

From the bestselling author of **THE HOSTAGE**

DUNCAN FALCONER



THE HIJACK

A dirty bomb. A dirty world. A one-man clean-up operation

The Hijack

Duncan Falconer

Little, Brown (2010)

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~~Duncan Falconer is a former member of Britain's elite Special Boat Service and 14 Int., Northern Ireland's top-secret SAS undercover detachment. After more than a decade of operational service he left the SBS and went into the private security 'circuit'. *The Hijack* is his second novel. He has also written a non-fiction bestseller, *First Into Action*, which documents the real-life exploits of the SBS.~~

Also by Duncan Falconer:

The Hostage

Non-fiction
First Into Action

The Hijack

DUNCAN FALCONER

www.littlebrown.co.uk

Published by Hachette Digital 2010

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

eISBN : 978 0 7481 2226 4

This ebook produced by JOUVE, FRANCE

Hachette Digital
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette Livre UK Company

To my Palestinian friend,
my Israeli friend, my Russian friend
and my dear English friend

Chapter 1

The approach to the English Channel, two hundred miles due south of the Devon coastline, was the furthest from home Abed Abu Omar had ever been in his life. At forty minutes past midnight it was wet and gloomy, but, despite the constant drizzle that had gradually soaked him and his men since they left the Spanish coast the afternoon before, the desert in winter had sometimes been much colder and he had spent many nights during his younger days without wood to burn or food for his belly.

The cloud was low but allowed visibility in all directions for several miles. The heavy swell that had arrived with the setting of the sun contributed to the conditions, making them perfect for the mission. Allah was indeed smiling down upon the twenty Arabs huddled under their glistening army surplus ponchos, equally divided between two wooden, open fishing boats tied alongside each other and holding position, their engines silent. The signal-strength indicator on Abed's GPS flickered as it struggled to maintain a link with the navigational satellites through the cloud. The last position reading indicated they were some five hundred feet off the proposed rendezvous point, but that was not a great concern to him. With this particular target he could afford to be much further from its track without fear of missing it.

The day before, Abed had received a message on his satellite phone informing him the vessel had been sighted passing Gibraltar and the Pillars of Hercules where it entered the Atlantic. Short of a mechanical breakdown, or some other unforeseen incident, it would soon be in sight.

Everything had so far gone to plan: the secret training in the desert camps of Lebanon, Syria and Jordan; access to the various ships owned by sympathisers in the Persian Gulf; the procurement of the equipment; the preparation of the two second-hand boats purchased in Spain; and the arrival of the men from various places in Europe, America and the Middle East. The easiest part had been the acquisition of their weapons: not a gun, bullet or explosive device among them. Each man carried a Spanish garrote, a dagger and a scimitar - the latter imported into Spain as antique artefacts - and they could use each of them with practised skill. For twelve months they had prepared and trained together for this moment, although it did not become a certainty until four months ago. Even now, with the time measured in minutes, there was still a possibility the operation could be aborted. That could happen right up to the point of no return, but Abed believed it was now unlikely. The sheiks, the masters, were as committed to the operation as Abed and his men.

He had not spent all of his short life, twenty-eight years, like so many of his people, waiting for the day he could serve Allah against Zion and its supporters and, if need be, make the ultimate sacrifice for the cause. Nor was his decision finally to take up the sword because he had been born and raised in the largest prison in the world, the Gaza Strip, or because so many people he knew had been killed and incarcerated. They were not the reasons he was here, although they had contributed over the years to the smouldering ember of hatred in his heart that one night burst into flames.

Abed's place of birth was Rafah, a Palestinian refugee camp in the south of Gaza along the border with Egypt. Up until just over a year ago, when he was smuggled out to begin his training for the mission, he had spent his entire life on the narrow strip of land eighteen miles by five that was the most densely populated place on earth. Gaza was surrounded on three sides by a narrow strip of no-man's-land, heavily fenced and razor-wired, and watched over by towers manned by lookouts and heavy machine guns. Like the Berlin Wall during the Cold War, or an American high-security prison, it meant death to anyone who tried to penetrate the perimeter day or night. The graveyards were

littered with those who had made the attempt. On the map, Gaza looked like a long, crooked rectangle surrounded by desert on three sides and the Mediterranean Sea, constantly patrolled by navy gunboats, F16s and helicopters, on the fourth. Only a privileged few, those who had foreign passports or special permits, were allowed to leave Gaza. Several thousand Palestinians were admitted through the Erez Crossing in the north into Israel on work days as cheap labour for the Israeli factories the other side of the border, but their passes were for twenty-four hours only and did not allow travel beyond the place of work. To be caught outside Gaza without a proper permit meant imprisonment, often for many years.

Abed lived with his mother in a breezeblock terraced hut with dirt floors in all but the main room which was concrete. This was also the only room with electricity, when it was available. They had their own running-water supply - a tap in the unroofed entrance - and since the Israelis blew up the sewage works at the beginning of the current intifada, the toilet was a bucket behind a curtain at the end of the hallway which was emptied into a large hole in the ground in a derelict house near no man's-land fifty yards away. Despite the conditions they were well-off compared to most others in the camps. The average income of a refugee family was ten US dollars a month. There was little industry left in Gaza, certainly nowhere near enough to provide work for those who were able. The population was more than a million, half of which was under fifteen years old, and a meagre living was scraped in any way one could.

