

Chapter Eight

For one mad moment I thought the checkpoint was deserted. I thought I could just leap over the chain and fly on. But as I put on a spurt, gathering myself for the jump, three men ran out from the ruined shopfront where they'd been sheltering from the rain. They were unslinging their guns from their shoulders as they came, and pointing them at me.

'You girl! Stop! Where do you think you're going?'

I tried to stop. I was skidding to a halt on the wet road when my big toe, unprotected by my flip-flop sandals, hit a chunk of concrete that had fallen from a building, and I stumbled. Before I landed on the ground, one of them grabbed my arm, wrenching my shoulder painfully.

'Who the hell are you?' he demanded. 'Who sent you here?'

Waves of pain were shooting up my leg from my injured toe and for a few precious moments I could

do nothing but screw up my eyes and bite my lip. I suppose it was the pain that saved me. It stopped me opening my mouth, and gave me time to listen. And as I did, I heard the men's accents. Their Arabic was different from mine. They were from the north of Lebanon. I was from the south. I only had to say one sentence, one word, and they'd know which side of the divide I was on. They'd know I was an enemy. They'd think I was a spy, and they'd have no mercy on me.

So I just stood there, with my mouth open, staring at them, the rain running down into my eyes.

One of the men was still holding my arm in a painful grip. He shook it.

'What's the matter with you? Are you deaf? Where did you come from? What are you doing here?'

I felt quite sure, at that moment, that it was Mama who had set that concrete block in my way, and made me stub my toe, so that I couldn't speak. I could have sworn, too, that she put the idea of Samar into my head.

Deaf, I thought. Samar. Be like Samar.

So I moved my hands about in the secret sign language that Samar had taught me, and I made the

little squeaking, grunting noises she made when she tried to speak.

'She's just an idiot,' one of the men said. 'Let her go.'

Thank you, Samar, I whispered in my mind.

The rain stopped then, as suddenly as it had started, and the sun came out. The men seemed to relax. The one who was holding my arm let go. I was just about to take my chance and bolt again, when another one grabbed me.

'Oh no you don't, little bird,' he said. 'How do we know you're not a spy, eh? How do we know you're not carrying messages under that dress of yours?'

I saw their looks change. Ugliness was in their eyes.

It was all I could do not to scream out 'No! Leave me alone!' Instead, I grunted furiously, twisting and turning, trying to free myself.

Then, from behind, came an angry voice.

'What are you doing, you animals? Leave the child alone.'

The man holding me growled and spun round, loosening his grip. I twisted myself free, and I'd have made a bolt for it then, only one of the other men's

guns was still pointing straight at me.

Then I saw the man who had called out. He was old, and nicely dressed, with outdated baggy trousers and a long jacket. On his head he wore a red fez with a black tassel, and he carried an ivory cane in one hand, as if he was setting out to walk down a smart shopping street.

As he came closer, I could see that he hadn't shaved for a while, and his clothes looked as if they hadn't been washed for a long time. Even so, he looked as out of place in that ruined, scary street as an elderly dog in a cage full of lions.

'Are you animals?' he said again. 'Persecuting a child? Let her go.' You could hear by the way he spoke that he was used to being obeyed.

The militiamen looked uneasy, like schoolboys caught out.

'Ya Abu Boutros,' one of them said. 'This girl came from the other side. How do we know she's not a spy?'

The old man came right up to me, stepping delicately through the puddles and rubbish of the street in his polished brown shoes. He rapped his cane on the ground in front of me, and the cloudy blue eyes were stern in his wrinkled brown face.

'Little girl,' he said severely. 'Where are you from? What are you doing here? Answer me now. The truth.'

Samar, I thought again. I copied her exactly, the noises she made and the signs she'd taught me.

'The child's a deaf mute,' Abu Boutros said, and he patted me kindly on the shoulder. He turned to glare at the men. 'And she's soaked to the skin. Aren't you ashamed? Call yourselves men? What has our Lebanon come to when little deaf girls are threatened by bullies like you?' He waved his stick at me. 'Run away, child. Shoo! Go home to your mother.'

I made myself stare at him, frowning, for a long moment, pretending that I hadn't understood, then I smiled gratefully and took off, racing on down the street towards the Burj, afraid, until I'd turned the corner, that a bullet might come slamming into my back.

