

SALWA BAKR

DOVES ON THE WING

They carried out their plan very efficiently. The first one, the one with the deep scar on his short neck, boarded the bus at the main terminal. Then, after the bus had made its way through the central shopping area, creeping along like a tortoise because of the masses of cars and people and the merchandise spilling out over the pavements and onto the streets, the second one leapt on the bus the moment it slowed down at the first stop in the old district—where buildings now vied with one another to soar into the sky, stifling the lovely gardens that had slumbered peacefully there such a short time before. The third, sharp-eyed, with a lean, straight body translating itself easily into sudden lithe movements, clung to the bar fixed to the rear door as the bus set off from the stop at the public garden, which separates the old district from the other districts. Every district had its distinct identity, reflected in the street lighting (sometimes faint, most often non-existent), the broken pavements and the regular potholes in the street, to which the bodies of the passengers responded by going up and down, or left and right, whenever the bus landed in one of them or the driver tried to go around them. The moment the third man boarded the bus and made sure his two partners were there too—the first one standing at the front, behind the driver, the second sitting in the last seat at the back—he raised his hand as a signal to go ahead and pushed his way through the standing passengers to the front, upon which the other two produced “gazelle horn” knives and pointed them at the backs of the driver and conductor. Then the third man whipped out his gun and aimed at the passengers. “Put your hands up,” he said, “and don’t move.”

Stunned, the passengers hesitated for a few seconds, then raised their hands. So did the conductor, in spite of the Belmont cigarette burning between his thumb and forefinger, the one his friend the