Abed was eleven years old when it occurred to him that his mother regularly received money although she never worked, but it was not until his teens that he asked her where it came from. He loved and revered his mother who had always cherished and cared for her only child, her one reason for living in this vile jail, something she often said to him after kissing his forehead each night before he went to sleep. The day he asked about the money she sat him down and explained how she came by it, also revealing for the first time the truth behind another great mystery of his life: his father. His story was disappointingly brief for one of such importance, sketchily describing how Abed's father had escaped the country by fishing boat to Cyprus soon after Abed was born, and from there how he made his way to England where he settled to live and work. The plan behind the escape was that one day Abed and his mother would follow him and they would all be together again, away from the poverty and humility of the camps. However, his father had failed to get the necessary paperwork and visas, or perhaps the Israelis had refused to recognise them; Abed's mother was never clear about these kinds of facts and did not seem particularly interested in the smaller details. As far as she was concerned, they were trapped in Gaza, his father was in England, and that was that.

Like most of the older generation in the camps, she had grown to accept her way of life and had long since given up the dream of one day being free to live like those in other countries, in a proper house with utilities, a garden and the freedom to go where she wanted. The camp was over fifty years old, established in 1948, when the first people were forced out of their homes from towns and villages all over Palestine and herded like cattle into dozens of camps in Gaza and the West Bank, to live in crowded tents without proper medical facilities, food or sanitation. In time, they started up basic industries, made bricks and built small huts; these were closely packed together as their numbers grew, and only temporary abodes for they all hoped and believed that one day they would return to the farms and land they had owned for hundreds of generations. Her dreams, like those of most others, had withered with time. She had been born in Rafah camp, in an old British army tent barely a hundred yards from the hut she now lived in and where she knew she would die. Whatever the reasons for Abed's father's failure to get them out, the fact was they could not leave to join him, and he could not return without having to remain in Gaza for the rest of his life. He had chosen to stay in England where he could earn enough money to send them some each month so that they could live mo

comfortably than most.

The money arrived in his mother's bank account promptly until Abed was twenty years old, then shortly after his birthday it stopped. His mother was philosophical about it, supposing Abed's father had died and that there was nothing they could do about it anyway. That part of their lives, the most comfortable times, was over. She had always seen it as a bonus and now they would live like everyone else in the camp: almost solely dependent on help from the United Nations.

Abed remained curious about his father and asked her many questions about him: where he lived in England; if he had ever written to her; and if he was still alive the reasons why he might have stopped sending money. Abed's mother showed no interest in discussing the subject. Then one day he pushed her too far and demanded he had a right to know about his father. She lashed out at him with a venom he had never seen before and yelled that it pained her too much to talk about it and she didn't want him to mention his father ever again.

He did not.

Abed left university that same week and found work with a nearby metalsmith where he earned enough money to subsidise the UN rations, without which everyone in the camps might starve.

If he ever suspected his mother's stories about his father were lies, it never prepared him for the day he learned the dark and terrible truth, the same day he was smuggled out of Gaza, a truth that was like a cut across his heart he would always feel.

Abed had been asked many times to join the ranks of the local freedom fighters such as Fatah or Hamas, or factions like the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. He always respectfully declined. His family was Christian Orthodox, a tiny minority among the Muslims, although it was not strange to find Christians fighting for the Jihad, only unusual because of their small number. Abed was Palestinian and shared the torment inflicted upon his race that did not distinguish between Muslim and Christian, but his heart did not allow him to join the fight. It had not been wounded enough, not yet.

Abed showed above-average intelligence and athleticism in college and it was noticed by those who watched how patient he was. He was a listener more than a talker and did not display the characteristic hysteria that most Palestinians expressed after an Israeli raid and during the funeral that immediately followed a death, or when the futility of it all became overwhelming. There was something interesting about him, though most could not say with precision what it was. He was not a follower, and even though as a boy he rarely joined in the ritualistic, almost daily, stoning of the occupying army, which for some meant paying the ultimate price, he was never taunted for being a coward. It was obvious to everyone he was not, even though he had never done anything brave. Patience is a revered virtue for the Arab, especially among those who live in the camps. The men who watched were confident they would turn one day. Some men will always offer the other cheek and others never. And some, and they expected Abed to be of this type, might offer it once or twice before something pushed them over the edge. This could be relied upon in Gaza because there was no shortage of pushing by the enemy, and much was expected of Abed when that day came.

What changed Abed's mind about joining the Jihad, what pushed him over the top to take an active role in the struggle, was relatively sudden, although it was the straw that broke the camel's back. Some picked up arms out of despair, sometimes strapping explosives to their bodies and blowing themselves up along with as many of the enemy as possible. Others joined out of sheer anger and frustration and hatred. Abed best fitted this latter category, though he didn't discuss his innermost feelings with anyone, not even his mother. It was not a desperate act and he would certainly never

throw his life away on a suicide bomb attack.

The event that wrenched open his heart and ignited the embers happened during the week he turned twenty-six years old, the same week he opened a metal shop of his own. The peace for him ended late one Sunday night during an Israeli incursion into the Rafah refugee camp.

These attacks were not unusual by any means and happened nearly every night somewhere in Gaza: raids by tanks, armoured personnel carriers, and Apache helicopter gunships, deep into the towns from any one of the numerous military outposts that surrounded the Strip. After the 1967 war, the Israelis decided they wanted Gaza for themselves and gradually carved chunks out of it by building settlements and fortresses for their own people to occupy. By the time Abed reached his twenties, almost 50 per cent of Gaza had been confiscated to house only a few thousand Israelis. The explanation for the nightly incursions was to protect the settlements and discourage the Palestinians from attempting to expel them.

