

Mayada: Daughter Of Iraq

Jean Sasson

Chapter 1

The Shadow Women of Cell 52

At about 8:45 on the morning of July 19, 1999, Mayada Al-Askari was driving to her office at full speed. Mornings at her print shop were always the busiest time of the day, and from the large number of orders that had streamed into her shop the day before, Mayada knew this morning would be an especially hectic one. When she opened her business the year before, she had purchased the finest printers in Iraq, and for this reason, the work produced at her shop was considered the best in the entire Mutanabi area. As a result, Mayada had more business than she could handle. She accepted a wide variety of jobs, designing logos and writing text for milk cartons, boxes and bottles. She printed books as well, as long as the print order arrived with a stamp of approval from the Ministry of Information. Mayada ran such an efficient business that many other printing houses in the district outsourced their work to her, their competitor, and passed off her work as their own.

Mayada glanced at her watch. She was running late. She careened around corners, but made certain she didn't exceed the speed limit. She glanced through the windshield at the sky. It was growing dark with blowing sand, looking much like a foggy day in England. The wind was beginning to gust, rising and falling in heated blasts. July was an unpleasant month in Iraq. Mayada yearned to escape the heat and fly to the mountains of Lebanon for a holiday, but she no longer had extra money for vacations, so she pushed those thoughts aside. She parked her car on the street and stepped to the sidewalk. To keep the wind from stinging her eyes and irritating her throat and lungs, she tilted her head down and placed her hand over her mouth, walking rapidly. To her relief, the door to the shop was unlocked. Mayada's dedicated staff was already at work. She had a committed group of employees, and not only because she paid higher salaries than most other printing offices. They were simply a well-educated, serious bunch.

Mayada took a quick look around the office. Hussain, Adel and Wissam were already at their computers. Her eyes strayed to the little kitchenette at the back of the shop. There was Nahla, making coffee. Nahla smiled and walked toward her, holding out a cup. Before Mayada could raise the cup to her lips, she was approached by Hussain and Shermeen, both talking at once about the graphic design projects they were working on. They were interrupted by a new client who rushed through the unlocked door, anxious to start a conversation with Mayada. The young man said he was a Tunisian student and that he had been referred to her by another shop owner in the area. He wanted her to translate and prepare a questionnaire for him. Mayada was discussing his job when the front door flew open and three men strode into her small office. Her heart skipped a beat, sensing instantly that the men were too rigid to be customers.

The tallest of the three men asked, "Is your name Mayada Nizar Jafar Mustafa Al-Askari?" His question astonished Mayada, for few people knew her full name. She used "Mustafa" particularly rarely, though it was a name she bore proudly. It harked back to her great-grandfather Mustafa Al-Askari, who, like her grandfather Jafar, was an important officer in the once-great Ottoman army.

Mayada stood quietly, searching the eyes of the men before her. For a moment she considered fleeing or lashing out, but her father was dead and she was divorced. Mayada did not have a man in the family to protect her. She uttered a weak reverberation that sounded enough like "yes."

The tall man curtly informed her, "My name is Lieutenant Colonel Muhammed Jassim Raheem and these are my two colleagues. We will search this place."

Mayada found her voice by this time and managed to ask a simple question, "What are you looking for?"

The lieutenant colonel lifted his neck only a little and the loose skin swung one way and then the other before he answered, discharging each individual word like so many bullets: "You tell us."

Mayada was silenced. She did not know what words or actions might save her as the three men began to tear her small business apart. Waste bins were emptied; the undersides of the chairs were scrutinized; telephones were opened with screwdrivers. Then the men seized her cherished computers and printers. Mayada knew she would never find the funds to replace them as she watched the men load the computers into the trunks of their two white Toyota Corollas, the choice vehicle of the Iraqi secret police. Helpless, Mayada slowly crumpled the Tunisian student's papers she held in her hand, watching as the men destroyed her future.

She took a quick look at her frightened employees. They had gathered in a corner of the room, not daring to breathe. Nahla's face was pale and her lips trembled. The Tunisian student tittered, rubbing his hands, his face filled with regret that he had come into her shop.

Mayada did not doubt she was the next item to be loaded into the ominous automobile and she begged the lieutenant colonel for one phone call. "Can I please call my two children and tell them where you are taking me?"

He gave her a sinister look, then shouted, "No!"

She spoke as gently as she could. "Please. I must call my children. My children have no one but me."

Her heartfelt plea failed to touch the man. "No!" He snapped his fingers and his two cohorts surrounded her.

Sandwiched by the two men, she was led away. At the front door of her office she turned her neck and looked back, wondering if she would ever return.

From the backseat of the Toyota, Mayada saw the sympathetic eyes of a passerby steal frightened glances at her before he scurried away.

As the Toyota sped through the busy streets of Baghdad, she grew lightheaded. She willed herself to concentrate on the orange and yellow sky outside that swirled with billowing dust. The sandstorm now fully cloaked the city. Normally her only concern when churning sands approached Baghdad was to protect her home by blanketing windows and shoving papers under the doors. She would wait out the fury of the windblown sand and then seize a broom and dust cloth to fill small buckets with sand, which she emptied into her garden. Mayada's stomach plunged.

She glanced out the car window and watched as tattered but once-proud Iraqis passed. Twenty years ago when she was a young woman, Iraq had hummed with promise. The country boasted splendid avenues, fine shops, beautiful homes and a promising future. But under Saddam, Iraq grew diminished and dilapidated. Corruption clogged every government department. Iraqis were even reduced to standing in long lines for miserly tins of flour, oil and sugar distributed as rations in exchange for Iraqi oil exports under the U.N. 661 agreement.

It was a bitter time for nearly every Iraqi. Even Mayada's mother, Salwa Al-Husri, a strong, intelligent woman intent on supporting Iraq, could no longer maintain her faith that Iraq would soon rebound. Salwa had finally given up on her country and left to live in nearby Jordan.

Mayada's real troubles began after she divorced her husband, Salam, in 1988. The year after, she had left her job as a newspaper columnist and gone into the printing business for herself. But the Iraqi dinar had been drastically devalued and she lost everything. Once again, and in a weakened job market, Mayada was seeking employment. After the wars and the sanctions, few Iraqis had jobs. But for women, the challenge of finding work was even more daunting than for men. An unspoken government policy kept as many men working as possible, but evinced no concern for women who did not have a husband to support the family.

With two children to support and on the verge of complete financial collapse, Mayada asked God for a small miracle.

Her miracle came in the human form of Michael Simpkin, a television producer for Britain's Channel 4. He sought Mayada's mother in Amman and asked Salwa's assistance to meet Prime Minister Tariq Aziz or Minister of Defense Sultan Hashim. Salwa's contacts and influence in Iraq were deep, and she still knew the private telephone numbers of high Iraqi officials. She placed a few calls and established Michael Simpkin as someone government bureaucrats should meet. The British journalist met with Aziz, Hashim and Saad Qasim Hamoudi, the man responsible for foreign relations in Saddam's palace.

Salwa also encouraged Simpkin to meet her daughter Mayada while he was in Iraq, and Simpkin paid a visit to her home on Baghdad's Wazihiya Place. While there, Simpkin told Mayada he needed to hire an interpreter. Once he learned of Mayada's

credentials as a journalist and heard her fluent English, he hired her, agreeing to pay her salary in U.S. dollars.

Simpkin's TV program, "War for the Gulf," was a success, and the moment the British journalist departed Baghdad, Mayada formed a plan to go back into business. She had been capable of running her own business, which was destroyed only because of Iraq's precarious financial situation. The business failure had been no fault of her own. She would simply try once again.