

Desperate Measures

Chapter 1

(Opening paragraph)

The sun's rays were streaming in through the cracks in the rotting timber shutters. Ali felt his body gently waking up as he stretched his muscles in bed. Today, the first Thursday of the month, was Ali's sixteenth birthday. The night before, his eldest sister Samihah had been teasing Ali, pretending not to remember it. But it did not matter. Today was Ali's to enjoy.

Chapter 2

Bahir wiped the sweat beads already building up on his forehead in the fresh air of the early morning with the red and white cotton bandana that Samihah made for him. The cement mixer with the small diesel engine was slowly but dutifully revolving while he shovelled another load of sand into its ever hungry mouth.

Chapter 3

Suddenly, Ali was thrown against the wall by the shock wave from an explosion only a few hundred metres away. For a brief moment, he was unable to breathe as the wind was knocked out of him by the force of the blast. As the assault of the shock wave on his ears receded, he started to hear the distant screams of people in panic.

Chapter 4

"Tonight you will be given a small parcel which you should guard with your life until you are contacted. The journey will be hazardous to say the least, and you will be surviving on your wits for most of the time as you traverse occupied territories."

Chapter 5

Ali felt as if time had stopped. For what seemed like eternity he was paralysed, in body and in mind. Ali kept watching in slow motion the stretcher carrying the girl being lifted above the heads of the crowd to make a hasty delivery to the ambulance, which was now waiting about 50 metres away.

Chapter 6

At that very moment, he heard a rustling behind him. As he swung around to see who was spying on him, he found himself facing Jafar again. On this occasion, there was no need to exchange words.

Chapter 7

Irfan's young wife, wearing the *hijab*, came out of the kitchen to greet the men with refreshments which she laid on the low table the men would squat around to have their dinner. She made no eye contact with them, as was the practice by traditional Muslim women, but seemed to know what their needs were with few words exchanged.

Chapter 8

"*Wa alaikum assalam*," replied Firouz trying not to encourage this teenager who seemed to be the happiest person this side of the Euphrates River. "Bring me *shawarma* and *doogh*," said Firouz curtly.

Chapter 9

"Let us get out of the scorching midday sun," said Jafar and turned away from Farah's grave towards the cemetery exit. Ali slowly rose up from where he had been squatting and followed Jafar from a few metres distance.

Chapter 10

The proud father was lying on his back on the green sofa with the toddler precariously balanced on his legs bent at the knees. While Bahir held his son's hands it was obvious that the toddler was enjoying the balancing act as he let out another cry of joy.

Chapter 11

They had drawn the heavy curtains on the only window of the room to keep out prying eyes. They were all looking at a small but heavy parcel wrapped in khaki cloth that had been delivered only a couple of hours ago.

Chapter 12

Samihah was unusually tall for the women of her people. Yet, this was not the only trait she inherited from her father. Her thick eyebrows and the jutting chin that complemented her otherwise gentle demeanour with a determined look, were also legacies of her father.

Chapter 13

Women with headscarves roamed from one vendor to another in search of better deals that would accommodate the family budget. Vendors were mostly men of haggard looks and week-old beards waiting to be shaved off at the first opportunity for rest.

Chapter 14

It was a day in November with dark rain clouds gathering in the distance and hailing the arrival of winter. As the first light shower of the afternoon hit the parched earth, the beautiful smell of the first rain drops on the dirt roads of Jenin filled the air with new expectations for the coming months.

Chapter 15

As he walked around the corner, he suddenly noticed a car hurtling towards him with its headlights turned on. In the next moment, Ali watched himself in slow motion as he was flung over the bonnet of the car with the force of impact and into the windshield. The driver stopped about twenty metres away. Slowly losing consciousness, Ali noticed a young man with a jet black beard and a broken nose get out of the vehicle.

Chapter 16

As she slowly opened the door Samihah was wearing a smile of relief. "I see you are being thoroughly spoiled here!" she said mockingly. She then marched up to Ali, and ignoring the nurse, kissed him on the cheek - one of the few parts of his head without bandages.

Chapter 17

She carefully placed freshly laundered underwear and some warm clothing into the suitcase that once belonged to their father. She could still smell the dried lavender flowers that were left in a muslin pouch. "The worst enemy of silverfish" her mother used to say.

Chapter 18

There was a brief moment when Ali could not find the courage to speak up. He was afraid that he would blurt it all out if the sergeant probed any more. Then suddenly Jafar came to the rescue.

Chapter 19

The stocky man who appeared to be giving the orders came to the back of the ambulance last. His blue eyes resembled the cold waters of Scandinavian countries. This settler was wearing his hair in the fashion of an ultra-orthodox Jew but more importantly there was no sign of mercy in his eyes.

Chapter 20

Hannah reached for the report in Meir's hand stretched out from behind his polished oak desk and gracefully sat down again in the armchair. Meir was a middle-aged Mossad agent, old enough to remember the 1972 massacre of Israeli athletes in Munich.

Chapter 21

Using his secure private phone line, General Parshand dialled a number in South Tehran. A middle-aged man sporting a short but well-trimmed beard, wearing a simple grey jacket, answered, "Yes?"

"Mahdi is on his way," said the general.

The other man acknowledged this coded message by not responding and quickly hung up as previously agreed.

Chapter 22

Hannah hit the emergency stop on the treadmill and headed to the showers. Within minutes she was rushing to the car park with her sports bag in one hand, and a towel in the other hand trying to dry her hair. She drove straight to Meir's office.

Chapter 23

"Indeed I do. We now stand a good chance of stopping Israel from retaliating and escalating the situation into a full blown war. This also gives PMOI a breathing space to start the revolution as Kamyar and his opponents reposition themselves. No doubt a few top heads will roll in the military soon."

Chapter 24

"...However, I want the world to make no mistake. Israel reserves the right to self defence by any means she deems appropriate at a time and place of her choosing. The Israel Defence Forces will continue to monitor closely the developments in Iran and our fingers will always be on the trigger. One expensive lesson we have learned from the history is that Jews cannot afford to become complacent."

Epilogue

(The closing paragraph)

Samihah quickly scribbled the requested information on a piece of paper and held it out to Hannah. As Hannah reached out to take it, their eyes briefly held each other's gaze. For the first time, Hannah noticed the gentle, smiling eyes of Samihah, and Samihah noticed Hannah's long hair – something they had in common.