

Chapter Two

It was a bright morning in Beirut . . . No, I can't begin there. I must think back a bit further, to the place we found to live in during those muddled, desperate weeks after Mama died. I don't want to remember the first few days, the panic and confusion and the aching, aching loss.

It was Latif who found the flat for us. Little brothers do have some uses, I suppose, although I didn't often think so then.

The four of us were sitting on a doorstep in a ruined street, feeling hungry and hopeless, after two days of wandering from place to place. All we'd thought about was how best to get away from the fighting. We had no food left, and no idea where we'd spend the night. Granny looked so old and worn and beaten I could hardly bear to

look at her. I think she'd given up hope. Ahmed was crying.

'There are people up there, in that window,' Latif suddenly said, pointing across the road to the first floor of the building opposite. 'Look, Granny, they're waving to us.'

That was the first kind, good thing that had happened to us since the disaster, and it was how we met Samar (who was ten years old like me) and Samar's mother, dear Mrs Zainab, the best mother in the world, after mine.

A few minutes later, we'd crossed the road, pushed open the broken street door of the building, gone up the dusty steps and found ourselves in what must once have been a beautiful flat, where rich people would have lived.

I can remember standing in the doorway, looking round in amazement. I'd never been in such a place before. The windows had all been blown out, and there were gaping holes in the walls where shells had blasted through, but you could still see how magnificent it had been in the old days.

Even the hallway was huge. The floors were made of marble, and there were big mirrors on the walls with elaborate gold-work round them. You could see beyond

the hall into amazing rooms, all light and airy with high ceilings from which ruined chandeliers hung at crazy angles.

The people who had owned this flat must have left long ago, and they'd taken their beautiful furniture and fancy clothes with them. But the rooms weren't empty. They were full of people. Refugees. Squatters. Poor people from the bombed-out parts of town. People with nowhere to go. People like us.

I could see through the open doors that they'd made corners of the rooms their own. They'd set up little homes, with their own mattresses and cooking pots, and strung up cloths on strings to make partitions so that each family could have a bit of privacy.

Mrs Zainab came out into the hall towards us. She was comfortable looking, with smile-wrinkles around her eyes. She wore a long tattered dress, and had a scarf tied over her head.

'You poor things,' she said. 'I couldn't let you go on sitting there, with night coming on and all. Have you got somewhere to go? Are you lost?'

It was then that Granny burst into tears, and Latif and I

were so shocked we huddled up against each other, not knowing what to say. We'd never seen her cry before.

Mrs Zainab took charge at once. She had found us a corner of our own, in what had been the sitting room, I suppose. She borrowed a mattress for Granny, changed Ahmed's nappy and gave us some of her family's supper to share.

And so we bedded down that first strange night in the flat – Granny on the mattress, Latif and me curled up on a mat and Ahmed in our old suitcase, which was now his cot.

That was how we found our new home, and that was where we lived, through the freezing cold of winter and the boiling heat of summer, until the old life with Mama in our little shack had begun to seem like a distant dream.