Chapter Five

I haven't told you about Samar yet, and she needs to be properly introduced. To be honest, when I'd met her that first evening, and for days afterwards, I was scared of her. I didn't know what to make of her.

Samar didn't speak. She made grunting, squeaking noises instead, and her hands flew about all the time, in complicated flicking movements.

'It's all right,' Mrs Zainab said, seeing my alarm. 'Samar's not stupid. She's deaf, that's all. She can't hear what you say to her, but she can read your lips. Just make sure she can see your mouth when you speak. She'll understand all right.'

She must have seen the wary look on my face, because she frowned as if I'd annoyed her.

'Samar's missing her friends,' she said. 'Before all this trouble began, she used to go to the deaf school. Top of the class, she was. They taught her sign language there. None of us can do it properly, and she gets really frustrated when we can't understand.

She's lonely. You don't have to be friends with Samar, Ayesha, but she'd love to be friends with you.'

I could see she was worried about Samar, and that I might be about to offend her. I didn't know what to do. Then I heard a noise behind me. Samar was there. She'd been reading her mother's lips. Now she was looking at me, with her head on one side. She took hold of my hand.

'That means she likes you,' Mrs Zainab said.

I still wasn't sure. I'd never met a deaf person before. I didn't know what to do. But Samar did. She pulled a ball of string out of her pocket, and before I knew what she was doing, she'd looped it round my hands.

'She wants to play cat's cradle,' said Mrs Zainab.

'What's that?' I said.

Samar rolled her eyes and grinned at the same time. She looked really funny and cheeky. She didn't need sign language to show what she was thinking. *What? Never played cat's cradle? Where have you been, you poor sad girl?*

It was so easy to understand her that I burst out laughing. She tugged at my arm. I followed her.

The place she took me to was her special place.

It was a quiet corner in a turn of the stair outside the flat. She showed me the few small treasures she kept hidden behind a loose shutter. There was a little ring with a red glass bead in a matchbox, a yellow plastic rose and tiny toy teddy bear with a sweet little hat.

That's how I became friends with Samar. She began teaching me her sign language at once. Slowly I began to understand most of what she wanted to say. Anyway, a week later she was as close to me as the sister I never had.

That afternoon, when Granny went to sleep, and I'd been cooking the chickpeas, Samar poked her head round the screen.

Come on, she signed. *Let's play*.

So we went to her special place (only it was *our* special place now). We took out our treasures, hers and mine, and arranged them in a proper order on the windowsill. We always did it the same way, taking a long time over it, before we started to play. It was our little ritual. Once we'd arranged our things, that dusty corner of the ruined stairwell became ours, set apart for us. We never noticed the people who hurried past us to and from the upper floors of the building.

The treasures I'd added to our hoard were a pink butterfly hairgrip that Mama had given me, an embroidered purse that Granny had stitched, and an envelope with a pretty foreign stamp on it, in which Baba had sent a letter to Mama from abroad.

The hours flew by that afternoon, as they always did when we played. I couldn't begin to tell you all that we did. Cat's cradle was only part of it. Samar was the best person I'd ever met at making up games – clever, funny games you could play for hours in the same small space.

Like many other days, we played all afternoon, until the muezzin from the mosque nearby sang out the call to evening prayer, and I told her it was time to go back in.

When I got back to our corner. Latif was nowhere to be seen. Mrs Zainab was minding Ahmed, and Granny was still lying down.

'I'm sorry, darling,' she murmured. 'You'll have to manage the supper by yourself.'

So I spooned out the chickpeas, and found a few olives and a bit of bread to go with them, and I mashed bits up for Ahmed and fed him with them, and gave some to Latif, who'd come home with a grazed knee and was picking bits of grit out of it.

I took a plate across to the mattress, but Granny just waved it away.

'Maybe later,' she said.

It was dark by now. No one dared go out after dark, no one except for the fighters. People huddled in their corners of that echoing, high-ceilinged flat and talked, or listened to the news on their radios. That evening, though, we had a few visitors. Friendly faces looked into our corner, one after the other, to ask how Granny was getting on.

'How is she? Better?' they'd say, smiling sympathetically at me. '*Wallah*, Ayesha, what a good girl you are. A fine mother you'll be one of these days, the way you look after those two brothers of yours.'

I don't know why, but their kindness didn't comfort me at all. It frightened me. It made me realize that something was seriously wrong.

