

Against the Tide

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Chapter 12: The Secret

Yusra's father still didn't know anything about her plans. She wanted to surprise him, so she kept them a secret and told Jameel not to say anything either.

It wasn't easy for Jameel to keep a secret for so long. He kept asking Yusra, "When's it time for the surprise?" and sometimes he forgot and even asked her in front of their father.

Eventually their mother began to suspect something was up and confronted her

"I feel like you're hiding something from me, Yusra," she said. "What's this surprise that Jameel keeps going on about? Who's it for? And what is it? Come on, out with it!"

Yusra was afraid her mother might become angry and prevent her from going ahead with her plan, or that she would object to the idea and then her father would too. So she decided it would be best just to tell her mother everything. She focused on her father's boat at first, and explained that it had needed repairs and how they'd fixed it up.

"You know how much Father loves his boat. He won't even think about selling it, not to anyone," she told her mother.

"I know, Yusra. That boat is like a child to him."

Yusra's mother listened, and she teared up when she heard how Saleh's friends had helped repair the boat too.

"Bless them, they're such good kids... such good kids," she murmured. "But what's the point of all this hard work?" She added sadly. "The boat will just sit there, waiting for Jameel. Who's going to use it? Your father is confined to his wheelchair – you know that as much as anyone. And Saleh..."

Her voice cracked when she said her son's name.

"Saleh, may he rest in peace. Your father dreamed of giving the boat to Saleh after he retired, and then to Jameel when he grew up. But that's not what happened." She sighed, as if trying to console herself. "God forgive me. We shouldn't question what He decides."

Her mother fell silent for a moment, and Yusra saw an opportunity to bring up her idea.

"Mother, remember how I used to go fishing with Father on breaks from school? I helped him with everything, and he always said I was better at fishing than Saleh, because Saleh didn't really want to be a fisherman when he grew up."

"Yes," her mother said, smiling at the memory. "Every time you and your father came home he'd say: if Yusra were a boy, she'd be the best fisherman out there."

"That's why I want to take Father's boat out and go fishing myself." Yusra said the next part quickly, afraid she might change her mind or lose her nerve.

"You?" Her mother exclaimed. "Have you lost your mind? Who ever heard of a fisherwoman in Gaza, much less a young girl? What will people say?"

"Why should they have a problem with it?" said Yusra defiantly. "Don't women drive cars in Gaza? Don't they fly planes and captain ships in the rest of the world? I'll go out fishing with Abu Ahmed and Father's friends, bring back some fish, and make a bit of money... what's so wrong with that? Wouldn't that be better than sitting around, waiting for handouts from other people? Wouldn't it be better than hearing our neighbors talk about us behind our backs when we ask them for help? I don't want to keep borrowing tea and sugar from them," she added desperately. "Um Hafez acts like she's better than us, like we're beggars."

Yusra continued to argue with her mother, reassuring her one moment and then trying to persuade her the next.

“Save your breath,” her mother said finally. “Your father will never agree to this.”

“Leave Father to me,” Yusra told her. “But when I bring it up, Mother, please help me convince him.”

Chapter 13: That Fateful Day

As‘ad and Suhad came home happy to have helped Saleh’s family. At the dinner table that night, they told their parents everything they’d done at the fisherman’s hut, but they didn’t mention Yusra’s determination to start fishing, because she’d asked them to keep her secret until she told her father.

“Bless you kids,” said their mother as she peeled an apple and cut it into four pieces. “Abu Saleh’s poor family... they’ve suffered one disaster after the next. What you did today will really help them out.”

Later that night, As‘ad lay in bed tossing and turning long after everyone else had fallen asleep. He couldn’t get the image of Saleh’s face out of his mind. He thought about the disastrous day when they’d all met up at Maher’s house to talk about the next rap concert in Gaza. Rappers who supported the Palestinian cause were coming from around the world, and there was talk of local rappers being included in the concert too, but people were worried the government wouldn’t allow it. Concerts needed special permits in order to feature local rappers.

As‘ad, Saleh, and Maher met every week to listen to songs on YouTube and chat online with rappers in the West Bank and the rest of the Arab world. Sometimes they wrote new lyrics, used a computer program to help set the beat, and practiced the songs. The girls, Suhad and Daad, helped write lyrics and rapped too.

They'd been hanging out for a long time that day and everyone was getting hungry, so Saleh offered to go to a market nearby to get falafel sandwiches for everyone.

"Sandwiches are on me," he told them while getting ready to leave. "But keep working on the lyrics until I get back... I've got a good feeling about this song, I think it'll be a big hit."

