

Prologue

The window glass shattered into a million pieces, awakening the entire family. Glass shards flew through the air, finding even the most remote corners of the bedroom. Until that night, the windows had welcomed the rays of sun during the hot Arabian days and the bright, cooling moonlight of the nights. Their home was less than a mile away from where the first American missiles hit, allowing the destructive sound wave to reach them by surprise in the middle of the night. Stillness, explosion, fear.

“The baby!” Suheir and her husband Faris woke up suddenly, the sound of the blast still reverberating in their eardrums. “She’s crying, I can hear her crying.” The desperate cry of her youngest daughter, May, tore through Suheir’s heart.

She didn’t wait for Faris before running to find their 18-month-old girl. He followed her, confused and disoriented. “Be careful, Suheir, the lights don’t work. There’s glass all over the floor.” But his words came too late. Impelled by desperation and her mother’s instincts, Suheir ran barefoot over a sea of sharp spines, shredding the skin of her feet as if it were nothing more than a thin layer of silk.

Navigating through the dark, Suheir found May standing in her crib, extending her little arms and crying out for her. She embraced her baby and gently pulled her out of the crib, probably the safest place she had known during her short life. Suheir held May tight against her chest until she felt her daughter’s heart rate slow down and her breathing become even. At that same instant, she heard Wahab, her thirteen-year-old son, calling for her. By then, Faris was with him and Amira, who had turned eight the previous week.

How was this possible? Life in Baghdad had not been easy, but Suheir had never imagined missiles raining on them. Her father, a seasoned diplomat, had warned her that if the negotiations at the United Nations failed, there was a strong possibility that the United States would act on its own and attack Saddam's regime. 'But the international community would never allow such a thing,' she had insisted. The U.S. would not act unilaterally, she was certain of it. She had worked for the UN and knew the organization well. 'How about innocent Iraqis? We don't matter?' she'd asked him. 'Collateral damage, that's what we are,' her father had replied.

Now she realized what he had meant, and she didn't know what hurt more: her bleeding feet or her broken heart.

"Suheir, you have to come. We need to get to the shelter!" Her husband's words brought her back into the moment, and she made an effort to walk with May, still crying in her arms. Faris was waiting for her with the children, frightened but brave, each one holding a hand. Amira was shaking but Wahab stood firm next to his father, showing unusual courage for his age. Suheir walked as quickly as she could, leaving a path of bloody footprints behind her.

They reached a small room at the back of their home, built during the 1991 Gulf War. They had laughed at the claustrophobic shelter with concrete walls and no windows when they bought the house on a quiet street of Baghdad, right after they got married. What seemed an impossible idea, even a joke in those days, had become a frightening reality. Suheir made sure she kept a few provisions inside the shelter at all times, enough water for a few days and an emergency kit, but never thought she would actually use them. It was her father who insisted she keep it always at the ready. "For the children's safety," he would say. Now she felt grateful for his advice.

Faris walked in first to make sure the inside of the room was safe, then waved to the rest of the family to follow him. They couldn't use the flashlights; it had been impossible to buy

batteries in the city for the past year, thanks to the embargo. Finding supplies had become a tiresome mission, while the black market with its sky-high prices flourished on a daily basis. The darkness inside the shelter was deep and the air was thick. Suheir opened a few small vents, hoping to let in some air, but her efforts seemed useless. Faris lit a kerosene lamp.

“Please sit down, Suheir, and let me see your feet.” His calming voice reminded her of her wounds, which she had completely forgotten. Sharp pain shot up her legs as she collapsed on a cushion on the cement floor; she grimaced but did not cry out.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Faris lied, hoping to reassure the children. “I’m going to clean them with some alcohol. This may sting a bit.” As the alcohol touched Suheir’s cuts, she closed her eyes and bit her lip, summoning all her strength not to scream. Tears of tension, fear, and impotence rolled down her face, beads of sweat covered her forehead and upper lip.

Wahab took her hand. “You are so brave, Ummi.” Suheir smiled at the sound of his voice. Once bandaged, she sat next to her children, holding May in her arms, touching Amira’s hair, and speaking soft words of comfort to Wahab. She looked into Faris’s eyes, as if asking: “What are we going to do? What’s going to happen to us?”

Faris understood. “Everything will be all right, we will be fine,” he said kissing his wife’s forehead. “Maybe some good will come out of this.”

“*Inshallah, inshallah,*” Suheir replied.

Chapter One

New York, 2003

“Natalia, are you home? Are you watching the news?” Charlie Klein’s voice was loud and commanding and he didn’t bother with niceties. No “Hello” or “How are you?”

“Yes, I’m watching, Charlie, along with the rest of the world,” Natalia replied, well-aware that her editor-in-chief thought she had no life beyond her job as a foreign correspondent in New York. And he was right.

