

# Chapter One

I was born in Beirut. It had been a lovely city once, or so Granny told me. The warm Mediterranean Sea rolled against its sunny beaches, while behind the city rose mountains that were capped with snow in the winter. There were peaceful squares and busy shops and hotels bustling with tourists.

My father and mother were farmers. They came from the countryside south of the city. They'd been happy in their little village. But they lost everything when Lebanon, our country, was invaded. They had to run away to Beirut. They had three children there, me first, and then my two brothers.

My father built a little house with his own hands in the poorest part of town, where everyone was crowded

together in narrow lanes. All our neighbours were like us – refugees from southern Lebanon – trying to manage on nothing, but thankful at least to be safe.

But just after I was born, all that changed. A terrible civil war tore the city of Beirut apart. I pray that those years never come again! I can never forget the horror of them.

And yet, in among all the sad things, the fear and destruction and loss, there are wonderful memories too, of kindness and courage and goodness.

I'll have to start my story, though, with the saddest thing of all.

Ours was a house of women and children, my granny, my mother and my little brothers Latif, who was seven, and Ahmed, who was still only a baby. My father was abroad most of the time, looking for work. He'd been gone for so long we were used to him being away. I'd almost begun to forget what he looked like.

When, on that terrible day, the bombs started to fall all around our house, my mother threw some clothes into a bundle and began to pack bags and cases.

'There's no time for that!' Granny screamed at her, looking out anxiously into the street. 'The gunmen are

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coming! They'll be here any minute. We must take the children and run!'

Mama went on packing. She pushed a big bag into my hands and a smaller one into Latif's. Granny was already running down the street with Ahmed in her arms.

'Go on, Ayesha,' Mama said to me. 'Go with Granny. I'll be right behind you. Wait for me by the mosque on the corner.'

And so we ran, Latif and me, racing ahead of Granny, who was hobbling along behind us with Ahmed in her arms. And a shell fell on our house just as we reached the end of the street, wiping out our little shack of a house and everything in it. I never saw Mama again.