Mrs Zainab was the only one who seemed to know what to do. She brought Granny some mint tea and knelt beside her, trying to coax her to drink.

'Where's her medicine, Ayesha?' she asked me.

'She keeps it in the box by her pillow.'

'Finished. It's finished,' Granny croaked.

I saw Mrs Zainab's lips tighten, and my stomach lurched.

Mrs Zainab took Granny's hand and squeezed it.

'Where did you get your medicine from, Auntie? Can we get some more for you?'

'She brought it with us when we came,' I said. 'She couldn't afford to buy it. It's really expensive. Dr Leila gave it to her.'

'Dr Leila?' Mrs Zainab looked puzzled.

'Yes.' My skin was prickling with fear. 'Granny used to work for Dr Leila. She cleaned her house. Dr Leila lives down town. Beyond the Burj.'

'But that's on the other side of the Green Line!' Mrs Zainab said, the worry lines deepening on her forehead.

I took a deep breath.

'Will she be all right, Auntie? What if we can't get any more medicine?'

Mrs Zainab didn't look at me. Her eyes were fixed on Granny's pale face. Then she said, 'It's in the hands of God, *habibti*. *Inshallah* she will get well.'

Chapter Six

The rest of the evening passed in a daze. Mrs Zainab stood up after a while and went out through our curtain. I could hear her talking to some women on the other side, and then came their low murmurs of sympathy.

I sat down beside Granny. A black hole of nothingness seemed to have opened up in front of me.

'Granny! You can't die – you mustn't! What am I supposed to do? I can't manage on my own. You know I can't!'

I should have been feeling sad, I suppose, but instead I was angry, and terribly afraid.

Granny opened one eye and tried to fix it on me, but it wandered away.

'You'll be all right. Big girl. Good girl. Look after . . . Mrs Zainab – she'll . . .'

'She can't look after us! She's not our family! Please, Granny, don't die!'

I was calling to her loudly now, my voice breaking up with tears.

Then I felt arms lifting me away. I was hustled through the curtain and two other old women took their place beside Granny. Mrs Zainab fetched Latif and Ahmed and made us lie down to sleep beside Samar when it started to get late.

'Don't worry, don't worry,' she kept saying. 'God is great. He sees our suffering. If it's his will, he'll spare her. Go to sleep now. You need your strength. Whatever happens, I'm your friend.'

Slowly, the countless people in that crowded flat settled down to sleep, and soon there was silence, except for a few bursts of coughing, and some loud snores, and the quiet murmurs of the two old women who were watching beside Granny.

I lay with my eyes open, looking up at the distant white ceiling. A terrible loneliness was making me shiver, as if I was being gripped by the chill of winter. But an idea had sprouted in my head, and it was growing clearer all the time.

I've got to do it, I kept telling myself. *I've got to find Dr Leila. It's not far across the Green Line. I could just slip through the ruins and out the other side. Who would want to hurt me, anyway? I'm only a child.*

I tried to plot in my mind the route I'd have to take. I'd walked through the old streets of down-

town Beirut quite often before the fighting had begun. Mama used to take me on Fridays to visit Granny at Dr Leila's house. I'd never noticed the way particularly, but I reckoned I could find it. The roads were quite straight. You just had to go on down the long main road and you'd get to the Burj, in the middle of old Beirut.

The invisible Green Line dividing the city ran right through the Burj, which was a huge open square. It would be much too dangerous to cross. I'd have to circle round through the streets to the north of it. And once I was beyond the Burj I would find my way quite easily.

Several times during that long night I sat up and groped for my flip-flops, steeling myself to set out at once. But then a burst of distant gunfire or the crump of an exploding bomb made me lie down again. It was dangerous enough trying to cross the Green Line in the daytime. It would be total madness at night, when gunmen stalked the streets, armed to the teeth and as jumpy as cats, ready to fire at the slightest sound.

So I lay back down again. I must have slept for a while, but I woke very early, and waited and waited for the dawn.

Chapter Seven

In the morning, Granny's breathing was shallow and her lips were blue. She didn't stir when I bent over to kiss her. Mrs Zainab moved me gently away.

'Why don't you and Samar take Ahmed and go down to the checkpoint?' she said. 'The refugee supply truck might have come by now. See if they've got oil today.'

In the night I'd promised myself that I'd slip off and find my way to Dr Leila's as soon as I possibly could, but when daylight had come my courage had almost gone.

