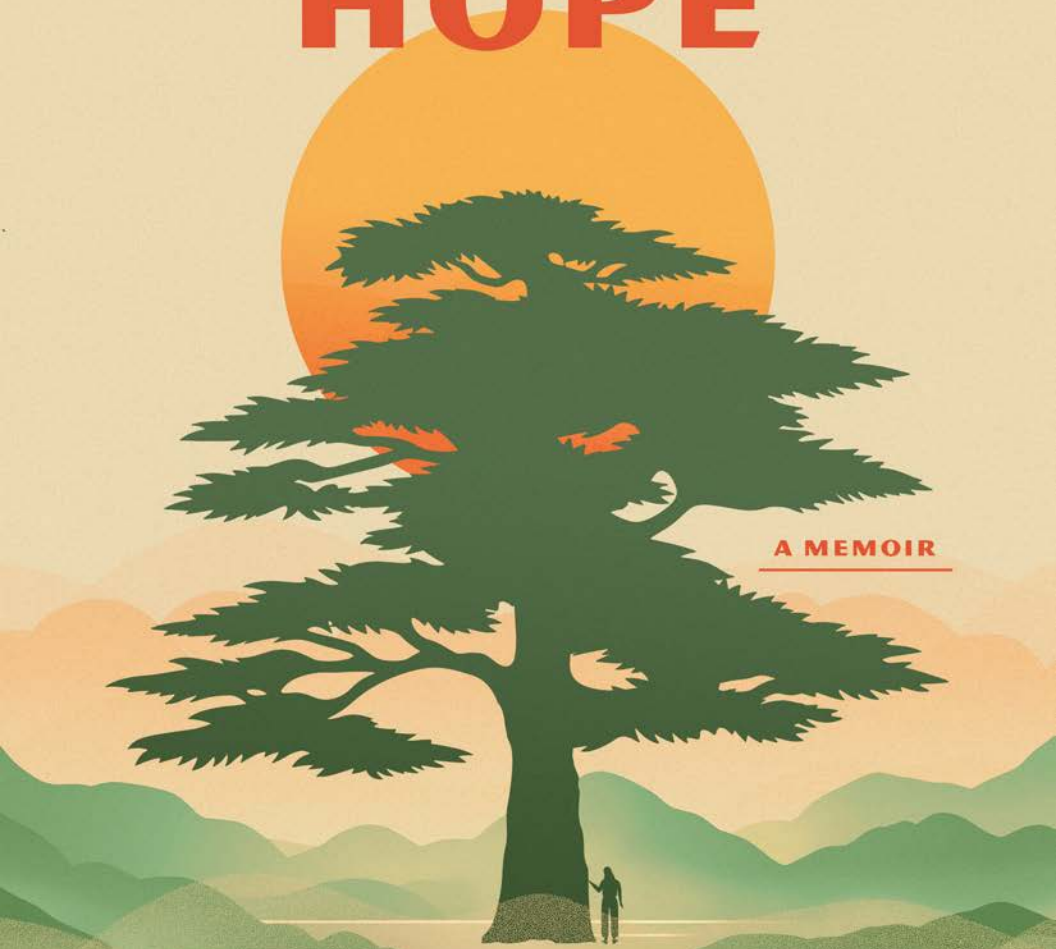
FROM THE RUINS OF MY PAST,
GOD'S LOVE HAS BUILT SOMETHING ETERNAL

I CHOOSE HOPE



A MEMOIR

RITA EL-MOUNAYER

They say that reading is an exercise in empathy—an exercise of walking in someone else's shoes for a while. This could not be more true than in Rita El-Mounayer's *I Choose Hope*. This is the honest and deeply moving tale of a girl who grew up in Lebanon's civil war, enduring things no child should have to. It follows her creative television outreach to children and traces the way in which God prepared her to lead the most extensive Christian media ministry in the Middle East today.

DR. TERENCE ASCOTT, founder and president, SAT-7

I love the stories of people who serve on the frontlines of Christ's Kingdom, bravely sowing gospel seeds of peace where hatred simmers and wars rage. Where do such believers find the courage to remain hopeful in a world disintegrating before their eyes? Rita El-Mounayer answers this in her poignant book, *I Choose Hope*. My brave friend tells the bittersweet story of growing up in Lebanon during its long civil war and how hardship and heartache prepared her for her pioneering work in the Middle East today. Your spirit will be stirred and your heart will be powerfully moved as you sit with Rita's remarkable story of great loss, yet greater hope. I heartily recommend it.

