

Chapter One

CAPTURED

1996

I steered my little white Subaru around a blind corner on one of the narrow roads that led to the main highway outside the West Bank city of Ramallah. Stepping lightly on the brake, I slowly approached one of the innumerable checkpoints that dot the roads running to and from Jerusalem.

“Turn off the engine! Stop the car!” someone shouted in broken Arabic.

Without warning, six Israeli soldiers jumped out of the bushes and blocked my car, each man carrying a machine gun, and each gun pointed directly at my head.

Panic welled up in my throat. I stopped the car and threw the keys through the open window.

“Get out! Get out!”

Wasting no time, one of the men jerked open the door and threw me to the dusty ground. I barely had time to cover my head before the beating began. But even as I tried to protect my face, the heavy boots of the soldiers quickly found other targets: ribs, kidneys, back, neck, skull. Two of the men dragged me to my feet and pulled me to the checkpoint, where I was forced onto my knees behind a cement barricade. My hands were bound behind my back with a sharp-edged plastic zip tie that was cinched much too tight. Somebody blindfolded me and shoved me into the back of a jeep onto the floor. Fear mingled with anger as I wondered where they were taking me and how long I would be gone. I was barely eighteen years old and only a few weeks away from my final high school exams. What was going to happen to me?

After a fairly short drive, the jeep slowed to a halt. A soldier pulled me from the back and removed my blindfold. Squinting in the bright sunlight, I realized that we were at Ofer Army Base.

An Israeli defense base, Ofer was one of the largest and most secure military facilities in the West Bank.

As we moved toward the main building, we passed by several armored tanks, which were shrouded by canvas tarps. The monstrous mounds had always intrigued me whenever I had seen them from outside the gates. They looked like huge, oversized boulders.

Once inside the building, we were met by a doctor who gave me a quick once-over, apparently to make sure I was fit to withstand interrogation. I must have passed because, within minutes, the handcuffs and blindfold were replaced, and I was shoved back into the jeep.

As I tried to contort my body so that it would fit into the small area usually reserved for

people's feet, one beefy soldier put his boot squarely on my hip and pressed the muzzle of his M16 assault rifle into my chest. The hot reek of petrol fumes saturated the floor of the vehicle and forced my throat closed. Whenever I tried to adjust my cramped position, the soldier jabbed the gun barrel deeper into my chest.

Without warning, a searing pain shot through my body and made my toes clench. It was as if a rocket were exploding in my skull. The force of the blow had come from the front seat, and I realized that one of the soldiers must have used his rifle butt to hit me in the head. Before I had time to protect myself, however, he hit me again, harder this time and in the eye. I tried to move out of reach but the soldier who had been using me for a footstool dragged me upright.

“Don't move or I *will* shoot you!” he shouted.

But I couldn't help it. Each time his comrade hit me, I involuntarily recoiled from the impact. Under the rough blindfold, my eye was beginning to swell closed, and my face felt numb. There was no circulation in my legs. My breathing came in shallow gasps. I had never felt such pain. But worse than the physical pain was the horror of being at the mercy of something merciless, something raw and inhuman. My mind reeled as I struggled to understand the motives of my tormentors. I understood fighting and killing out of hatred, rage, revenge, or even necessity. But I had done nothing to these soldiers. I had not resisted. I had done everything I was told to do. I was no threat to them. I was bound, blindfolded, and unarmed. What was inside these people that made them take such delight in hurting me? Even the basest animal kills for a reason, not just for sport.

I thought about how my mother was going to feel when she learned that I had been arrested. With my father already in an Israeli prison, I was the man of the family. Would I be held in prison for months and years as he had been? If so, how would my mother manage with me gone too? I began to understand how my dad felt—worried about his family and grieved by the knowledge that we were worrying about him. Tears sprang to my eyes as I imagined my mother's face.