The first clue that danger was in the wind that night for the people living in Rafah camp was the cessation in the sporadic bursts of machine gun fire in no-man's-land along the border a street away. There was always a burst every ten minutes or so. A saying in the camp was that one slept with the gunfire and was woken by the silence.

Abed sat up in his bed, his ears searching to confirm the sounds he was as familiar with as the wind whistling through the date trees and the waves crashing on to the beach. When he was sure the distant creak and rumble was that of tanks and APCs, he put on his jeans and trainers and went to the front door, opening it just enough to peer carefully into the dark street. As the metallic clatter grew louder there was the unmistakable crunch of a nearby building being crashed through. It appeared that Abed's neighbourhood was the night's target. That was not new, of course. Rafah had been attacked dozens upon dozens of times in the past few years, but there had not been an incursion into Abed's immediate neighbourhood for several months.

He was tempted to make his way down to the corner of the block to the main street that led to the marketplace to take a look and confirm what by now was obvious, but the snipers would most likely already be on the prowl, and if he was seen he would be shot. They were not the only unseen danger: the Apache gunships would also be hovering high above, their engines cloaked by noise suppressors, watching through night vision aids for anything living to show itself in the battered streets below. Many residents, regardless of age or gender, had died with a bullet to the chest or brain because they had been too curious and had not fought the urge to look out of their window during such times.

There was another loud crash from the opposite direction, followed by the guttural revving of a massive engine: another tank. They were penetrating from several directions. Whatever their area of focus was, Abed decided his home must be close to it, if not directly in it.

Suddenly the house at the end of the street crumpled and a tank brushed aside the front of it as if they were made of sugar blocks. A burst of machine gun fire followed as the tank continued past Abed's block and on to the next.

There was another long rattle of machine gun fire from behind the house which was very close. Then came the sound of someone running down the street towards him. The next burst of fire was different, lighter. Abed knew it was not the enemy. It was erratic and had the desperate characteristics of the hunted, not the hunter.

Abed could make out two men in his street carrying AK47 assault rifles, an easily recognisable weapon since they were often on display in Gaza City during the daytime when the Israelis rarely

attacked. Israeli soldiers carried mostly American M16s or Canadian versions of the same model. They never used AK47s.

The men paused outside Abed's house looking uncertain about where to go next, with little time to decide. Abed remained still, watching them from the shadow of his door, which was slightly ajar. One of them sensed Abed and looked straight at him, and for a moment Abed wondered if they were considering an escape through his home. If the enemy suspected, it would mean the end of his home, literally, and possibly his incarceration. Despite the dangers, Abed opened his door to offer them entry.

'Close your door,' the man said. 'Stay out of sight.' He was tall and lithe and gripped his rifle close to his body, his finger through the trigger guard, ready to use it in an instant. Abed did not know him, although he looked vaguely familiar. The man was not from Rafah camp. Perhaps he was from Khan Younis, the larger town just north of Rafah. The man tapped his partner who was covering the other direction and they ran down a narrow alleyway opposite Abed's front door.

A moment later he heard more running in the direction the men had come from, and he instinctively closed his door and carefully drew the bolt across without making a noise. There was a roar of engines and the sound of masonry crumbling; one of the buildings behind Abed's home had gone down. Then many footsteps charged past his front door and gunfire erupted, followed by shouts in Hebrew. Everyone in the camp would be wide awake by now. Families would be huddled together in fear, praying their door would be passed by, that they would be among the lucky ones tonight.

A helicopter roared overhead drowning out all other sounds. Abed froze in the darkness as the helicopter's searchlight shone through gaps in the corrugated roof above the front door sending shafts of light across his face. As the helicopter moved on, a voice speaking in Arabic came over a hand-held loudspeaker.

'This is the IDF. All men from the age of fourteen to sixty come out of your homes with your hands raised!'

Abed was immediately filled with concern. The last time a callout happened in his neighbourhood he was eighteen. He had been made to line up along with a dozen other men, a few older but most his age or younger, and they were searched and ordered to remove their shoes. Several boys were slapped about, two beaten quite severely for not co-operating quickly enough, but Abed had received little more than a few shoves, the most severe one accompanying his dismissal when he was pulled away from the wall, pushed up the street and told to go home immediately without looking back or he would be shot. He obeyed them to the letter. The IDF, the Israeli Defence Force, was not to be trifled with. They were ruthless jailors, without compassion, and punished severely those who did not obey them, and just as often those who did. The rules of Gaza at night were the rules of the jungle, and the IDF had all the teeth and claws.

The loudspeaker's message was repeated over and over in all directions. Abed remained behind his front door unsure what to do. If he went outside he feared it would be different this time. He was a man now and adults were often beaten and nearly always taken away and interrogated, which usually lasted a couple of days. He still had a lot to do to get his new metal shop ready to open for business with supplies due to be delivered in the morning, which he had to be there to receive. But if he did not go outside and the IDF decided to search his home, he might be shot or accused of colluding with terrorists. The latter meant immediate imprisonment without trial for God only knew how long. Some men had been gone for years without even being charged. But compliance did not ensure safety either. There were endless stories of men, and also boys, who had left their homes as ordered in just such

situation, and been shot or beaten and left for dead. The least Abed could expect was to be half stripped and taken to a holding area, or driven to another part of the Strip and left to find his own way back without money for food or transport. Being beaten was inevitable. It would be down to the mood of the troops as to how badly. If one of their own had been killed recently then it did not bode well for anyone. Resistance was out of the question, and to defend one's home was to die as a terrorist. Many Palestinians had guns but few who lived in the camps. The most common was the AK47 but some had M16s, and there was even the occasional British GPMG, a heavier belt-fed machine gun. But guns were expensive in Gaza.