JONI EARECKSON TADA, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

This is a story of an indomitable spirit and a resilient faith. Rita El-Mounayer's prose is so beautiful; it reads like poetry. Her story will inspire you and make you weep, but also strengthen you. Through her, you will see what God has been doing—and will continue to do—in the Middle East and beyond.

DR. ALLEN YEH, dean and vice president of academic affairs, International Theological Seminary

Many of us in the Western world live in a bubble. We haven't experienced wars in our homeland during our lifetime. Rita El-Mounayer has, and she writes about it in *I Choose Hope*. Rita is a strong, gifted leader of SAT-7 and an excellent communicator. In these pages, you learn where Rita's strength comes from and how God has shaped her heart to share His hope with others. Her honest and vulnerable recounting of her childhood in war-torn Lebanon, along with many other challenging life experiences, offers a powerful lesson for us all. Rita chose the One who chose her to be His follower, His servant, His friend. You, too, will be blessed when you do the same.

DR. RON HARRIS, founder and president, Media Alliance International

Few of us can truly relate to Rita's memoir—someone raised in war-ravaged Lebanon and navigating multiple crises before stepping into regional ministry leadership within an overwhelming patriarchal society. And yet those who were children when the civil war began in Lebanon and were young adults when it ended seem to have carried a uniquely anointed calling to serve with courage. This book captures that journey through short sentences and concise chapters. If you know Rita well, this account will deepen your respect for her journey. If you know of her, you will be amazed by how powerfully God can work through fragility to raise empowered female leaders. And if you don't know Rita, this book offers a firsthand, honest diary of a Christian daughter of God who transforms brokenness into bravery. *I Choose Hope* is a constant reminder that hope is a choice, and as Christians we have no choice but to choose it.

DR. MICHAEL BASSOUS, CEO, Bible Society–Lebanon; author of *Leadership . . . in Crisis*

To choose hope, time and again against all reason—in the context of war, family breakdown, and social disintegration—is a testament to the power of faith and confidence in God and his plan. Rita's indomitable spirit shines through her recollections in *I Choose Hope*. She consistently tried to see the best in people in difficult situations, while growing increasingly aware of God's presence, shaping her faith through the turmoil of war and loss. This is a compelling story told by a master storyteller. Rita shares how she overcame fear and learned to trust, daring to answer the call to minister through SAT-7. Her daily choice of hope amidst the chaos of the Middle East is a testament to the power of being led by faith in God's redeeming love for the world.

CORNELIA LENNEBERG, World Vision International regional leader for the Middle East and Eastern Europe (2011–2017)

Having known Rita for over fifteen years, I have seen her progress in every facet of life. Her account makes it seem simple and organic, but it has been a truly remarkable development of a woman with incredible resilience, insight, and commitment to all that she does. Rita's story is one that may be similar to many other like-minded and able women across the Middle East who, after learning about her journey, may be inspired to share their experiences. And those who are on a similar path may find strength to continue and persevere. I am so blessed to know Rita in many capacities, and I am sure that this work will inspire, enable, and encourage all those who read it.

HIS EMINENCE ARCHBISHOP ANGAELOS OBE, Coptic Orthodox Archbishop of London and Papal Legate to the United Kingdom

Rita shares her journey through war, loss, and chaos with remarkable courage and honesty. In the midst of shattered realities, she reveals glimpses of hope and God's sustaining love. With simple yet profound language, she offers deep theological insight, showing how the eternal can be found in life's darkest moments. Raised during the Lebanese civil war, Rita discovered early the healing power of stories and media as a refuge amid violence. That vision led her to SAT-7, where she rose from presenter to CEO, using media as a channel of hope, reconciliation, and transformation. This memoir is a powerful testimony to choosing hope.

REV. NAJLA KASSAB, director of Christian education, the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon

Wow! This is a wonderful true page-turner of a book from a born storyteller. Despite her upbringing in the explosive cacophony of a war-weary Middle East, there arises a melody of hope, healing, and new life in Jesus Christ. Rita shares her remarkable journey from pain and obscurity to a global impact intertwined with the amazing ministry of Sat-7. *A story simultaneously raw, riveting, and redemptive!*

REV. DR. STEVE BRADY, pastor, former seminary president, and trustee of the Keswick Convention

This is a beautifully written book with a powerful message. Rita grows up through the fifteen-year civil war in Lebanon, witnessing horrific violence and seeing her country torn apart. She comes to personal faith and soon finds herself in front of a television camera presenting children's programs for SAT-7 because she believes changing the face of the Middle East must start with the children. This is much more than an

autobiography of the CEO of SAT-7; it is full of deeply moving examples of the grace of God at work in her life. It's also a striking example of Christian mission in a troubled region today, showing how millions have been able to see "the love of Jesus on their television screen."