Yet, as she watched the missiles flying over the dark skies of Baghdad on TV, Natalia had momentarily forgotten about work—all she could think about was her friend. An unpopular invasion was taking place in front of millions of eyes around the world, and nothing could be done to stop it. The fear that Suheir might have already paid the ultimate price in the name of freedom started to creep slowly into her mind and heart, squeezing the air from her lungs and sending a wave of panic down her spine.

“I need UN feedback right away—can you reach one of your State Department contacts for comment?” Charlie was incapable of masking his controlling nature and it was something Natalia had learned to live with. She’d been listening to his demands for eight years, and in all that time had never once balked or let him down.

“The State Department is sure to be a madhouse right now, Charlie,” she said. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to get to any of my sources tonight.” As soon as she said it she knew he wouldn’t buy it. “I’ll send a few emails and see what I can find out, but maybe you should call George. He’s in DC.”

“He’s probably calling everyone he knows to get me a story, but you’re more resourceful and a better journalist.” Charlie knew Natalia was competitive with George Brown, that before coming to New York she’d applied for the position at the Washington Bureau that George wound up with, and he couldn’t resist trying to push her buttons. “All George knows is how to drink expensive whiskey with lobbyists and politicians and brag about his wife being a Kennedy. Bah! You may not have his connections, Natalia, but you’re the better writer and I want you to get me the story.”

She was on to his act, as always. “No promises, Charlie, but I’ll see what I can do.”

“That’s my girl.”

“Don’t flatter me, Charlie, you know it won’t get you anywhere.” She meant it, but somehow he always seemed to get what he wanted.

“Okay, okay,” he said impatiently. “Just get on it, pronto.”

If Natalia didn’t know Charlie’s softer side she wouldn’t have put up with his rudeness for a minute, but she genuinely liked him. “Sure, boss,” she said, hitting the red icon on her cellphone and turning her attention to the television screen.

Natalia Rodriguez was used to remaining calm in the face of crisis; after all, she’d been a working journalist for over a decade, covering international conflicts for much of that time. But this crisis was hitting too close to home, and she ached at the sound of each explosion.

The time she’d spent with Suheir represented some of the happiest moments of her childhood. And although the two hadn’t spoken since Natalia’s move to New York, she could vividly recall the first time she met the shy girl with black hair and large, dark eyes seated at the back of her eighth-grade classroom in Buenos Aires.

At that very moment, alone in her apartment, Natalia regretted not having tried harder to stay in touch with Suheir. Her life had changed dramatically in the past decade, and the embargo on Iraq hadn't made communicating any easier. Still, they'd made a promise to keep in touch, always, and there was no good excuse for breaking it.

With the clock ticking and the voice of her boss still echoing in her ears, Natalia forced the distracting thoughts from her mind to focus on finding a source who could give her enough information to make Charlie happy tonight and let her sleep till morning.

In eight years at UN Headquarters Natalia had developed a number of strong relationships with gatekeepers to the information she needed to do her job. Right now, she knew most of them were being overwhelmed by communications from all sides. She would have to be creative to be heard, let alone get any answers.

The UN press office would ordinarily be a good place to start, but Natalia knew it would be shuttered at this hour. She'd have to call the press assistant, Fatima Silva, with whom she was very friendly. It wouldn't be the first time the two had spoken after-hours.

Natalia took her cellphone to the window and opened it halfway with one hand while dialing with the other. The March temperatures were warming up slowly after a harsh winter, and as a cool breeze wafted in she thought the city seemed unusually quiet tonight.

Fatima picked up on the second ring. "Who's calling, please?" The anxiety in her voice was unmistakable.

"Fatima, it's Natalia. I'm sorry to call so late, but I need your help."

"I'm expecting the press secretary any minute, Natalia, for a conference call." The Portuguese accent was familiar, but the tension in the older woman's voice was uncharacteristic.

She gave a loud sigh before continuing. “I apologize if I sound stressed out, Natalia, but the last twenty-four hours have been exhausting.”

“Tell me about it,” Natalia said. “The Security Council has been keeping everyone on edge.” She hadn’t missed a single Council meeting leading up to the invasion. “I don’t think I’ve had a good night’s sleep in weeks.”

“You know how unpopular this invasion has been among the international community,” Fatima said. “I guess there’s nothing we can do now but wait and see what comes out of it.”

“That’s why I’m calling, Fatima. I need a UN source willing to comment on the invasion. On the record.”

“I’m sorry, Natalia, but none of us can speak to the press until the Secretary General clears it,” Fatima said, adding, “I may know more after the conference with my boss. If we get the green light to speak, you’ll be the first reporter I call.” She sounded earnest, and very weary.