Ironically, most of the weapons smuggled in were not from other Arab countries, which in truth gave little support to the Palestinians. The Palestinians bought their weapons from the Israelis themselves, the so-called Israeli Mafia mostly; they passed through the settlements to be sold by the settlers themselves, the very people the guns might be used against. An AK47 could cost from three to five thousand US dollars, making Palestine the most inflated weapons' market in the world - in Baghdad an AK47 could be picked up for as little as thirty-five dollars. Some of the weapons originated from the West Bank, captured or found by Israeli soldiers during raids and then sold on to the Mafia. Weapons captured in Gaza were usually recycled back to the Palestinians at the going rate, a poignant example of commerce rising above conflict.

The loudspeaker voice came again, this time warning that any man found hiding would be guilty of terrorism. Abed had to go. Staying was a much greater risk. He quickly removed his trainers and put on an old pair of shoes since there was a good chance he would lose his footwear and the trainers were new.

As he reached for the bolt, he heard something behind him and looked over his shoulder. His mother stood at the corner of the hallway in her sleeping gown looking at him. He could not see her eyes in the darkness but he knew she was filled with fear.

'Don't go out there, Abed,' she said in a soft voice. 'Please don't go, my son.'

His stomach began to churn as his own fear grew. 'I must,' he said.

He reached for the bolt again and drew it across.

'Abed. Please. Don't,' his mother pleaded again, her voice trembling.

'Go back to your room, Mother.'

He started to open the door then paused as he remembered something. He pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it to the ground so that he was naked from the waist up. Some people had died because the soldiers feared they were wearing an explosive belt. At least he would remove that excuse to shoot him, not that they needed one; he was Palestinian and that was reason enough in their eyes.

'Abed, don't go,' his mother begged one last time, then she broke into tears knowing her son would do what he had decided and nothing she could say would change his mind.

As he opened the door he looked back at her, but she had her head in her hands, unable to watch him go. He stepped out into the street and raised his arms.

There were half a dozen soldiers a couple of yards away and they quickly trained their rifles on him. 'Come out!' one of them yelled.

An officer stepped forward, a large man no older than Abed, dressed like the others in a khaki uniform, a harness with weapons pouches about his chest and wearing a helmet, the straps tight under

his chin. 'Forward!' he shouted as he closed in, his rifle aimed directly at Abed's face.

Abed walked calmly forward keeping his hands high. The officer reached for him and was immediately joined by another soldier who grabbed Abed harshly as if he might fly away, pulled him up the street and slammed him against a wall. Another soldier joined them to search Abed's trousers and legs while the officer stepped back.

'Take your trousers off,' the officer shouted.

Abed did not move quickly enough for their liking and one of the soldiers slapped him brutal across the face and repeated the officer's command. 'Take your trousers off!'

Abed was still too slow, refusing to give up all his dignity, arrogance his only weapon. He lowered his hands to unbutton his trousers and received another fierce slap across his face. 'Move when we speak!' shouted the soldier who hit him. Abed flashed a look at him; he was no more than eighteen years old. He appeared to be nervous. This was probably his first incursion, or first close contact with the enemy in a hostile situation. The soldier's uniform was a size too large for him and his weapons pouches were worn and undone. Abed glanced at the others as he pulled down his trousers. They were all filled with the same hate and eagerness to kill the vermin that lived on their promised land. As he pulled a trouser leg over his shoe, the soldier who had slapped him grabbed it and yanked so hard he pulled Abed's feet out from under him and Abed fell back against the wall, his backside hitting the street with a thump. He had grazed his back on the wall but he ignored the pain. The soldier continued to pull hard on Abed's trousers, tearing at them until one of the legs popped over the shoe, the other shoe coming off with the last tug of the other trouser leg. He tossed the garment aside and kicked Abed.

'Get up,' he shouted. When Abed did not move straight away he kicked him again. Abed's fear was growing by the second. The blood lust was in their eyes and he could feel they wanted to kill.

The soldier helped Abed up by his hair and Abed lost control for one second, pushing the man's hand away. The soldier could not believe the animal's audacity and clenched his jaw as he raised the butt of his weapon to strike, but the officer grabbed the soldier's webbing and pulled him back.

'So, we have a spirited one . . . What's your name?'

'Abed Omar.'

'You live in that house?'

'Yes.'

'Who else is in the house?'

'Only my mother.'

'Let's go and see if you're telling the truth.'

'I am telling the truth.'

'I wouldn't believe you if you told me it was night time,' the officer said coldly. As he stepped towards the house, Abed was filled with dread. He could feel himself about to move and charge to protect his home and his mother even though it would probably be the last thing he ever did in this life.

Shots suddenly rang out nearby, followed by an explosion in the next street. The officer stopped and glanced in that direction, the activity reminding him he had work to get on with. He looked at Abed

thoughtfully and then changed his mind. 'Bring him along,' he barked as he turned from the door and headed up the alleyway.

Abed was grabbed and held firmly between two soldiers as they marched him briskly behind the officer.

They turned a corner to where several soldiers stood outside a metal door that was the entrance to the breezeblock hut. The officer stopped to talk to them and after a brief discussion faced the door and banged on it loudly.

'You have been ordered to open up. If you continue to refuse we will open the door ourselves,' he shouted in Arabic.

He did not wait for a reply and barked an order to his men. Two of them hurried to the door and hung a small canvas pack the size of a brick on the handle. Wires were quickly led from the pack back up the street and all the soldiers except the officer and the two men holding Abed took cover.