COLIN CHAPMAN, former lecturer in Islamic Studies, Near East School of Theology, Beirut, Lebanon; author of *Whose Promised Land?*

In these pages, you are entering into the "holy of holies" of a daring little girl. Please respect that sanctuary and do not judge. You'll meet a sensitive eight-year-old whose mother, her guiding light, was snatched from her without even a chance to say goodbye, and whose father, her great hero, was absorbed by an atrociously ugly war. Blood, destruction, and death became Rita's daily bread. In the midst of such desperate situations, that little girl decided *to choose hope*. If you wish to know why, read on: She is trusting you with what is most precious to her—her inner self! Please handle it with care.

HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP PAUL SAYAH, Archeparch of the Maronite Church and Curial Bishop of the Maronite Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch

A deeply personal and compassionate life story, full of wisdom and sadly so timely—I was moved as I remembered my own childhood in war-torn Lebanon.

CHRIS ASLAN, author of *Alabaster*

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RITA EL-MOUNAYER

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INTRODUCTION

The world I live in is often wrapped in silence—not because I am deaf, but because I live alone.

It is not always a peaceful silence. Often it is pierced by echoes from the past: the sounds of guns, grenades, crying children, and the stomp of heavy boots. Then I remember that what happened to me was not yesterday. It was a lifetime ago. A time when I truly believed I would not live long enough to tell the story, let alone write it.

These memories belong to a girl who became a woman—an astonished, weathered woman. It's still unclear how she made it to the present with everything she experienced.

These are my memories, or what I believe to be my memories. Sometimes I wonder if the stories in this book really happened or if they are merely echoes of emotion and fragments of imagination woven together by time and longing. I suppose I may never really know.

But I will tell them anyway.

Because stories, real or partially remembered, still carry truth.

Rita El-Mounayer

1

ALIDA



I can still hear us, my sister Andrea and me, begging Dad, "Again! Tell us the story again!"

Poor Dad. Patient, gentle, steady as a rock. He had to repeat his stories over and over, and if he missed even the tiniest detail, we'd catch him in a heartbeat.

"You forgot the part about her sleeves, Baba!"

And so, smiling at our insistence, he'd rewind and start again, letting us ride the carousel of memory one more time. He loved storytelling, and we loved him for it. He was captivating—the way he rose from his chair, using his arms to paint the air, changing his voice for each character, drawing us into long-ago days. It was part theater, part history, and all love.

Sometimes he'd pause and ask, "What do you think I did next?"

Even as little girls, we knew this was his favorite story, the story of Alida. Our mother. His first love.

"She was beautiful," he'd always begin, his voice softening as if

she were still walking past him. He was a young soldier, strolling the streets in Beirut.

"The first time I saw her, she was leaving her school. A group of girls in uniform, all blue skirts and white shirts, but your mother stood out. Her sleeves were rolled up, like she was ready to fight the world or build it from scratch. Her cheeks were flushed. Her walk was proud, almost regal. Like the world was spinning just to keep up with her. I was lost in that moment. Just like that, I knew."

Dad came from Baalbek, Lebanon, a city of deep traditions and ancient temples to Roman gods like Jupiter and Venus. They called it the City of the Sun. Dad was raised among Roman ruins and old stories. Our family, the El-Mnayers (Il-Mnayar in Arabic), were Maronites living peacefully in a mainly Shia Muslim region. We stood out, but we carried our faith quietly and with pride.

My grandfather Georges was a builder, not only of olden structures, but of dreams. He restored ruins in Lebanon and Syria, shaping ancient stone for modern eyes. He was as strong as the rock he worked with, and stone deaf. He had lost his hearing when he was young.

I remember his silhouette clearly: the baggy pants, the tarboosh (traditional Turkish hat) on his head. He didn't walk—he strode, as if history followed him.

And beside him was Victoria, my grandmother. Small in stature, but with striking blue-green eyes and long, silky gray hair that she brushed with Brylcreem hair cream and tied in a bun, even in her eighties. Her lap was soft and safe, her scent a mix of rose water and oil that was pleasant to smell.

