

**Chapter One**

*Al Hamdulil Allah—A Son*

Cairo, 1944

*A father is a man who expects his son  
to be as good a man as he meant to be.*

Frank A. Clark

According to my mother, I was ten days late when I was born on the second Friday of April, 1944. In the male-centric Muslim society of the Arab world, including Cairo, Egypt, there was no higher asset, no greater social benefit, than the birth of a male offspring. My Baba, Abdel Aziz, shouted from the balcony of our flat in Giza to the passing pedestrians below, “I have a son! A son, a son.” Raising his hands to the heavens, he proclaimed in a loud voice, “Praise be to Allah—*Al Hamdulil Allah*.” He had established the beginning of an academic dynasty.

The overjoyed feeling was not shared by my mother and sister. My mother found the pregnancy inconvenient, for it derailed her plans to return to England to complete her education—a promise my father had made to her in London in 1938 before marriage, almost as inducement. And Gulnar, my three-year-old sister, was incensed at being physically and emotionally usurped. She was no longer the center of attention. She began to rival for attention, setting up a life-long fateful conflict, for in her eyes no one was going to devalue or displace her. Mother’s water broke around seven in the morning on a cloudless day with the half-moon lingering above the desert’s edge and the apricot trees in full bloom. Sister Edith Röske, a German nurse and close friend, accompanied Mother to Papaioannou Hospital. I glided into the world after a short labor, at about eleven. Sister Röske assisted an Egyptian midwife delivering me at a Greek hospital in the shadow of the great Pyramid of Cheops on the edge of the Giza Plateau overlooking the green Nile valley. I was circumcised by a Muslim cleric.

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The tranquility of my arrival belied cataclysmic events abroad and at home. In the previous summer's battles in the desert west of Alexandria, the Allies had halted the advancing Axis troops at El Alamein, forcing their retreat to Tunisia along the North African coast. The German approach to Cairo had encouraged those Egyptians who were struggling against sixty years of British colonial rule and hoped a German presence in Cairo would usher in Egyptian independence.

Domestically, there was mass migration from the rural Nile valley to Cairo's teeming, proliferating slums. Cairo's population increased rapidly, and the infrastructure strained under the burden of the influx. Cholera outbreaks were frequent.

In neighboring Palestine, the continuous flow of refugees from central Europe and Poland who seized Arab lands, encouraged by the Zionist movement, caused unrest in Egypt and in the surrounding Arab countries, foreshadowing the creation of Israel in 1948 and the first Arab-Israeli war. Against this turbulent backdrop, my childhood in Cairo would unfold.

When we saw each other for our first face-to-face meeting sixteen years later, Sister Röske told me that the vitality of my first bellow reflected the vigor of a healthy baby. And as I would have expected, the midwife dangled me, cut the cord, and spanked my slippery bottom. My cries mingled with the muezzin's mid-morning call to prayer—*dhuhr*—which wafted through the open delivery room window from neighborhood minarets.

Sister Röske said I looked about in wonderment, seeking the warmth of my mother's breast. Mother, however, was hesitant and reluctant to hold me. As Sister Röske swaddled me, she noted my strikingly long, slender fingers and predicted that I might become a pianist, a violinist, or even a surgeon one day. Sister laced me in a bassinet within my mother's view,

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hoping she would take to this new vulnerable stranger who had unintentionally disrupted her plans.

A messenger hurried along the dusty road leading from Papaioannou Hospital toward the shady, two-story villa where my parents occupied the top flat. It was set back from the main street on the fringes of an expanding Cairo in the middle-class district of Dokki, Giza—a ten-minute walk from the university, the zoo, and the botanical gardens. Baba was at home on this Friday Sabbath. He was the youngest professor in the Department of Arabic and Pedagogy at Cairo University. As I would come to accept during his life, he was working, as usual busy on a manuscript, this one for his new Arabic textbook. The servant kept an eye on Gulnar while he anxiously awaited the outcome of the birth. He hoped that his second child would be a son—an heir—to bolster his standing as a man.

The messenger burst into the house, rushed into Baba's book-lined study and shouted, "A son, Master—*Ya effendi*. You have a son, *alf mabrouk*, a thousand congratulations!"

Baba's joy, he told me more than once, was such that he emptied his pocket of all its change to reward the messenger. "Mind you, I had only a few coins," he would add each time he related this story to me with a wry smile. "I rested my pen on the manuscript and rose from my desk with pride. News of a son filled me with such elation it popped my shirt buttons. I stepped out onto our balcony in my joy."

Baba first set eyes on me during visiting hours later that evening. I wonder if he thought of the zebra, with its two types of stripes: Gulnar expressed his dark, enigmatic Arab ones, and to his surprise, I, his son, had the lighter ones, fair skin, and a shock of blond hair.