'You have fifteen seconds to open the door or we come in,' the officer shouted then turned to the soldiers holding Abed and jutted his chin at them.

They moved tightly behind Abed, pressing one side of him against a wall while keeping him facing the door like a shield. Abed could still see part of the charge, the wires trailing from it along the ground and past his feet. Only then did it dawn on him that the soldiers intended to blow the door while he remained exposed. He tried to twist away but an arm reached around his throat and held him in a firm chokehold.

A woman's voice called out from inside the house that she was coming.

'Standby,' the officer said.

The woman called out once again, oblivious to what was going on, her voice growing louder as she walked along her roofless hallway to the door.

If Abed could hear her then the soldiers could too but none of them responded.

'Standby,' the officer called out again.

Abed became frantic. This was madness. 'She's coming to the door,' he tried to call out but his words were stifled by the arm about his neck.

'Now!' the officer shouted.

The explosion was deafening and the shock wave and bits of debris struck Abed's body sending him back into the soldiers holding him. Something hit him in the face and stomach and burned for a few seconds, but he did not have time to think about any of it. He was quickly pushed forward towards the hut, the point man of a Roman wedge. The door had been blown completely off, and he was rushed into the hallway and along it, the soldiers remaining tightly behind him in case a desperado with a gun fired upon them. He almost tripped on something on the dark floor. It was a body. But the soldiers held him up and pushed him on. When they reached the end of the narrow passage that opened out into a small yard, the soldiers in the rear rushed past him and quickly entered the rooms. A woman screamed and furniture was smashed, then two young girls were dragged crying from a room and thrown to the ground in the yard where they grabbed each other in utter terror.

Abed was released, his employment as a human shield over for the time being at least, and he looked back up the hallway to the entrance where the body lay beside the fallen door. It was the

woman who had called out. The device must have exploded as she reached for the bolt. Her right arm had been blown off above the elbow and half of her face was missing. He knew her. She was the mother of the two girls on the floor holding each other. Her husband was a security guard in a petrol station on the edge of the town. He was probably there tonight. No one would go and tell him until morning when the soldiers had gone and it was safe. Abed was horrified and looked away.

The soldiers could find no one else in the house and after some terse commands from the officer, Abed was pulled back out into the street and held against a wall. He glared at the officer barking orders as the screaming girls were pulled out of the house and taken away. The majority of the soldiers moved on up the street to carry on with their search and the officer faced Abed who was staring back at him with hate-filled eyes. Blood trickled down his face from a cut on his forehead and ran over his nose and mouth, and he wanted nothing more than to tear the officer's throat out with his teeth. The officer stood in front of Abed, slightly taller and looking down on him.

'You look angry,' the officer said calmly. 'Have we upset you in some way?'

The anger welled uncontrollably inside of Abed and he jerked his head forward as he spat blood into the officer's eyes. The soldier grabbed Abed by the hair and slammed his head into the wall. The officer wiped his eyes clean with his sleeve and then, taking his time to aim while the soldier held Abed, punched Abed in the stomach so hard it took every ounce of breath out of him as his knees gave way. The soldier did not let Abed fall and gripped his throat to keep him against the wall. Abed could barely recover the air he had lost as the officer wiped the rest of the bloody spittle from his face, took a pace backwards and brought the barrel of his M16 level with Abed's heart. The soldier held Abed as far away as he could to avoid being splattered with blood. Abed believed his time had come and he calmed himself ready for the bullet.

The officer stared into Abed's eyes, savouring the moment. He had every reason in the world to kill this Palestinian having lost three of his company in the last month: two to a landmine and one sniped in the back at a checkpoint. The pressure for revenge had come from his men, all conscripts, one of whom had recently lost a sister to a suicide bomber in Jerusalem. But he did not need encouragement. He loved this land more than anything, enough to die for it, and certainly enough to kill those who had promised not to rest until every Israeli was gone or dead. The officer removed the safety catch and curled his finger around the trigger.

'Wait a minute.' A voice came from behind the officer. A rugged, tough-looking man in grubby civilian clothing whose face had not seen a razor in weeks stepped from an alleyway with a similar looking partner who remained in the shadows while the first man, holding a notepad, came over to the group.

The officer lowered his gun and looked at the intruder with guarded contempt. He knew these men were Mossad and although he did not like them, he had no choice but to tolerate them. They called the shots on operations like this one. What the officer resented was the way they made him feel like a lackey of Mossad. His family had spent five generations in Israel having moved to the land before the Second World War. They had fought in just about every battle of survival since then and his father had been an officer during the Yom Kippur war and commanded a company under Sharon during the invasion of Lebanon, taking part as an observer in the infamous massacre by Phalangist militia of hundreds of Palestinian men, women and children in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. He was an army man through and through and proud of it, and resented these spooks lording it over him.

'What's his name?' the Mossad agent asked the officer.

‘I don’t know and I don’t care.’

The agent looked at him, guarding his own contemptuous feelings about the officer, which were very different from the officer’s perceptions.

‘What’s your name?’ the agent said to Abed.

Abed hesitated, still in shock from his near-death experience and suffering from the torture knowing it was only a temporary reprieve.

‘I asked you your name,’ the agent said without any malevolence.

‘Abed Abu Omar.’

The agent checked his notepad and then looked at Abed as if with a fresh pair of eyes.

‘Let him go,’ the agent said.

The officer’s mouth opened like that of a fish. ‘This has nothing to do with you.’