About half an hour after Saleh left, a massive explosion shook the house.

Everyone screamed, terrified. They tried to work out what had caused the explosion and where it was, and rushed out into the street to see what had happened.

"An Israeli missile," someone on the street shouted. "I saw it hit. It must have been aimed at an activist's car. God help us. Each time they target an activist in the street with a rocket, more innocent people die. They're slaughtering us like cattle."

Someone else rushed over from the site of the explosion, yelling angrily.

"God damn them! They killed everyone in the car, and ten people on the street, too."

As'ad remembered Saleh. He started calling his friend's name.

"Saleh! Saleh!"

He ran towards the site of the explosion, no one could stop him, and there in the middle of the packed market was a horrifying scene. He saw the car, completely burnt out, and bodies lying on the ground nearby. There was smoke, dust, and people shouting as they searched for survivors and loved ones. As'ad was in shock. He stopped and looked around.

Suddenly, his gaze fell on a hand resting beside a bag of falafel sandwiches. Then he fainted.

Back in his bed, As'ad cried, thinking about Saleh, his oldest childhood friend. He wished he could erase the image from his memory. He wiped his eyes and got up to get a glass of water, and then he returned to bed and tried to fall asleep.

He thought about the boat, *Sitt al-Kul*, and Yusra's plan to take her father down to the beach so he could see it and sit by the sea with Abu Ahmed, just like in old times. Then his thoughts turned to Yusra, and how vibrant she was. He thought about her constant attempts to control that rebellious lock of hair that always fell across her forehead, and smiled.

Chapter 14: The Surprise

Everything was ready. The only thing Yusra could think about was her plan, and now the only thing she needed to do to set it in motion was tell her father. Abu Ahmed agreed to pick them up in his old car and drive her father and his wheelchair to the beach, while Saleh's friends agreed to come to the house early and go with them.

Saleh's friends arrived right on time and had tea with the family, and then As'ad turned to Yusra's father.

"Abu Saleh, we have a surprise for you."

"What is it?" he asked, waving at a fly that was buzzing around his face. "The last thing we need is another surprise."

Maher laughed.

"Don't worry, it's a good surprise today. We're going to take you with us on a little excursion."

"If only," Abu Saleh sighed sadly. "My days of going on excursions are over. The only places I go now are the vegetable patch and the doctor. I don't know what I'd do without Abu Ahmed. Whenever I need to go to the clinic, he drives me there."

"Abu Ahmed is waiting outside, he's going to take you with us," As'ad said with a laugh.

Yusra stroked her father's forehead tenderly. "Come on, Father, go with Saleh's friends. They came all the way here just for you."

Her mother chimed in too.

"Yusra's right, don't let the kids down. Go with them and Abu Ahmed, he's waiting for you."

Abu Saleh didn't stop grumbling the whole way there, but when the car stopped at the beach he suddenly fell quiet. He took a deep breath of sea air, as if he wanted to fill his lungs with the salty breeze after such a long time away. He gazed out at the distant horizon.

"I've missed the sea," he said quietly. Tears filled his eyes. It took him a moment to regain his composure.

"Is this the surprise?" He asked finally.

"Nope – there's more," Saleh's friends told him as they opened the trunk of the car and took out his wheelchair.

They helped Abu Saleh into the wheelchair, pushed it to where the beach began, and then over the wooden pathway they'd built for him, which led all the way to the fishermen's hut. They stopped his wheelchair under an umbrella Abu Ahmed had set up for him, and Abu Saleh looked around. He couldn't believe it had been so easy to reach the hut. He looked deeply moved, as if he'd lost the words to express how happy he was.

Yusra went over to her father, gave him a hug, and kissed his forehead.

"This is where you belong, Father. On the beach, with your friends."

"Bless you, Yusra." He looked at Saleh's friends gathered around him. "You kids are wonderful, bless you."

Abu Saleh tore his gaze away from the horizon to look for his boat, and when he saw a shiny new boat in its place, he cried out, horrified. "Where's *Sitt al-Kul*? Who's taken her?"

“Calm down,” said Abu Ahmed, laughing. “That new boat right there is *your* boat: it’s *Sitt al-Kul*. Your son’s friends wanted to surprise you. They painted her and fixed her up as good as new.”

Abu Saleh’s eyes shone with tears. “This is too much, far too much... how can I thank you.”

Abu Ahmed nudged his friend playfully. “Enough with the talk, old pal. Have some tea and help me mend this net.”

Before long, news had spread that Abu Saleh was back on the beach, and other fishermen came down to say hello and swap stories, just like old times.

Chapter 15: What’s So Wrong?