I also wondered if all my years of high school were about to be wasted. If I indeed was headed for an Israeli prison, I would miss my final exams next month. A torrent of questions and cries raced through my mind even as the blows continued to fall: *Why are you doing this to me? What have I done? I am not a terrorist! I'm just a kid. Why are you beating me like this?*

I'm pretty sure I passed out several times, but every time I came to, the soldiers were still there, hitting me. I couldn't dodge the blows. The only thing I could do was scream. I felt bile rising in the back of my throat and I gagged, vomiting all over myself.

I felt a deep sadness before losing consciousness. Was this the end? Was I going to die before my life had really even started?

Chapter Two

THE LADDER OF FAITH

1955–1977

My name is Mosab Hassan Yousef.

I am the oldest son of Sheikh Hassan Yousef, one of the seven founders of the Hamas organization. I was born in the West Bank village of Ramallah, and I am part of one of the most religious Islamic families in the Middle East.

My story begins with my grandfather, Sheikh Yousef Dawood, who was the religious leader—or imam—for the village of Al-Janiya, located in the part of Israel that the Bible calls Judea and Samaria. I adored my grandfather. His soft, white beard tickled my cheek when he hugged me, and I could sit for hours, listening to the sound of his sweet voice chanting the *adhan*—the Muslim call to prayer. And I had plenty of opportunities to do so since Muslims are called to pray five times every day. Chanting *adhan* and the Qur'an is not an easy thing to do well, but when my grandfather did it, the sound was magical.

When I was a boy, some chanters bothered me so much that I wanted to stuff rags in my ears. But my grandfather was a passionate man, and he carried his listeners deep into the meaning of the *adhan* as he sang. He believed every word of it.

About four hundred people lived in Al-Janiya in the days when it was under Jordanian rule and Israeli occupation. But the residents of this little rural village had little use for politics.

Nestled into the gently rolling hills a few miles northwest of Ramallah, Al-Janiya was a very peaceful and beautiful place. Its sunsets tinted everything in hues of rose and violet. The air was clean and clear, and from many of the hills' peaks you could see all the way to the Mediterranean.

By four o'clock every morning, my grandfather was on his way to the mosque. When he finished morning prayers, he would take his little donkey to the field, work the soil, tend his olive trees, and drink fresh water from the spring that flowed down the mountain. There was no air pollution because only one person in Al-Janiya had a car.

When he was at home, my grandfather welcomed a steady stream of visitors. He was more than the imam—he was everything to the people in that village. He prayed over every newborn baby and whispered the *adhan* in the child's ear. When someone died, my grandfather washed and anointed the body and wrapped it in winding clothes. He married them, and he buried them. My father, Hassan, was his favorite son. Even as a young boy, before it was required of him, my father went regularly with my grandfather to the mosque. None of his brothers cared anything about Islam like he did.

At his father's side, Hassan learned to chant the *adhan*. And like his father, he had a voice and

a passion that people responded to. My grandfather was very proud of him. When my father was twelve years old, my grandfather said, "Hassan, you have shown that you are very interested in God and Islam. So I am going to send you to Jerusalem to learn sharia." Sharia is Islamic religious law that deals with daily life, from family and hygiene to politics and economics. Hassan knew and cared nothing about politics or economics. He simply wanted to be like his father. He wanted to read and chant the Qur'an and to serve people. But he was about to learn that his father was much more than a trusted religious leader and beloved public servant. Because values and traditions have always meant more to the Arab people than government constitutions and courts, men like my grandfather often became the highest level of authority.

Especially in areas where secular leaders were weak or corrupt, the word of a religious leader was considered law.

My father was not sent to Jerusalem simply to study religion; his father was preparing him to rule. So for the next few years, my father lived and studied in the Old City of Jerusalem beside Al-Aqsa Mosque—the iconic golden-domed structure that visually defines the profile of Jerusalem in the eyes of most of the world's people. At the age of eighteen, he completed his studies and moved to Ramallah, where he was immediately employed as imam of the mosque in Old Town. Filled with passion to serve both Allah and his people, my father was eager to begin his work in that community, just as his father had done in Al-Janiya.