‘I said let him go,’ the agent repeated calmly. The officer knew he was stepping into a fight he would not win. Mossad had the last word in virtually everything and if he disobeyed, he would pay a severe price. His career would be over for one, and that alone was enough to keep him in check. He lowered his gun and relaxed his shoulders in reluctant deference.

Another burst of gunfire came from a couple of streets away. The agent let his eyes linger on the officer’s long enough to hammer the message home that he was in charge, then disappeared up an alleyway with his partner.

The officer spat on the ground in the direction of the agents and mumbled an obscenity before returning his attention to Abed. ‘Why did they spare you?’ he asked.

Abed was even more surprised than the officer, and was feeling almost high with relief. ‘I don’t know,’ he said.

‘You think I give a shit what he said?’

Abed’s relief went screaming into reverse.

‘This isn’t over,’ he said. ‘I’m going to save you for another time, make you sweat a little.’

The officer removed the magazine from his M16, cocked the weapon and caught the bullet that was ejected from the breech. ‘You see this,’ he said holding the bullet up to Abed’s face. ‘This is yours . . . Kiss it.’ He pushed it against Abed’s bloody lips, grinding it into his mouth, cutting his gums.

‘There, it has your kiss. Now, listen carefully. This is what I’m going to do with it. I’m going to give it to one of my snipers - he’s the best in Israel - and I’m going to tell him to give it back to you one day. Maybe in a week, maybe in a month, but one day, you’ll get it back. Right through your head. Or perhaps I’ll just do it myself.’

The officer let the threat sink in, stepped back and placed the bullet in a breast pocket. He pushed the magazine back into its housing on the weapon, pulled the cocking arm until it was all the way back, then released it on its spring to load a new bullet into the breech with a slam.

‘Take him away,’ he said. The soldier yanked Abed down the street and around the corner to a waiting truck where a dozen other men from the camp were pressed inside, some of them bloody, all looking frightened. Abed’s hands were bound behind his back and he was pushed up and into the truck. Two soldiers climbed in, shoving their prisoners further along, the tailgate was slammed shut and the

truck drove away.

Abed was kept in a holding cell for a week along with several other prisoners before he was removed for interrogation. He was questioned for an hour after which he was returned to the cell. Two days later he was unceremoniously released, wearing the shirt and jeans from a Palestinian prisoner who apparently would never need them again.

When he opened his front door, he stopped in the doorway. Strewn about the hallway and small yard was their household furniture and belongings, or what was left of them. Anything that could be broken had been. A pile of clothes in a corner had been defecated on. Filled with immediate concern for his mother he hurried down the hallway to the entrance of the main room where he saw her huddled in a corner wrapped in a blanket. When she looked up and saw him, he could feel the relief gush from her as she leapt to her feet and ran into his arms, sobbing uncontrollably. He held her close, stroked her hair and kissed her head. 'It's okay, Mother. I'm all right.'

She would not let go of him and after a minute or so he gently pushed her away to look at her. 'Are you okay? Did they hurt you?' he asked.

She shook her head and tried to smile as the tears ran down her face, then took hold of him again as if he were a dream which might disappear any moment. 'It's okay,' he assured her. 'It's all okay now.'

But he was wrong. The officer was true to his word and made sure Abed did not forget there was a bullet with his name on it. The first reminder came a couple of weeks after the incursion as he stood on the street outside his front door drinking a bottle of Coke and taking a moment to feel the sun on his face. The bottle shattered in his hand as a single shot rang out from no-man's-land on the Gaza-Egypt border a hundred yards away. He dived back into his house, his hand bleeding from a cut caused by the shattering glass and wrapped a cloth around it to stem the flow. The sniper had missed him, but Abed knew it was not through lack of skill. The IDF snipers were far too good to miss someone standing still from that range. They had plenty of practice. The shot had been a reminder, a message that Abed had not been forgotten and his day would soon come.

A week later he was open for business in his new metal shop situated on the corner of a block near the marketplace only a few hundred metres from home. After finishing welding a metal framework for a door he turned off the acetylene torch and accidentally knocked a tool off the bench. As he bent down to pick it up a shot slammed into the wall behind him where his head had been a second before and ricocheted off several metal sheets in various parts of the shop before lodging itself in the ceiling. People in the street outside scattered with practised alarm and Abed flung himself to the floor behind his bench just as another shot slammed into one of the metal table legs in front of his face, splattering him with flakes of rust and dirt. The adrenaline soared through his veins as he realised the day of his execution had come and the sniper had so far been unlucky. He could not stay where he was and crawled as fast as he could across the floor, heading for a corner out of view from the street. Another shot rang out but no bullet entered his shop. It sounded different, louder, as if fired from close by. Abed remained tight in the corner unable to see out of the shop, which hopefully meant the sniper could not see inside.

He lay there for what seemed an age, contemplating his situation. The bottom line was it was only a matter of time before he was killed as the officer had promised. If he was going to stay alive, he had to do something radical and he spent the next few hours mulling over his options.

By the time Abed got to his feet he had come to a decision, which was not difficult since he had only one choice.

That night he asked a friend who had connections with the Islamic Jihad to arrange a meeting for him. He was asking to join the cause. The truth was he still did not truly want to be a part of the armed struggle, despite all that had happened, but he could not stay in Rafah, and since he could not leave Gaza he needed to relocate to somewhere else in the Strip. But that was not easy. Gaza was not a big place and if he and his mother moved to another part, they would have to find somewhere to live in an already overcrowded place and begin the equally difficult task of finding work. Abed was not exactly sure what the freedom fighters could do for him but he had to find out. Of equal concern was what they would ask him to do for them. He hoped they might hide him in one of their secret compounds but if so, what about his mother? She could not live with them. If she remained at their home in Rafah and the IDF learned he had joined the Jihad they might retaliate by destroying the house and quite possibly killing her too.