Chapter Nine

I was so out of breath, once the checkpoint was out of sight, that I had to slow down. The storm had rolled on. I could still hear distant thunder as it moved into the mountains behind the city. Once or twice, as I trotted on down the deserted street, I heard a crash from closer at hand. Was the storm returning? Was a bomb exploding? Or were walls caving in somewhere in the ruins all around me?

The wind was still blowing hard. Even though I'd been hot from running, I was starting to shiver now. I heard a strange noise behind me and looked to see. A gust had whipped up old blue plastic bags, which were flying through the air like demented birds. Then I saw something big, round and spiky spinning down the street towards me. I gasped with fright, then laughed shakily when I saw that it was only the top of a palm tree, blown clean off its stump by the storm.

I was near the centre of old Beirut now. To my

left, at the end of the street, I could see down into the vast, open space of the Burj.

I stopped for a moment, amazed. In the old days, traffic had crawled nose to tail round the edges of the square, and the paved centre had been crowded with people. Now, I knew, there were hidden snipers on the top of every building. No one had dared set foot in the Burj for months and months.

There was something even odder, though, than the silence and emptiness. I screwed up my eyes to look more clearly, unable to believe what I was seeing. Plants were pushing right up through the tarmac — little bushes and baby trees, breaking up the hard surface as easily as if it had been loose soil.

That glimpse of the great square, so desolate, made me shiver. I hurried on.

The streets around me were changing. I was leaving the ruins behind. The buildings were still pitted all over with bullet holes, like faces marked with acne, but they weren't burnt out or falling down. Some of them still had glass in their windows. No one was around, but the tarmac had been swept clear of debris, as if traffic sometimes came that way.

And then I heard the strangest thing of all —

the sound of horses' hooves, and above that the whooping shouts of boys.

'Come on, you broken old nag!'

'Get on with it, you mother of donkeys! Do you want to win this race or not?'

I dived into a doorway and looked cautiously round a pillar as the first horse appeared from a side street. It was an old creature, with red plumes tossing about on its head. It was harnessed to a little tanker, like the ones that came round our streets, on the other side, selling paraffin for oil lamps and stoves. Latif loved those tankers. He was always running alongside them, trying to pat the horse. A boy was driving this one. He was looking over his shoulder and laughing. And then another racing tanker appeared, with another boy astride it. A second later the two horses with their nodding plumes, the tankers and the laughing boys had splashed through the puddles and disappeared.

I let out a long breath.

I've made it, I thought. I'm on the other side.

Coming out of no man's land was the strangest thing, like stepping from a darkened room into the light. The distance between the frightening emptiness of the ruins along the Green Line and the

bustling every day world on the other side was no more than a few metres. I just walked straight from one into the other.

There was life here. Normal life. Market traders were doing business all the way down the sides of the street. Some stalls were piled with fruit and vegetables. Others were selling china, or clothes, toys or radios. People were walking about, doing their shopping, as if they'd never heard that there was a war on at all.

I wasn't afraid of any gunmen now that ordinary people were all around me. Instead, I had a terrible new fear. I'd been quite sure, when I'd made my plan to cross the Green Line, that I'd be able to find my way easily to Dr Leila's surgery. I'd seen it clearly before I started out: the flower seller in his yellow shirt on the corner, the ice cream parlour at the top of the next street, the film posters on their hoardings above the door of the cinema.

I couldn't see any of them. Everything had changed. And the biggest, the worst change of all was that Mama wasn't there.

I'd never been here on my own before. Mama had always been with me, holding my hand as we crossed through the busy traffic, telling me to hurry.

And when I've found Dr Leila, I thought, or even if I don't, I've got to go back again through no man's land. On my own.

I suddenly felt so lonely and miserable that I sat down on a step, still wet from the storm, and burst into tears.

Chapter Ten

'What's the matter with you?'

I looked up. A boy was staring down at me. He was dressed in dusty old black trousers and a crumpled sweatshirt.

'Nothing,' I said, before I remembered not to speak.

'Suit yourself. I thought you might like this orange, that's all. To cheer you up. My dad sent me over.'

I looked across to where he was pointing. Further down the street, one of the fruit stallholders was smiling and waving at me.