She used to tell us how she chose Grandpa Georges from a long line of suitors. Her stories were about love, strength, and faith.

Looking back, I think she was the first person who shaped how I saw God: mysterious, strong, and kind.

Together they had six children: Olga, Alice, and my father, Tanios (the eldest of the boys), came first, followed by Elias, Maroun, and Roukoz.

Life in 1938 was tough, always walking the tightrope between hunger and hope. That year, at the age of eleven, my father was pulled from school to work with his father as a stonecutter. They traveled to various archaeological sites in Lebanon, camped, and lived on roasted potatoes and onions. In later years this simple dish would become Dad's favorite comfort food.

But Dad never let go of his hunger to learn. Somehow, between lifting stones and digging foundations, he taught himself math and French, skills that would open doors for him (after his military service at eighteen) to become an accountant in the Ministry of Agriculture. From builder to soldier to government worker, his belief in education ran deep. Especially for girls.

"We don't raise fragile girls," he would say to Andrea and me. "We raise women with strong roots."

And he meant it. Woe to us if we brought home low grades. The army had taught him discipline, and he passed it down with a firm hand, but also with a fiercely loving heart.

Still, when he spoke of our mother, Alida, his voice always softened.

"I fell in love the moment I saw Alida," he'd say. "But I didn't know how to reach her, how to even speak to her."

He would always laugh at this part.

"So I did something foolish. Very foolish. I went to her school in Beirut one day, pretended to be her cousin, and told the

principal that I had an urgent message from her family. Alarmed, the principal pulled her out of class.

"Alida rushed out, worried. And there I stood, young, nervous, and shaking. She froze, and this is where I leaned in and whispered, 'Will you go out with me?'

"She didn't laugh. She didn't scream. She just said, 'No!'"

But Dad came back the next day. And the day after. Each time with the same story: "I'm her cousin. It's urgent." And each time, he asked her out and she said *"No!"*

Until one day she smiled. And that smile changed everything. They started dating.

But the path of love is rarely simple.

Her family owned lots of orange and olive groves in Mansourieh and was wealthy. His was not. She had many suitors—men with money, big names, promises of stability. He had only love and the fire in his heart to offer her. Alida's older sister, Saide, didn't approve of him: first, he was from Baalbek, disparaged as a rural place by most people living in Beirut, and second, he was Maronite, not Greek Orthodox like Alida.

Saide was not the only one who disapproved. Alida's brothers, Jeryes and Nicolas El-Hajj, were also reluctant to see their sister marry a stranger from Baalbek who, in their eyes, was not particularly affluent.

Saide put a lot of pressure on Alida, arranging a meeting with a "respectable" man, a suitor the family approved of. A quiet meeting where Alida and the suitor would meet before a formal proposal.

My father continued the story.

"Alida told me through tears that she was going to meet this man that week and wasn't sure what she would do if he proposed.

"I lost my mind. I knew I couldn't let it happen. So I did what only a man truly in love and maybe a little mad would do. I was still in the army, and with the help of a friend, I stole a military jeep. Together we sped straight to her family's home like a scene from a war movie: gravel ricocheting from under the tires, a mounted cannon on the jeep, people running, some saluting, others ducking. When we arrived in front of the house, Alida's family was sipping coffee in the front garden with the suitor. My friend aimed the cannon. Everyone froze.

"I stepped down from the vehicle. Silence.

"'I love Alida,' I declared. 'And she loves me. If you force her to marry this man, I will bring this house down.'"

The first time I heard that story, I gasped. Even now, I still do. I didn't know whether to laugh or be alarmed. And as I got older, the story didn't lose its magic; it gained meaning. Yes, it was reckless, but it was also beautiful. It was desperate love, brave love, real love.

The army suspended my dad for two weeks for using the jeep for a personal matter. When his officers heard the story, they laughed and said, "Foolishness in the name of love."

But to me, it was never foolish. It was the boldest kind of love, the kind that doesn't wait for permission or play by the rules. The kind that believes that when you have nothing—no money, no power, no approval—you still fight for love.

That is sacred courage. And that courage became the foundation of our family. My parents were married in 1955. Dad was twenty-eight and Mom was twenty-one.

Long before I was born, their story taught me something I carry with me still: Love may be messy, inconvenient, costly.

But when it is real . . . it is always worth the risk.