To his surprise, when he eventually met with the council he did not need to explain any of his concerns to them. The council, who remained secretive about their names and everything else that did not directly concern Abed, had already decided what was best for him. He was told nothing other than they would take care of everything and after the meeting was taken directly to a sparse apartment in the middle of Gaza city and told to stay inside it and not to go out for any reason whatsoever. Food was provided and he was assured his mother would be told he was well and not to worry about him and that they would also take care of all of her needs. There was no formal induction ceremony or briefing, no indication that he was now a part of the organisation other than this security blanket, but it appeared he was now a member of the group, but what group he did not know. There were many factions within the liberation struggle who often squabbled and fought between themselves, each with a different view of how the ultimate fight should be conducted, politically and militarily. It was a valid concern since he would owe someone for this service and the cost could vary from one group to another. He also had his own views on the situation and being Christian Orthodox did not necessarily share those of the extreme Islamic fundamentalists who had taken advantage of the intifada, the current war with Israel, and risen to control Gaza. Abed decided that since he had given control of his destiny to others, and that there was nothing he could do about it for now, he would gratefully accept the security and wait to see what developed. His only plan was to regain control of his life as soon as he could, although he was well aware that this would come at a price.

For a month Abed saw no one except Hasim, a teenage boy who was responsible for providing food and domestic supplies. Hasim was always very polite and humble but provided hardly any conversation. Abed soon decided Hasim was not so much close-lipped for security reasons as he was dim-witted. Television and books were Abed's only way of passing the time and he soon began to feel like a prisoner although the doors were not secured from the outside and he could leave if he wanted to.

The fifth week a man arrived with Hasim and introduced himself as Ibrahim. He was the same age as Abed, slightly taller and thinner, and had a thick beard. After a formal greeting, Hasim left the two men alone and Ibrahim set about making some tea without saying another word. Abed chose not to speak either. After taking a cup of the sweet drink together Ibrahim eventually broke the silence. He told Abed in an economical manner that they were going to leave Gaza together. Abed's first question was where were they going and his answer was a warning look. Ibrahim was physically strong and hardened but his manner was gentle and non-confrontational. The look had no malice behind it and was intended as a tuition.

'Your first lesson, Abed, is never to ask questions. The sheiks know everything. All will be taken care of. You will never be told the next step until after completion of the one before.'

Abed understood and sat back looking at Ibrahim, suspecting he knew more and would reveal when he wanted to.

‘It was not always this way,’ Ibrahim continued. ‘We used to be more relaxed . . . and more stupid. Traitors infiltrated us and many of our leaders and best fighters were killed. So now we work in cells isolated from all other cells. No single person knows where each cell is or who is part of it. Not even the sheiks. Each cell can be contacted, but only through its single contact. In this way traitors can also be found out more easily.’

Ibrahim poured them both a fresh cup of tea and they sat back in silence for a while longer. Abed was enjoying this in a bizarre way. It might not be conversation per se, but it was interesting communication: informative about Abed’s future with the hint of more to come.

Ibrahim eventually smiled at Abed. ‘They say you are intelligent and brave. Did you really spit on the face of the officer? Some might say that was more stupid than brave.’

Abed did not answer and simply stared at Ibrahim. Ibrahim’s smile broadened. ‘They are right. You will learn fast.’

Ibrahim got to his feet and casually looked out of each window, checking not only the street below but the rooftops that surrounded them and the sky too. He then opened the front door and took a look outside. ‘One must always be careful,’ he said as he closed the door and sat back down in front of Abed. ‘There are those who would sell our lives just for a permit to escape this prison.’

He poured himself some more tea and filled Abed’s glass. ‘We leave Gaza tonight,’ he said without a hint of drama.

Abed did not show his surprise. While he had considered many ways in which the council might employ him, he had never thought they might get him out of Gaza. It seemed far too great an effort to go to for such a small fish. He immediately began to imagine where he might go and what it would be like outside of the Strip. His imagination was limited since he knew so little about the world. Instead of excitement at the prospect, he found himself feeling nervous, but he was not clear exactly why. Maybe it was the passage through the perimeter, which was notoriously dangerous since many more had died than had succeeded. But it was better than staying in Gaza and he could not have hoped for more under the circumstances. Then another thought entered his head, the true source of his concern.

‘There is one thing I must ask,’ Abed said.

‘My rank is not above yours, Abed. I can tell you everything I know, which is not much more than I’ve already told you.’

‘It is not information. I must see my mother.’

‘Ah. That has already been taken care of. I told you the sheiks think of everything. We leave as soon as it is dark and go to Rafah where you will have time to see your mother.’

‘Back to Rafah? Is that wise?’

‘We must. That is the way we will leave Gaza.’

‘The Rafah tunnels into Egypt?’ Abed asked. The tunnels were legendary, though their location was as secret as the cells. In design they were much like the famous tunnels dug by inmates of the World War Two prisoner of war camps, and they were used to smuggle contraband into Gaza, including weapons and explosives or the ingredients to make them. The IDF would on occasion discover one and destroy it, but another was soon dug to replace it. Rafah was the obvious place for a tunnel because

bordered Egypt, although that did not necessarily mean it was safe to arrive in that country either. The Egyptians were no friends to the Palestinians and were quite capable of handing them over to the Israelis if they were caught in their country without the proper permits. However, it was far less of a risk than escaping into Israeli territory where one had to run the gauntlet of dozens of checkpoints to get to Jordan, Syria or Lebanon.