'Thanks,' I said unwillingly. I couldn't tell from the boy's accent where he was from, but his face was sunburnt, and he sounded a bit countrified. There was a chance he wouldn't recognize my accent, if his family wasn't from Beirut either.

I sniffed at the orange. I hadn't eaten any fruit for a while. It smelled wonderful.

'You lost, or what?' the boy said.

'No, I . . .' I stopped, looking up at him again. He seemed friendly, and ordinary. 'Well, yes, I am. I'm looking for Dr Leila, but when I visited her before I was with my mum. I can't remember the way.'

'Dr Leila? Never heard of her,' the boy said. 'Wait here.'

He walked back towards his father's stall, his hands in his pockets, looking as if he wanted me to see how grand and grown-up he was. I watched while his father shook his head, and pointed with his chin to the stall next door. The boy disappeared behind it.

The sun had come out at last. Its warmth wrapped me round like kindness, and my dress began to steam. Without realising what I was doing, I started to peel the orange. The first taste of its delicious sharp sweetness was wonderful.

It brought back a memory too. The last time I'd eaten an orange had been with Granny. She'd come back triumphantly to the flat with a bag full of them. She'd peeled some for Latif and Ahmed and me, and we'd sat sharing them from the same chipped enamel plate.

Granny! I thought. What am I doing sitting here? She might be dead by now! I've got to find Dr Leila!

I threw away the orange peel and jumped up, forgetting the boy, wanting to run, to explore every side street, to force myself to find her. But before I could move, the boy was back again.

'Where do you think you're going?' he said. 'I thought you wanted to find Dr Leila?'

'I do!'

'I've found out where she lives. I'll show you if you like.'

I felt so grateful I nearly cried again.

'Which way? Show me quick! I've got to see her now!'

It's amazing how quickly your feelings can change. One moment I was lonely and despairing, and the next I felt proud of myself, sure that everything was going to be all right.

The boy walked fast and I had to trot to keep up with him. I really felt like skipping.

'It's a mess round here, isn't it?' I said. 'What happened to that old man on the corner back there, who used to sell flowers?'

'He left. Months ago.'

'He was really nice. He used to give a me flower to hold when I was little.'

The boy's footsteps slowed.

'He was one of *them*. From the south. I hated him. It's all the fault of his lot that the war started.'

I bit my lip. I'd opened my big mouth too soon. The boy was looking sideways at me now and frowning.

'How come you didn't stay indoors till it stopped raining? Where do you live, anyway?'

My heart started thudding uncomfortably.

'Couldn't,' I said shortly. 'Granny needs her medicine. She sent me.'

I was trying now to say as little as possible. The boy didn't seem to have recognized my accent yet.

We were in a narrow side street by now. The boy stopped abruptly and pointed.

'Dr Leila's office is down there. First turn on the right.'

'Thanks,' I said quickly. 'I know the way now.'

I ran off. When I reached the corner I looked back. He was standing still, watching me thoughtfully.

Dr Leila's surgery was halfway down the next street. In the old days the door was always open, and people had endlessly gone in and out. The door was firmly shut now.

She's gone! She's left! I thought, panic seizing me.

I stood on tiptoe to reach the knocker and rapped it as loudly as I could, then waited with my fists clenched, hoping desperately that someone would come.

At last I heard slippers shuffling towards the door and a woman's voice called out, 'Who is it?'

'I've come to see Dr Leila,' I called back.

'She's not here. Who are you?'

I felt like having a screaming fit. I wanted to lie on the pavement, kick my feet on the ground, and yell till I was blue in the face like Ahmed when he had a tantrum.

Instead I pounded on the door with both fists.

'She's got to be there!' I yelled. 'She's got to help me! I *need* her!'

At last I heard a key turning in the lock and the door opened a crack. An old woman stood on the other side. Her head was uncovered and she wore a cotton dress that just covered her knees. She was glaring at me.

'Stop that screaming, you little madam. You'll break the door down. Dr Leila isn't here. Now go away before I teach you what's what!'

Tears were sprouting from my eyes.

'*She is here! She's got to be here!*'

And then, through my tears, I saw a tall misty figure appear in a doorway behind the old woman.

'Who is it, Auntie?' Dr Leila said. 'Why, it's only a child. Let her in.'