

## CHAPTER 1

# Murder in Amman

In summer the temperature in Jordan soars to the unpleasantly high thirties. Across the sweltering capital, those of Amman's citizens who were fortunate enough not to have to make their living on the teeming streets hid away from the sun in the city's many coffee shops.

It was 31 May 1994, the day that Kifaya's mother, uncles and brothers had decided she would die.

In the built-up part of the conservative old city, Kifaya sat, tied to a chair in the kitchen of her family home. The sweets that her older brother, Khalid, had bought earlier to persuade her that everything was all right lay untouched on the counter.

Kifaya's crime was to have allowed herself to be raped by her other brother, Mohammad. She had then been forced by her family secretly to abort his child and had been made to marry a man thirty-four years her senior, whom she had divorced after six miserable months.

She had shamed her family. There was only one solution.

Khalid held a glass to Kifaya's lips, and told her to drink some water. He asked her to recite verses from the Quran and picked up a knife. Kifaya begged for mercy. Outside, the neighbours listened but did nothing as she started to scream.

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'You're a professional,' I muttered to myself. 'Don't worry, you'll

know what to say when you get there. Just stay focused, stay focused.’

It was 1 June 1994. I turned off Amman’s busy commuter highway and drove upwards with mounting apprehension towards one of the most impoverished areas of the city.

Jordan’s capital, home to two million souls, is always congested, but nowhere more so than in the poorest parts of the city. There’s no rail or metro system, and in old Amman, the narrow streets cannot hope to cope with freight trucks, buses and cars.

As I sat behind an ancient truck that coughed exhaust fumes at my battered rust-bucket of a car, I recited the words I’d read in the paper for the umpteenth time that morning. ‘Thirty-two-year-old man kills sixteen-year-old sister in Hashemi Shamali. Surrenders to police. Investigations underway.’

I don’t know how many times I saw similar four-line stories spread all over the Arabic press. Something told me that I needed to investigate these stories. As a twenty-six-year-old crime journalist, I was still somewhat uncertain of myself. I had been working for *The Jordan Times*, the only English-language daily in Jordan, for just nine months.

Journalism had become a career choice almost by accident. My father, a civil engineer, and my mother, a librarian, both supported my dreams of studying Public Relations and Advertising at a US university and so when I won a place at Oklahoma City University in 1987 they were only too happy for me to go.

This was around the time of the first Palestinian uprising, and a reporter called Corky Huffin asked me to write about the intifada (although I hold Jordanian nationality, I am originally Palestinian). I wrote the article and it was published. Corky then asked me to join the university’s newspaper since they always needed reporters, so I did and loved it. I wrote about women’s sports as I was an athlete myself (I played basketball for Jordan’s national team) and then switched majors, focusing on journalism.

During the final semester I worked for the weekly *Oklahoma Gazette*, where I wrote about social issues; I learned how people can make a difference and help each other and how journalism helps them to do this. By the time I returned to Jordan, I knew I wanted to focus on women's issues but had no idea what I was about to get into.

As I drove deeper into the poor neighbourhood, the buildings became shabbier; the road narrowed and the streets soon became jammed with cars forced to a honking crawl as pedestrians spilled from the crowded pavements.

I stopped the car and rolled down the window. A young man was striding purposefully down the road towards me. I called out to him: 'Have you heard about a young girl who's been murdered?'

'Who hasn't?' he replied, pointing back in the direction he'd come. 'Round the corner, close to Omar's barbershop, you'll find her family's house; she was killed there.'

It seemed as though everyone knew. This was, after all, a very crowded neighbourhood where everybody knew everyone else's business. A real-life murder was a sure attention-getter in the absence of other distractions like movie theatres, parks or libraries.

'Do you know why they killed her?' I asked.

He was already walking away. 'Because her brother raped her,' he said casually.

Assuming I'd misheard him (who kills rape victims?), I soon found Omar's barbershop and parked my car. As I got out, a loose paving slab wobbled under the sneakers I'd decided to wear in case I had to run away – I was about to stick my nose in some very private business. My non-traditional baggy T-shirt and loose-fitting jeans also helped me feel more comfortable, although I stuck out like a sore thumb in this conservative part of town.

I pushed the front door halfway open; the smell of stale cigarettes and hair grease overwhelmed me. Through the haze, I saw there were two empty chairs to my left. A fat man, who I assumed

was the proprietor from the way he straddled the chair, faced me. Two skinny middle-aged men were slouched on a brown hole-ridden sofa to his left. They were all smoking.

‘Assalamu Alaikum,’ I said.

‘Wa Alaikum Assalam,’ they chorused.

‘A young girl was murdered around here, have you heard about this?’

At this the two men looked at each other and both sat up. ‘Yes,’ one of the skinnier ones said. ‘Who told you?’ he asked, suspiciously.

‘It was in the paper this morning.’ I pulled out the page I had torn from the newspaper and showed it to them while I remained on the doorstep.