“Thank you, Fatima. I appreciate it.” Natalia knew there was no point in pushing things with the press assistant, at least for now. She’d have to find another source.

“Try to get some rest, Natalia. Tomorrow will be a busy day for all of us. Now, I really have to go.”

When the call ended a wave of disappointment washed over Natalia. She paced back and forth anxiously inside her small apartment for a few minutes as she considered her options. The internal debate was brief; she would have to swallow her pride and call Martin Carter at the State Department. The diplomat had been a good friend, before she’d ruined everything.

The solitary siren of an ambulance driving down West Broadway brought her back into the present, and the realization that she had no time to waste. Not with so much at stake.

Her cellphone rang again. “Charlie, it’s been just a few minutes since your last call,” she said, guessing correctly who was on the other end of the line.

“Were you able to reach your press contacts?”

“No, not yet.”

“What are you waiting for?”

“I won’t be able to do much if you keep calling me. Please give me at least an hour before you call again. I promise if I find out something before that, I’ll let you know immediately.”

“One hour, tops.” He hung up and Natalia exhaled. Pulling up Martin’s number, she hit the call button and waited to hear his gentle yet manly voice. She liked that he didn’t have the typical American accent, probably owing to his studies in England and his fluency in several languages, Hebrew and Arabic among them.

The call went right to voicemail and Natalia cursed under her breath. She was reluctant to leave a message and decided not to, unsure what to say. She felt a little guilty knowing she was using their friendship to get what she needed, but reminded herself that urgent times call for desperate measures.

Martin *had* to be at his State Department office; there was no other possibility. She found several numbers online and decided to call them one-by-one if necessary. Even if he wouldn’t speak to her, she had to try.

After her third failed attempt, Natalia took a break to impose order on the thoughts competing for her attention, but the television news channel was a continual distraction. It was getting late and she was finally letting the exhaustion of her body take over her mind.

She stood and walked to her tiny kitchen with its yellow subway tiles that felt so Seventies, to make a cup of tea. She opened the cupboard, took out her grandmother’s china teacup

decorated with little pink roses, and put the kettle on the stove to boil. She kept a few things in her apartment that reminded her of home in Argentina: books by her favorite Latin American authors including García Márquez and Cortázar; a few framed photos of her parents, Teresa and Fernando, and of her brother, Marco; and, finally, her grandmother's tea set. Having opted to build a life in a foreign land, she cherished these small but powerful things that connected her to her past.

As she walked toward her gray sofa, Natalia felt tempted to have a glass of wine instead of the tea, but reconsidered. She needed to keep a clear head right now. As much as it might relax her, she knew the wine would make her drowsy and that wouldn't do with the pressure on.

As she waited for the water to boil she listened to the voice of the CNN anchor in the background, explaining to the show's American viewers the reasons their country was going to war for the second time in less than two years. As the reporter repeated the Bush administration's assertion that it would be a brief intervention, an "in-and-out" initiative, Natalia's thoughts drifted back to her Iraqi friend.

After the United Nations imposed the commercial embargo against Saddam's regime on August 6, 1990, Suheir's letters became fewer and further between and eventually stopped all together. Natalia didn't know if her friend chose not to write anymore or if the mail had been cut off by the sanctions.

Her heart had grown heavier with each new detail that emerged. Any one of Saddam's youngest victims could be Suheir's child, any man killed might be her husband, brother, or father. Victims can't be numbers when they have a human face, and Natalia saw her friend's face in every news report. Saddam was killing his own people in the worst possible way. Slowly and painfully.

Despite the desperate situation, Natalia had long held that a U.S. military invasion without the full support of the international community was a terrible idea. It would destabilize an already volatile region and cost thousands of lives on both sides.

But now she was thinking that Martin may be right after all, that the U.S. action could end Saddam's tyranny, bringing peace to Iraq and opening the door to democracy. Maybe, she thought, something good would come out of the destruction, before quickly reminding herself how seldom things worked out that way.

As she sipped her hot tea and imagined the worst that could happen, she prayed to God she was wrong.

"How are your feet feeling?" Faris asked Suher after waking her up with a kiss on her forehead. She assured him that the wounds were healing fast, but he had his doubts. The cuts were deeper than he'd realized the night they'd run to the shelter, but she stubbornly refused to go to the hospital, insisting she would not cause any more worry for him or the children.

Her body ached, certainly, but not so much from her injuries. The four of them had slept the past few nights on the concrete floor of their dark, homemade shelter, fully prepared should the bombardment begin again.

Yet Baghdad's skies had remained clear and bright, its streets relatively quiet, giving the couple cautious hope that this nightmare would soon be over. The electricity came and went without warning, requiring the use of a kerosene lamp that emitted strong fumes and making it hard to keep up with the news. Saddam's regime was on the run, they'd heard, but the radio