The days they took her father down to the beach, Yusra didn’t tell him her plan. She thought one surprise a day was enough, and decided to tell him the following day.

Um Saleh was waiting for them expectantly when they came home. She watched Abu Ahmed help her husband out of the car, and even from a distance she knew that something had changed. He seemed more alive than she’d seen him in a long time, as if he’d been on a distant journey and was finally returning home. The family came in and sat down, and she listened to them describe everything that had happened on that amazing day.

Abu Ahmed promised to come by twice a week to pick Abu Saleh up and take him to the sea.

Two days later, as Abu Saleh was eagerly waiting for his friend to arrive and take him to the fishermen’s hut, Yusra sat down next to him and took his hand in hers. She patted it for a few moments, and then placed it on her cheek. His hand was less rough than it used to be.

“Father, do you remember how you always took me fishing with you on my days off from school?”

“Of course, Yusra, how could I forget?” he chuckled. “Those were the best days. You loved fishing, and you knew exactly what to do, not like Saleh, God rest his soul. His mind was always somewhere else.”

“You taught me to fish yourself, Father. You taught me to love fishing and love the sea, just like you do.” She paused. “That’s what I want to talk to you about.”

Quickly, so she wouldn’t lose her nerve, Yusra told her father what she wanted to do. Her father listened to what she said. He looked stunned.

“What kind of ridiculous idea is that?” He burst out angrily. “Stay home and let my daughter go out fishing in my place? For shame! What would people say? It would be a disgrace, Yusra, a disgrace!”

But Yusra stood her ground, and their voices rose as they argued over the idea. Um Saleh attempted to calm them down, but she knew her daughter was stubborn, just like her father.

“What’s so shameful about following in your footsteps so I can help the family?” Yusra countered, trying to convince her father. “Isn’t it more shameful to beg from our neighbors just to get by? Tell me. You’re my father, you know me and trust me, and you know how good I am at fishing. Why won’t you let me help the family? If you stand up for me, no one will be able to say anything. I know who I am! I’m Yusra, your daughter, the daughter of a fisherman, and I’m proud of that.”

Tears rose to Abu Saleh’s eyes. He fell silent.

“I know who you are, my girl,” he finally said. “And I know how skilled you are. Give me some time to think about it. I’ll let you know what I decide.”

A week later, Yusra asked her father again, and was surprised by his response.

“I’ve thought about what you said for a long time, Yusra, and I’ve spoken to Abu Ahmed. He convinced me to give you a chance to prove you’re serious about this. He promised me he’ll go out with you until he’s sure you’ll be all right on your own. I know it’s almost the end of the school year. I want you to promise me you’ll focus on your studies until then. When summer vacation starts I’ll let you take the boat out, but on one condition: you have to practice with Abu Ahmed. When he tells me you’re ready to go fishing by yourself, then I’ll let you.”

Yusra leapt up and hugged her father, overjoyed.

“I’ll make you proud, Father. Things will be just like they used to be.”

Chapter 16: A Long Night

Finally, the day she’d been waiting for had almost arrived. Yusra tossed and turned in bed the whole night before, unable to sleep. She was nervous and scared, and she’d started to doubt herself, too. What if she’d forgotten how to fish? What if the boat capsized, or if she got lost at sea? What if Israeli Navy patrol ships intercepted her?

All sorts of disastrous possibilities swirled around in her mind. Finally, she pushed away her fear and steeled herself for the challenge. She wouldn’t give up now. She was going ahead with her plan, and hoped everything would be fine.

Eventually drowsiness overtook her and she fell asleep, thinking about everything she was going to catch on her first day as a fisherwoman in the Mediterranean Sea. She woke up early, did her dawn prayers, and felt calmer and more reassured. She put on her gym clothes and looked around for something to protect her from the hot sun. She found the hat Saleh used to wear all the time, one he loved. She turned it over in her hands, remembering him.

“Saleh’s hat will keep the sun off my face better than anything else,” she told herself. “It’ll be like he’s there with me, protecting me and helping me.”

The sun began to ascend through the sky and spread its warm rays across the earth. Yusra sat down to breakfast with her mother and father. She ate a slice of bread with olive oil and *zaatar* spices, and drank some tea with mint. Her mother kept glancing at her anxiously, and Yusra tried to avoid catching her eye.

“The best time to go fishing is early in the morning,” her father told her. “Go out for two hours just after dawn, and two hours in the evening. Are you ready, sweetheart? You can change your mind if you want.”