‘It’s *already* made the papers?’ This development was apparently unwelcome. The barber took a drag of his cigarette and asked, ‘Who are you and why do you want to know?’

I declared confidently that I was a crime reporter working for *The Jordan Times*. Inside I was a bag of nerves. Media coverage only serves to keep any ‘scandal’ committed by the victim of the so-called honour crime alive, which is why so few reporters – in fact, no reporters whatsoever – investigated honour killings.

They didn’t respond, so I stepped through the door and sat on the sofa next to the two men. Hoping to win their confidence and encourage them to speak to me about the murder, I chatted with them casually about my job, my education in the USA, journalism, the country and politics.

Our chat revealed that the two men on the couch were her uncles. ‘Kifaya was not a good girl,’ one of them said, as if killing a ‘bad girl’ was acceptable.

Kifaya. Suddenly, my story had a name.

I stayed and we talked some more. Every now and again I asked why Kifaya had been killed, until one of the uncles said, ‘She was raped by Mohammad, her brother. That’s why she was killed.’

I straightened my back, and placed my notebook on my lap, not sure what to say next.

Eventually I said, ‘Why was she punished and not her brother? Why didn’t Kifaya’s family discipline him instead?’

One of the uncles looked worried. ‘Do you think we killed the wrong person?’

Her other uncle answered quickly, ‘Relax. We did the right thing.’

I struggled to contain my fury. It was as if they were speaking about a sheep. These men were part of the conspiracy. Her body not yet cold, yet here they were – on a sofa in a barbershop chatting with the owner and smoking cigarettes.

‘She seduced her brother. She tarnished the family’s honour and deserved to die,’ the skinnier uncle declared.

I sighed at his stupidity. Jordanian society blames women for everything: for being raped, for being harassed on the streets, for philandering husbands, for husbands who divorce them, for bearing a child of the wrong gender – the list is endless.

‘But why would she choose to sleep with her brother? If she wanted to sleep with a man, surely, she would not choose to sleep with her brother.’

Instead of answering my question, the barber stood up and said, ‘Why do you care for such a story?’

‘Why are you dressed like this?’ one of the uncles asked, pulling an expression of disgust at my jeans and T-shirt.

‘Why are you in our neighbourhood?’ the other continued. ‘You do not belong here. You have become westernized in America. You forget where you are now.’

I was clearly ‘not a good girl’. I thanked them and quickly left.

Outside, I looked at the houses stacked haphazardly on top of and overlapping each other. Kifaya’s wasn’t hard to find. Even the kids playing in the street could point me to the three-storey house situated at the end of the road. I looked at it with pain in my heart.

‘Why did they kill you?’ I asked myself. ‘You were only sixteen.’

I headed towards her neighbours; a shabby house where a newly-wed couple lived. They offered me tea and told me what they saw.

They had heard Kifaya scream and beg for mercy. They had seen her brother Khalid standing outside his house holding the blood-stained knife and shouting, ‘I have cleansed my family’s honour.’

His family was waiting to congratulate him.

Khalid then went to the nearest police station and turned himself in, claiming to have killed Kifaya to cleanse the honour of his family.

I arrived back at the newspaper offices frustrated and exhausted. I needed to exorcise this experience from my system by telling my story to my editor, Jennifer Hamarneh. Jennifer had arrived at *The Jordan Times* a couple of years before me. She was a tough editor and would often get mad when I made mistakes. But she taught me so much; though at times it was tough, I took on board what she was telling me in a positive way; I certainly didn’t make the same mistake twice.

‘I don’t want Kifaya’s murder to be just another crime story; I want so-called honour killings to become a national issue.’

Jennifer looked at me like she was weighing me up. ‘Tell the story, we’ll make space for it.’

I think Jennifer knew then that Kifaya’s story was going to change my life for good. In order to maintain objectivity, I had to suppress my great anger and sadness as I wrote, hoping that someone important, that any of our readers, would read it and would feel inspired to take action.

The following day my story appeared on page three with a headline that read: ‘Victim of incestuous rape killed by second brother’.

The next morning George Hawatmeh, my former editor-in-chief, took a call from a Jordanian woman, who described herself as an intellectual who worked in an official position. George was

also a strong believer in the fight against so-called honour crimes and was immediately thrilled at the thought that the caller was also outraged at this appalling murder and wanted to voice her objection. Perhaps she wanted to use her influential post to exert some pressure on the government to help prosecute all those involved in Kifaya's murder.

But his hopes were immediately dashed. She shouted down the phone at George: 'You should stop Rana Husseini from reporting these crimes because they do not exist in Jordan! This does not happen in our society!'

Luckily, George and Jennifer disagreed and supported me when I told them I wanted to become the voice of these women whose lives have been wiped out and every record of their existence destroyed by their family. I would expose each and every murder I heard about.

I didn't realize then quite how busy I was going to be.