But Ramallah was not Al-Janiya. The former was a bustling city. The latter was a sleepy little village. The first time my father entered the mosque, he was shocked to find only five old men waiting for him. Everyone else, it seemed, was in the coffeehouses and pornographic theaters, getting drunk and gambling. Even the man who chanted the adhan for the mosque next door had run a microphone and cord from the minaret, so he could continue the Islamic tradition without interrupting his card game.

My father's heart was broken for these people, though he wasn't sure how he would ever reach them. Even his five old men admitted they only came to the mosque because they knew they were going to die soon and wanted to go to heaven, but at least they were willing to listen.

So he worked with what he had. He led these fellows in prayer, and he taught them the Qur'an.

In a very short amount of time, they grew to love him as if he were an angel sent from heaven.

Outside the mosque, it was a different story. For many, my father's love for the god of the Qur'an only highlighted their own casual approach to the faith, and they were offended.

"Who is this child doing the adhan?" people scoffed, pointing to my baby-faced father. "He doesn't belong here. He is a troublemaker."

"Why is this little guy embarrassing us? Only old people go to the mosque."

“I would rather be a dog than be like you,” one of them shouted in his face.

My father quietly endured the persecution, never shouting back or defending himself. But his love and compassion for the people would not let him give up. And he continued to do the work he had been called to do: urging the people to return to Islam and Allah.

He shared his concerns with my grandfather, who quickly realized that my father had even greater zeal and potential than he had originally thought. My grandfather sent him to Jordan for advanced Islamic study. As you will see, the people he met there would ultimately change the course of my family’s history and even affect the history of conflict in the Middle East. But before I continue, I need to pause briefly to explain a few important points of Islamic history that will help you understand why the countless diplomatic solutions that have been put forward have uniformly failed and can offer no hope for peace.

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Between 1517 and 1923, Islam—personified by the Ottoman Caliphate—spread from its base in Turkey across three continents. But after a few centuries of great economic and political power, the Ottoman Empire became centralized and corrupt and began its decline.

Under the Turks, Muslim villages throughout the Middle East were subject to persecution and crushing taxation. Istanbul was simply too far away for the caliph to protect the faithful from abuses by soldiers and local officials.

By the twentieth century, many Muslims were becoming disillusioned and began to look for a different way of life. Some embraced the atheism of the recently arrived communists. Others buried their problems in liquor, gambling, and pornography, much of which was introduced by Westerners who were lured to the area by mineral wealth and growing industrialization.

In Cairo, Egypt, a devout young primary schoolteacher named Hassan al-Banna wept for his countrymen who were poor, jobless, and godless. But he blamed the West, not the Turks, and he believed that the only hope for his people, especially the youth, was a return to the purity and simplicity of Islam.

He went to the coffeehouses, climbed up on tables and chairs, and preached to everyone about Allah. Drunkards mocked him. Religious leaders challenged him. But most of the people loved him because he gave them hope.

In March 1928, Hassan al-Banna founded the Society of the Muslim Brothers, popularly known as the Muslim Brotherhood. The goal of the new organization was to rebuild society according to Islamic principles. Within a decade, every province in Egypt had a branch. Al-Banna’s brother established a chapter in the Palestinian territories in 1935. And after twenty years, the Brotherhood numbered about half a million in Egypt alone.

Members of the Muslim Brotherhood were largely drawn from the poorest and least influential classes—but they were fiercely loyal to the cause. They gave out of their own pockets to help their fellow Muslims, as called for in the Qur'an.

Many people in the West who stereotype all Muslims as terrorists don't know about the side of Islam that reflects love and mercy. It cares for the poor, widows, and orphans. It facilitates education and welfare. It unites and strengthens. This is the side of Islam that motivated those early leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. Of course, there is also the other side, the one that calls all Muslims to jihad, to struggle and contend with the world until they establish a global caliphate, led by one holy man who rules and speaks for Allah. This will be important for you to understand and to remember as we go along. But back to our history lesson....

