# PROLOGUE

*How can I ever trust the one who broke my heart?* Jannah wondered. One moment she was in his arms: his scent woodsy, his smile endearing, his adventurous spirit wild and exciting, and the next he was the reason she was crawling through the charred remains of their family bed and breakfast searching for her siblings, for Mama and Baba.

By sundown, her family lay wrapped in sheets, in a motionless row, like broken tree branches after a storm.

*Now I am entirely alone in the world.*

Some things you never get over, never forgive. Betrayal is one of them.

## Chapter One

## Wrongly Accused

For too many days, Jannah al-Jorbouni lay on a frayed and smelly mattress in her dim jail cell in Lachish Detention Center. The corridor light cast a yellow glow on a colony of ants climbing through the concrete cracks. Their black oval bodies darted into the bedding, food, and clothing.

Jannah clutched a handful of knotted sheets as the pain in her stomach spiked. A bizarre fever had raged through her body all night.

Like ice crystals on a frosty windowpane, she was freezing cold one moment, clutching the thin blanket under her chin, then suddenly, burned hot, her bedding drenched in sweat. The noxious odors of sweaty bodies and sewage further sickened her, and she felt like a caged animal.

She licked her cracked lips, which did little to moisten them, and stared at the two swallows of water left in the cup she held.

She leaned up, took a sip, swished it around to let the liquid bathe her tongue, then held it in her cheeks before swallowing.

As the gray days passed behind bars, each day drearier than the one before, a kind of hopelessness gripped her. She struggled against despair more than she did against the pain in her abdomen and ran her hand over the tally marks scratched into the wall near her bunk. *Six months in this hellhole*. *How much longer can I hold out?* she wondered.

The first few months at Lachish, she’d believed she could handle anything, but her Christian spirit had been drained. Too much wrath and retaliation had left her soul riddled with holes. The only evidence that she had not been entirely broken was when she left the boiled egg yolk or crust of bread on the dinner tray for Besan, who was more sister than cousin.

When Besan joined Islam, Jannah assumed it had been to win the heart of the man she desired to marry. But after the wedding, when her level of devotion surpassed his, Jannah realized Besan had become be one of those stalwart souls with an impenetrable faith in Allah.

Finding it impossible to get a building permit from Israel to erect a family home on the outskirts of *beit Shaphier*, Besan and her husband had built the small home with a turquoise-blue door without a permit—a flagrant threat to the State of Israel.

The cousins had been arrested for demonstrating against tearing down the home. After they’d been handcuffed and dragged out of the bulldozers path, heavy equipment knocked down the charming house of lime and cement.

Now, Jannah bit her lower lip as Besan moaned and pitched back and forth on the bunk below Jannah’s, fighting waves of labor pains.

She leaned her head over the edge of the bunk. “Try to relax.”

“How?” Besan asked.

“Breathe deep, like we practiced.” Jannah inhaled slowly, demonstrating how to fill her lungs.

*Prison is a despicable place to give birth*, Jannah thought. *She should be at home lying in clean sheets surrounded by her family.* They’d be praying, consoling her, along with a caring midwife coaching her through each contraction. The midwife would lay the newborn against Besan’s chest, place a date in her mouth, the kind that would improve her breast milk, and make the newborn grow patient and clever. She deserved better than jail.

Besan’s words faltered under the intensity of contractions. “They’re leaving me…and my baby…here.” She seized the steel bedframe. “They think we deserve to die.”

Besan would not die before Jannah. She would make sure of that. Jannah shouted to the guards, “We need a doctor in here!”

For a moment, while staring at the single light fixture that hung overhead, she thought she heard footsteps. Upon listening more intently, she realized it was only the sound of her own blood flow throbbing in her ears.

Other women incarcerated in the second-floor cellblock banged on the steel grates and shouted. Carefully calculated defiance, so as not to bring down the wrath of the watch on duty.

The noise brought a male and female guard stomping across a metal catwalk overhead. In the narrow walkway, they dragged police batons along the doors, rattling the thick, wire mesh as they passed like bullies on their way to school.

The female guard yelled, “Shut up!” in her high-pitched voice, as if the prisoners were barking mutts. Keys clinked in the lock, and their cell door screeched open.

“Help me,” Besan whimpered.

A six-foot man with piercing green eyes and a firearm strapped to his waist, clomped to Besan. “Stop making a scene. You see this?” He held up his two-way radio in his rigid fingers. “Your doctor says it’s false labor. Stop wasting our time.”

“My pains are different now.”

“Get up,” he growled at her. “Let’s see.”

Besan creaked the metal springs as she moved to the mattress’s edge, still holding the tin bowl she’d kept beside her while her nausea came and went. She rested her bare feet on the paint-chipped floor, pressed the small of her back, and lifted herself into a semi-standing position.

With a sneer the soldier said, “As I told you, we don’t have permission from the doc.”

That was their standard line. Soldiers always waited for authorization from some invisible higher-ups. She imagined that the guards wanted to get back to playing cards or video games on their cell phones. They turned and slammed the cell shut, the echo hollow.

Jannah felt sure they gave more measured thought about which wine bottle to uncork for their supper at home than they did about anyone’s suffering in prison.

The last thing Jannah wanted was for Besan to feel alone in her fragile condition. Singing the notes of “All Creatures of our God and King,” as she’d heard Mama do those many years ago, did little to soothe either of them. Her voice echoed mournfully off the barren walls.

Secretly she wished, if God was the great and mighty creator of all things living, let him create more kindness in this holy land.

It seemed as if hours passed before two female medics in heavy boots wheeled a chair into their cell and marched to Jannah’s bunk. Without emotion, they grabbed her legs and arms and hauled her from the bed. Pain like a jagged knife shot through her abdomen. “No, stop. Take Besan. I can wait.”

One paramedic with a pony-like face said, “Don’t make a scene! An ambulance is waiting.”

“Hold on!” Jannah said bitterly.

“We have our orders,” the other medic said with a taunt in her voice.

Jannah’s cousin had not just been ignored. To these two medics, Besan was invisible.