‘Concern was also my first thought,’ Ibrahim said. ‘We will find out tonight.’

Ibrahim grinned and Abed finally smiled for the first time in a long while.

‘We are going to have an adventure,’ Ibrahim said. ‘I don’t know for sure, but I believe it is true. We are destined for glory, my new friend.’ Ibrahim offered up his glass and the two men toasted their adventure and their new friendship.

That night Hasim came to the apartment and led Abed and Ibrahim to a car parked a block away. Hasim said goodbye and left. Abed and Ibrahim climbed into the back. Two men were seated in the front, the passenger holding an AK47. Not a word was spoken as they drove through the city and down on to the beach road. They turned south past Hotel Row, the Riviera of Gaza, except that now most of the hotels were empty, some even burned down since the intifada by the fundamentalists as a punishment for serving alcohol. Several miles further on they headed inland from the beach to avoid the Israeli settlement of Gosh Ghativ and stopped several hundred yards short of the Salah ed-Din road, the main highway that ran the length of Gaza, right through the centre from north to south. The highway was not safe to drive on at night - the IDF would shoot at any vehicle that moved along during darkness.

The passenger signalled Abed and Ibrahim to get out. The driver remained and as Abed and Ibrahim followed the passenger off the road and into a ditch, the driver turned the car around and headed back the way they had come. The passenger waited silently for a moment, checking there was no movement anywhere about them, then moved off for several hundred yards across rugged, open terrain, stopping to listen every now and then, until they reached the outskirts of the town of Khan Younis. The passenger climbed into another car that was waiting for them, manned by only a driver, which took them into Rafah a mile or so further on.

The car stopped at the far end of Abed’s street, the driver turned off the lights and engine, and the three of them all waited in silence for several minutes.

‘You have half an hour to visit your mother,’ the passenger said finally, speaking for the first time. ‘No longer. We will wait here for you.’

Ibrahim smiled at Abed and nodded, conveying his good wishes.

‘There are snipers out tonight,’ the passenger added. ‘Keep to the shadows at all times and don’t pause. Go directly to your house and stay inside.’

Abed climbed out and headed down the street towards his house, keeping against the wall until he reached his door. There was no one else about and he could see the glow from a small light within. He carefully opened the door and went inside, quietly bolting it behind him. His mother never bolted the door while he was not home, and even though he had not been there in over a month obviously she had remained hopeful he would return.

He found her sitting in the main room, sewing by candlelight. She looked up at him, and after her initial surprise she put down her sewing and stood up. He had expected her to run into his arms, but she did not. She was unhappy about something and there was a trace of anger in her eyes.

‘What do you think you are doing?’ she asked. There was no mistaking the anger in her voice. ‘~~Me have come and given me money for food and told me you are well. I know who they are.~~’

He realised what her concerns were and that he should have been prepared for them. He walked over to her and took her hands in his. ‘Sit down, Mother,’ he said.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Have you lost your senses? I know what you are doing and you are mad. You will be killed.’ She had no idea what he was doing, only that he had joined the cause, but that was enough.

‘I have no choice, Mother. What am I to do? If I try to live a normal life I will be killed.’

‘The IDF will kill you if you join those fools. This is not the way to get back our homeland. The Jihad are worse than that fool Arafat and his thieves in the Authority.’

‘My concern right now is not for my homeland. It’s to stay alive, and keep you alive.’

‘No. You will not join them. I did not stay on this earth to raise you so that you could die like a bandit with a gun in your hand.’

He grew suddenly angry and intolerant of her ignorance. ‘Then what should I do? Eh? What is your solution? I cannot stay here without being shot, and I cannot leave Gaza without their help.’

His words only heightened her fears. ‘You are leaving?’ she gasped. ‘You are leaving Gaza?’

He calmed his voice, aware that the news was breaking her heart. ‘Yes, I am leaving Gaza, Mother. And you will remain here and be taken care of. It is all arranged and nothing you can say will stop me. It is final so don’t talk of it any more. Come. Sit. I don’t have long. Let us spend some time together. Make some tea for us.’

‘If you leave Gaza it will be the end of my life,’ she said, but his reply was only to stare at her with a look of kindness as well as hopelessness. It was as if for the first time she could see the determined man instead of her determined small boy. He had grown up so quickly. It seemed like only the other day he rode his little tricycle up and down the street outside the house, and was it as long as twenty years ago when she first dressed him in his new, clean school uniform and packed him off with his little satchel of books on his back? But even as a young boy, when he said it was final, then it was. She had been proud of that strength in him then. Now she wished he was weak and feeble and that she could dominate him as some mothers could their sons. But that would never be. He was master in the house and always had been.

She took her hands out of his and went to the small fuel cooker on the floor, lit it with a match and placed a pot of water on it. She started to place tea in the pot and then stopped as if exhausted, unable to carry on.

‘I will never see you again,’ she said, without a doubt in her prediction.

He could not pretend to her that what she said was not true. He was not the kind of man to say anything for the sake of appeasement if he did not truly believe it himself, and so he remained silent.

She looked at him, her expression solemn, her eyes fixed. The emotion seemed to have faded and neither sadness nor anger remained.

‘Sit down, my son,’ she said softly. ‘There is something I must tell you.’

The way she looked at him and spoke the words compelled him to obey. He could not recall ever seeing her this way before.

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