In 1948, the Muslim Brotherhood attempted a coup against the Egyptian government, which the Brotherhood blamed for the nation's growing secularism. The uprising was interrupted before it could get traction, however, when the British Mandate ended and Israel declared its independence as a Jewish state.

Muslims throughout the Middle East were outraged. According to the Qur'an, when an enemy invades any Muslim country, all Muslims are called as one to fight to defend their land. From the viewpoint of the Arab world, foreigners had invaded and now occupied Palestine, home of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third holiest place on earth after Mecca and Medina. The mosque was built on the site from which it was believed that Mohammad had traveled with the angel Gabriel to heaven and spoken with Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.

Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq immediately invaded the new Jewish state. Among the ten thousand Egyptian troops were thousands of Muslim Brotherhood volunteers. The Arab coalition, however, was outnumbered and outgunned. Less than a year later, the Arab troops had been driven out.

As a result of the war, about three-quarters of a million Palestinian Arabs fled or were expelled from their homes in the territories that became the State of Israel.

Although the United Nations passed Resolution 194, which stated in part that "refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so" and that "compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return," this recommendation was never implemented. Tens of thousands of Palestinians who fled Israel during the Arab-Israeli War never regained their homes and land. Many of these refugees and their descendants live in squalid refugee camps operated by the United Nations (UN) to this day.

When the now-armed members of the Muslim Brotherhood returned from the battlefield to Egypt, the suspended coup was on again. But news of the overthrow plan leaked out, and the

Egyptian government banned the Brotherhood, confiscated its assets, and imprisoned many of its members. Those who escaped arrest assassinated Egypt's prime minister a few weeks later.

Hassan al-Banna, in turn, was assassinated on February 12, 1949, presumably by the government secret service. But the Brotherhood was not crushed. In just twenty years, Hassan al-Banna had shaken Islam out of its dormancy and created a revolution with armed fighters. And for the next few years, the organization continued to add to its numbers and its influence among the people, not only in Egypt but also in nearby Syria and Jordan.

By the time my father arrived in Jordan in the mid-1970s to continue his studies, the Muslim Brotherhood there was well established and beloved by the people. Its members were doing everything that was on my father's heart—encouraging renewed faith among those who had strayed from the Islamic way of life, healing those who were hurt, and trying to save people from the corrupting influences in society. He believed these men were religious reformers to Islam, as Martin Luther and William Tyndale were to Christianity. They only wanted to save people and improve their lives, not to kill and destroy. And when my father met some of the early leaders of the Brotherhood, he said, “Yes, this is what I have been looking for.”

What my father saw in those early days was the part of Islam that reflects love and mercy. What he didn't see, what he perhaps has never yet allowed himself to see, is the other side of Islam.

Islamic life is like a ladder, with prayer and praising Allah as the bottom rung. The higher rungs represent helping the poor and needy, establishing schools, and supporting charities. The highest rung is jihad.

The ladder is tall. Few look up to see what is at the top. And progress is usually gradual, almost imperceptible—like a barn cat stalking a swallow. The swallow never takes its eyes off the cat. It just stands there, watching the cat pace back and forth, back and forth. But the swallow does not judge depth. It does not see that the cat is getting a little bit closer with every pass until, in the blink of an eye, the cat's claws are stained with the swallow's blood.

Traditional Muslims stand at the foot of the ladder, living in guilt for not really practicing Islam. At the top are fundamentalists, the ones you see in the news killing women and children for the glory of the god of the Qur'an. Moderates are somewhere in between.

A moderate Muslim is actually more dangerous than a fundamentalist, however, because he appears to be harmless, and you can never tell when he has taken that next step toward the top.

Most suicide bombers began as moderates.

The day my father first put his foot on the bottom rung of the ladder, he could never have

imagined how far from his original ideals he would eventually climb. And thirty-five years later, I would want to ask him: Do you remember where you started? You saw all those lost people, your heart broke for them, and you wanted them to come to Allah and be safe. Now suicide bombers and innocent blood? Is this what you set out to do? But speaking to one's father about such things is not done in our culture. And so he continued on that dangerous path.