice is unwavering. By Allah, he is dearer to me than this world and all it holds. Yet, what is this world beside the path of Allah, beside Jerusalem, beside Al-Aqsa? By Allah, I would offer Nidal, Husam, and Rawad in sacrifice, if it be for the dignity of our people, for the honor of our nation. And I yearn—oh, how I yearn—that Allah may bestow His mercy upon us and unite us all in a seat of truth beside the Beloved, peace and blessings be upon him. The shrill ring of my mobile phone cuts through my thoughts. I lift it to my ear. From the other end, Ibrahim's voice reaches me. Hello, Ahmed. Peace be upon you. I exclaim with urgency, Ibrahim! And peace be upon you, and the mercy and blessings of Allah! Where have you been, man? It's been too long since I saw you! A chuckle. I missed you, so I called. How are you? How is your family? Send them all my regards. And don't forget—kiss Israa and Yasser for me. I ask, Aren't you coming to see them yourself? It's been a long time since they last saw you. He hesitates. I don't know. I'll try, but you know how busy I am. And how are you, Ibrahim? I press. He laughs. Ahmed, do you know? Last night, I had a vision—clear as the break of dawn. I saw myself reciting the sayings of the Messenger of Allah (PBUH). His voice deepens as he begins: **"Abu Huraira (RA) narrated that the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said: 'The Hour will not be established until the Muslims fight the Jews and kill them, until the Jew will hide behind the stones and the trees. And the stones and the trees will say: O Muslim, O servant of Allah, there is a Jew behind me—come and kill him! Except for the Gharqad tree, for it is one of the trees of the Jews.'"** "And from Abdullah ibn Hawala: **The Messenger of Allah (PBUH) said: 'You will become armies—an army in Al-Sham, an army in Iraq, and an army in Yemen.'** Abdullah said: **'O Messenger of Allah, choose for me!'** He replied: **'Go to Al-Sham. But if you refuse, then go to Yemen and drink from its wells, for Allah has guaranteed Al-Sham and its people for me.'"** "And another: **'A group from my nation will remain steadfast upon the truth, triumphant against their enemies, unharmed by those who oppose them—save for afflictions that may touch them—until the decree of Allah comes while they remain as they are.'** They asked, **'O Messenger of Allah, where will they be?'** He said, **'In Jerusalem and its surroundings.'"**

And from Abdullah ibn Hawala, who said: **“O Messenger of Allah, write for me a land to be in, for if I knew that you would remain, I would choose nothing over being near you.”** He replied, **“You must go to Al-Sham,”** repeating it three times. But when the Prophet (PBUH) saw his reluctance, he said, **“Do you know what Allah (PBUH) says? He says: ‘O Al-Sham, O Al-Sham, My hand is upon you. O Al-Sham, you are My chosen land. Within you, I place My select servants. You are My blessing and My whip of punishment. You are the elite, and to you shall be the gathering. The night I was taken on the Night Journey, I saw a white column, gleaming like a pearl, carried by the angels. I asked, ‘What are you carrying?’ They said, ‘We carry the pillar of Islam, commanded to be placed in Al-Sham.’ And while I was asleep, I saw a book snatched from beneath my pillow. I feared that Allah had abandoned the people of the earth, but then I followed it with my gaze and saw it as a radiant light before me, until it was placed in Al-Sham. So, whoever refuses to go to Al-Sham, let him go to Yemen and drink from its wells, for Allah has guaranteed Al-Sham and its people.”**

Then, I saw myself, Ahmed, fasting, and I saw the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) saying to me, **“Your breaking of the fast is with us today, O Ibrahim.”** So now, I wait. I cried out, **“Does that mean...?”** He cut me off, **“Do not cry out, Ahmed. Do not cry out. I am taking every precaution. But this is an invitation that cannot be refused. Farewell, Ahmed.”** And with that, he ended the call.

I stood frozen for a moment, tears welling in my eyes, for I knew—these were words of farewell. Then I rushed up the stairs to the second floor, where Maryam stood, looking at me with a smile. I asked, **“Did he speak to you?”** She smiled and said, **“Yes, but in a vision, in a dream. He bid me farewell, Ahmed, a farewell I shall never forget as long as I live. He entrusted me with Israa and Yasser.”**

She was smiling, even as tears shimmered in her eyes. My own tears spilled onto my cheeks, hot and unrelenting, as she continued to smile and said, **“You weep, you fool? What has come over you...?!!”**

The explosion rang out, deafening and final, as the Apache helicopter struck the vehicle Ibrahim was in. I felt my heart stop. Then I ran.

Thousands surged toward the car that had been struck, and I heard some of them repeating, **“This is Ibrahim Al-Salih.”** I gathered Ibrahim’s remains and lifted them onto a stretcher, and the crowds surged like a raging sea around the martyr’s body, carrying him home.

At the doorstep, Maryam stood, wrapping her scarf around her head, covering her hair, her smile unwavering. Her zaghrouta rang high above the roaring crowd. To her right stood Yasser, to her left Israa, and behind her, my mother, wiping away a tear with the edge of her scarf.



I reached the door just as Mahmoud emerged from the house. I hoisted Yasser onto my shoulders, while Mahmoud lifted Israa onto his. I extended my hand toward Maryam, and Mahmoud did the same. But instead of grasping our hands, she handed each of us a Kalashnikov rifle. We seized the weapons, raised them high above our heads, and charged forward, the crowd behind us roaring in unison: "Khaybar, Khaybar, O Jews... The army of Muhammad shall return! In the name of Allah—Allahu Akbar! In the name of Allah—Khaybar has come! With our souls, with our blood, we sacrifice for you, O martyr! With our souls, with our blood, we sacrifice for you, O Palestine! To Jerusalem we go—martyrs by the millions!" From the side streets, thousands emerged—masked fighters from the Al-Qassam Brigades, dressed in their recognizable attire, forming endless lines beneath the fluttering green banners. From the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, their ranks extended infinitely, their yellow flags waving in the air. From the Al-Quds Brigades, black banners soared high above. Others carried weapons of every kind, waving them defiantly in the air, honoring the martyr's farewell. As I shook my rifle in the air, I held Yasser with my other hand, perched on my shoulders. The images, the voices, and the final words of Ibrahim remained etched in my mind, never leaving me—not even for a moment.

**Completed in December 2004 ·Be'er Sheva Prison, Eshel, Palestine**  
**This novel concluded within the confines of Be'er Sheva Prison, its thirtieth chapter finished. Yet, the tragedy of its author and his comrades continues to unfold—entrenched within the depths of the occupation's dungeons.**

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**The Thorn and the Carnation**  
Embodies the duality of pain and hope in a  
way that touches the heart

The "thorn" reflects the bitterness of harsh  
circumstances and the ongoing suffering under  
oppression, while the "carnation" symbolizes renewed  
hope and the dream of freedom and liberation. This blend  
of pain and hope encapsulates the philosophy of Palestinian  
struggle, which transforms suffering into a driving force for  
liberation and dignity

Through this profound duality, it delivers a humanistic  
message about perseverance, resistance, and the belief that  
light can emerge even from the darkest moments. It tells a story  
that intertwines hardship with the desire for life, becoming a  
living testament to the strength of the human will in facing  
adversity

The Thorn and the Carnation is not a story about one  
person or an individual experience, but a narrative of an  
entire nation

Written by translator Abdul Latif Al-Dahmali