What if I end up dead too? I'd kept asking myself. *Who'd look after my brothers then?*

I knew, though, that I had to make myself brave.

'I've got to go to the checkpoint on my own,' I tried to tell Samar. 'I can't explain. I'll see you later.'

Samar looked hurt for a moment, then nodded.

Go, she signed. *I'll look after Ahmed.*

This is it, I thought. I've got to do it now. And I ran down the stairs and outside.

The air hung heavy in the streets and thick dark clouds were rolling in from the sea. There would be rain soon, I could tell.

The way to the checkpoint seemed endlessly long. I tried to hurry, but I couldn't help slowing down. I could hardly believe that only yesterday I'd been nervous of the men who manned it. They were on our side, keeping us safe. It would be a different matter once I'd slipped past them into the no man's land that lay beyond.

The same soldiers were on duty today.

'Hey, *habibti*, where's that little tiger of yours?' one of them called out to me.

I hadn't expected them to remember me.

'He's sick,' I said, trying to think. 'Where's the truck? You said it would be here today. Granny said to get some oil. She needs it. I've got to get oil.'

I knew I was babbling on, sounding like an idiot, but my brain was working furiously. Somehow, I had to slip past them and get into the dead, dark, ruined city that lay ahead.

I'd been a fool to come to the checkpoint so early. I should have waited till there were people around.

As it was, I was the only one out in the streets, apart from the militiamen. There was no one else to distract them.

Just then, when my silly chatter was running down, like a talking toy when the battery goes flat, the first huge drop of rain splashed down on to the shattered pavement, as round and dark as an old coin. The men looked up at the sky, then at each other.

'Here it comes.'

'Where did you put the rain capes?'

'I left them in the jeep.'

'Go and get them then. Think they'll keep us dry, piled up over there? Where are your brains?'

'Hop it, kid,' the nice one said, the one who had played with Ahmed yesterday. 'You'll fall sick like your little tiger if you get soaked through.'

I was so used to doing what I was told that I automatically turned round, ready to run obediently back to the flat, but at that moment there came the rumble of an engine and the refugee truck appeared at the end of a side street, coming towards us, weaving from side to side to avoid the debris and the bomb craters.

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The rain was coming down fast now. The men were distracted, waiting for their comrade to run back with their capes, and keeping an eye on the approaching truck.

This was my chance and I took it. I slipped under the chain and bolted down the deserted street, running into no man's land as fast as my flip-flops would let me.

It was a miracle that I got away with it. A kindly angel must have been looking out for me, guiding my steps and turning the men's heads the other way.

I didn't stop running until I'd reached the bend in the road and knew I was out of sight of the checkpoint. Then I dropped right down to a walk. I didn't mean to. I'd meant to go on running all the way and not stop until I'd reached Dr Leila's house, but I couldn't help myself. It was as if fear was tangling my legs, slowing me down.

I could hardly believe that these were the same streets that Mama and I had walked down together, so long ago. There had been brightly lit shopfronts then, and pavements crowded with people, and cars and trucks bumper to bumper in endless traffic jams.

There wasn't a soul to be seen now. The shopfronts had all been blown out and their contents

looted long ago. The old shops were dark, empty caverns now. Their signs hung drunkenly over the street, twisted and rusting. I could see old neon strip lights hanging broken from the ceilings inside. Piles of rubble choked the pavements. Bullet holes pitted every centimetre of the stone facades, and the shells that had blasted right through the walls had made holes that looked like the empty eye sockets in dead giants' skulls.

The storm had really burst now. The rain was spouting out of the sky, splashing down the broken sides of the buildings. I was soaked to the skin already. The clouds were so low it was half dark, although it was only morning.

A thin cat shot out suddenly from the building beside me, making me leap with fright. My legs responded on their own. Now I was running again, hardly knowing where I was going.

Mama! Mama! I was saying over and over again in my head. In the long months since my mother had died, she'd become less and less real to me, but I could almost see her beside me now, urging me on.

It can't be much further, I kept telling myself. *This street was never so long*. My hand was pressed to the painful stitch in my side.

And then I saw it. Ahead of me, stretched across the road, was a chain suspended between two piles of sandbags. Another checkpoint. And the flags that hung from it were white, with the symbol of a tree in the middle of them. They were the wrong flags. The enemy's flags. I'd run right into trouble.