Yusra shook her head no. “I’m ready, Father. Besides, Abu Ahmed is already here to take us to the beach. I can hear the car.” She hugged her mother and kissed her on the forehead. “Don’t worry, Mother, I can do this.” Then Yusra stood up and pushed her father’s wheelchair out to the car.

Chapter 17: The First Voyage

Yusra knew what she needed to do. She put her fishing net in the boat along with the lunch her mother had packed and insisted that Yusra take with her. She dragged the little boat to the edge of the shore, and with Abu Ahmed’s help and a final push, the boat was in the water. She started to paddle.

“Good luck, my girl,” her father called out from shore, his voice a bit hoarse. “Good luck, *Sitt al-Kul*.”

“Remember what I taught you, Yusra,” Abu Ahmed called after her excitedly. “And don’t go more than three miles from shore. Because if you do...” he trailed off.

Yusra stood up in the small boat, found her balance, and then began to paddle: once on the right side, then once on the left. For weeks, she and Abu Ahmed had practiced balancing and paddling. After being away from the sea for so long, she now felt her muscles growing stronger with every day.

Yusra looked around and saw several other fishing boats heading towards the horizon, to the farthest point that the Israeli naval patrol ships allowed. The fishing was better out there.

Those heading out to sea included many seasoned fishermen around her father's age and lots of young teenage boys about her age. She was the only girl, the only fisherwoman.

The horizon stretched endlessly in front of her. Yusra had forgotten the world was so huge. She left the shore farther and farther behind, and thanked God the sea was calm that day. Far off in the distance, far away, she saw Israeli naval patrol ships looming menacingly on the horizon. They were poised like sea monsters, ready to snatch up the fishing boats. She turned away and gazed out even farther, imagining far-off countries she wished she could visit.

A sense of tranquility settled over everything: the sea around her, the sound of little waves lapping rhythmically against the boat. A light sea breeze buffeted against her face as if it were tickling her, and blew her hair back behind her. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and felt as if she could take off and fly on the ocean wind, out into the open skies, just like the seagulls she could see. It didn't matter where to; all she wanted was to be free of all the restrictions and barriers in her life.

She looked at her compass and decided to try her luck in this part of the sea. She wasn't far from shore. She felt safer when she could still see it back in the distance.

Yusra threw the net into the water, just like her father used to do. Now all she needed to do was wait. She was hungry, so she opened the lunch her mother had packed for her, took

a bite and drank some tea. Nearly two hours went by. Every so often she checked the net. Finally, it was time to return to shore. She checked her net one last time, hoping she'd managed to catch enough fish.

Yusra knew there weren't many fish close to shore, because over the years Israel had punished the Palestinian people of Gaza by limiting the area where they were allowed to fish.

The Oslo Accords decreed that Palestinians in Gaza had the right to fish twenty-five nautical miles from Gaza's shore. Then Israel reduced the distance to twelve miles. Then five. Now it was just three miles.

The people of Gaza depended on fishing to eat and support themselves. But the area where they were allowed to fish was so small that now there were hardly any fish left there. Yusra knew that any fishing boat that crossed beyond the three-mile mark could be turned back, seized, or even shot at by the Israeli patrol ships. And what really angered her was that those same patrol ships protected the huge Israeli fishing boats that came into Gaza's waters to fish.

Yusra gazed out at the far-off Israeli Navy ships and shouted as loudly as she could, "Enough already! Enough! Just let us live!"

A wonderful feeling swept over her. She could yell freely here and no one could hear her.

She looked around and shouted again at the top of her lungs, with all the strength she could rally. She wasn't calling for help, she just wanted – for once – to let out all the frustration and anger and sadness she felt.

Everyone was waiting for her as she approached the shore: her mother, father, and Jameel were there, and Abu Ahmed and Saleh's friends too. A crowd of fishermen who had heard about Yusra had come to see with their own eyes if "Gaza's first fisherwoman" was actually real.

Everyone waved at Yusra as she paddled toward shore.

As'ad, Maher, and Abu Ahmed rushed into the water to pull the boat up onto the beach, and Yusra jumped out.

“Here, help me pull in the net,” she said to Saleh’s friends with a laugh. “Let’s see how much I caught today. I didn’t go far from shore, it was just my first day out there.”

Saleh’s friends started pulling in the net and folding it up so it wouldn’t get tangled. Jameel helped too, with focused excitement.

Finally, they saw fish jumping around in the net. There weren’t many, just a few small fish and crabs, but enough to grill on the beach and share with everyone there. Um Saleh had brought some warm flatbread and spicy Gazan salad from home to share, too.

The smell of grilled fish filled the air as the sun began to disappear over the horizon. Everyone gathered around Yusra, and listened to her tell them about her first day at sea.