

## Chapter 2

### Israel/Gaza Border...Months prior to the explosion

Syed Kassab and his two fellow workers waited in line for their turn to pass through the security gate into Israel. The standard of life within the PLO section was far below that of most American inner-city areas. Jobs, food, daily commodities, and basic living standards were, in many cases, unobtainable. Worse, was the generalized feeling of being prisoners controlled by the Israeli government. The Palestinians felt neglected, mistreated, and persecuted by an armed Jewish military force with no end in sight. The Palestinian population was a unique problem; they were a people with no national identity, no recognizable leadership, and no neighboring country offering to absorb them and address their problems.

As Syed approached the border security checkpoint, he became increasingly aware of the cold, dispassionate manner in which the guard addressed those in line. *If only the tables were turned*, he thought. The Israeli Jews were in control now, but Syed told himself that one day soon, things would be very different. At least, that is what he and his friends had heard on a daily basis at the training camp sessions during the previous year in Pakistan.

The guard looked at Syed and, without any show of emotion or concern, muttered, "Papers." Syed showed his work visa and prepared to pass through the designated gate. The guard passed the work papers back without a word, then turned to the next person in line. Syed felt those in line were like dogs or beggars. *Wait in line*, he thought to himself. *Be quiet, respectful, and obedient, and you may be given a cookie treat by the benevolent Israeli guard.* Someday, Syed swore to himself, he would return the favor!

The three friends went to the same workplace, handling custodial and landscape assignments at an Israeli private school facility. Their pay gave them buying power at the Palestinian market centers. On occasion, they would purchase Israeli goods, but preferred to spend the money with their own people and feed their present home economy. Syed remembered bitterly how one day, he bought a bag of Israeli-assorted fruits to take home to his family. At the security checkpoint, one of the guards helped himself to half the fruit and offered the rest around to his armed colleagues. When Syed asked him to pay for the fruit, the guard laughed and told him to pass through the gate before he decided to take more of the fruit.

However, during the last six months or so, Syed also had another job that didn't pay as much but was more gratifying. He and his two friends had been recruited to meet at someone's home and work for two hours, twice a week on a special project. They would sit at a table

## Conflicted Identity

conversing, listening to music, or eating, while applying detonating devices to explosives. Once activated, these devices were capable of being set off by cell phones from a distance. The three young men were trained to do the electronic link-up, but the process was tedious and required several hours of time to complete a single one. Syed and his friends knew the explosives were made to be worn in a vest or jacket; the concept of suicide bombing was assumed. They knew better than to ask any questions.

Syed knew that his evening work was dangerous. Regardless, for the first time in years, he felt he was doing something of substantial value for his homeland. He had no idea when or where the explosive units would be used and didn't care. He knew he was contributing in a small way to striking back at Israeli oppression. Syed, as well as the others, had all taken an oath not to discuss their work with anyone.

Syed's family lived in a small community on the outskirts of Cairo. His father was a strict disciplinarian, frequently unfair in his childrearing habits, as well as being unemotional and unaffectionate. He worked long hours repairing furniture. Syed's mother was an Egyptian jewel who sold baked goods in the market square for additional income. Together, their income provided a middle-class lifestyle and the possibility of future opportunities for their two sons. Syed was the oldest and did not get along well with his father. Walid, his younger brother by three years,

was more adaptable and able to coexist in peace with the man. Walid was not as street smart nor as proficient in manual labor as Syed, but he was academically gifted and often dreamed of becoming an engineer or scientist. His mother supported his academic accomplishments and vowed to do anything to assist his further education.

Syed left his home in 2012 at the age of 19 and moved into the Palestinian area to live with his uncle, Faruq. He appreciated the opportunity to stay, and got along with his uncle fairly well, even though Syed knew he was far overpaying his share of the living costs. Oftentimes, every *shekel* he earned by manual labor went to cover his housing and food expenses. His evening work with the explosives paid for extras and Syed kept it a secret from the uncle. He began to get a better sense of the PLO's viewpoint on Israeli oppression, frequently witnessing the effects of Israeli military control, social and political injustices, and day-to-day mistreatment of his fellow citizens. Hatred of the Israeli presence and its ruling control became a festering wound that worsened with time.