

CHAPTER ONE

Tiny, They Called Me

All we knew about her was that she called herself J.J., that she spoke English, that she was alone out there in her big yellow rowing boat and that she was like a giant to all three of us – even me – a giant with a bandaged wrist and plasters on her fingers.

‘So tell me,’ she said, ‘tell me everything.’

I could hardly refuse, could I? I mean, this J.J. had saved our lives. It was thanks only to this stranger that we were dry again, well fed, warm and rested.

‘I mean,’ she went on, ‘I want to know how it is that you’re out here on the open ocean in such a small boat. Who are you? Where have you come from?’

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I could have asked her much the same questions. But I found myself telling her our whole story. I was happy to tell her too, not just because she had shown us such kindness, but because once I began telling her our story out loud, it somehow helped me to believe it had all really happened to me, helped me to remember who I was, who I had become. That she would believe me I had no doubt. After all, she had the evidence right in front of her. She could hardly take her eyes off the evidence. The three of us were there to prove it. We were the truth of our own story.

I began at the beginning, because without the beginning none of it would have made sense to her; and anyway, none of it would ever have happened. I would never have had to leave home, and my life would have been another story altogether.

‘It’s quite a long story,’ I told her.

‘That’s fine,’ she said. ‘I need to rest this wrist anyway. Can’t row far like this.’

So I began.

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Where I come from is no longer my home. There was a house and a village I once called my home, in Afghanistan. I had a family of my own once. Not any more. I have my name – Omar – and I have Mother, but I don't know where she is. I think and I hope she may be in England with Uncle Said. I was on my way to find her. That's why we were out here on our little boat when you found us, and we found you.

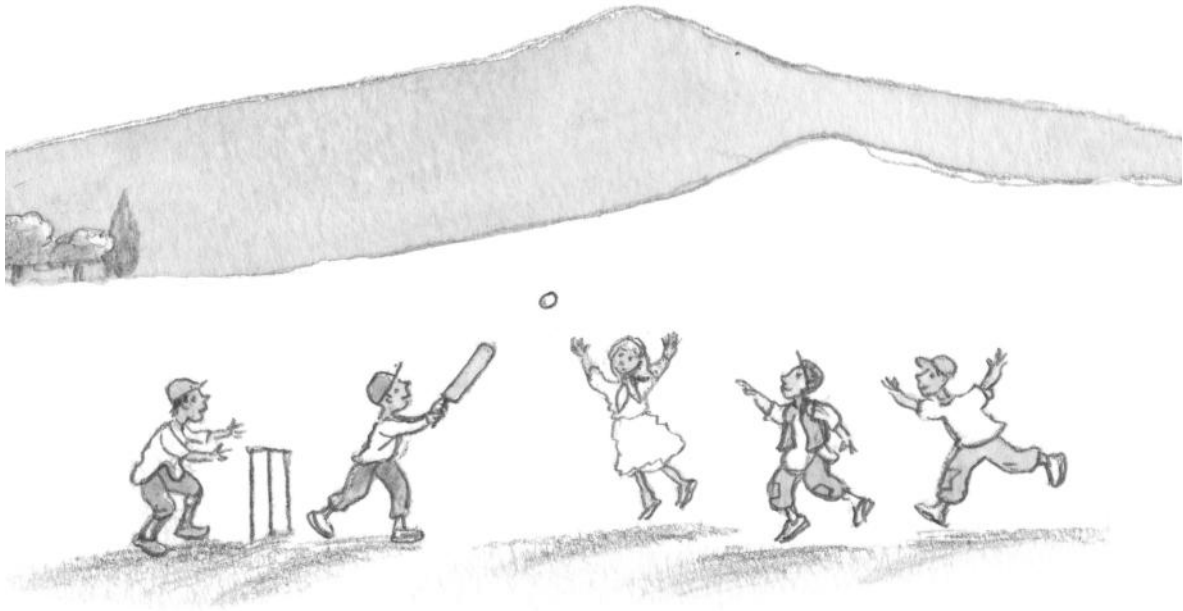
I don't know any more what day or month or year it is, but I think I must now be about sixteen years old. Of my beginnings, of my home, there is not much to tell, and I do not like to speak of it or think of it, because it makes me sad to remember. My home was a quiet place, in





a peaceful town in the countryside. We lived on the edge of town. My father was a shepherd, our flock was our livelihood. We never went hungry or thirsty. I had a little sister, Hanan. She and I were much loved in our home. We were together. We were all happy.

School was school. All my friends were there. We learnt our lessons, played together. But I was always small and thin, and at school I was never allowed to forget it. 'Tiny', they called me. Little I may have been, but I was by far the best at cricket. No one hit



the ball harder. No one bowled faster. The pitch was always bumpy, but it was the same for us all, and it was fine. Everything was fine. I could read the bounce of every ball they bowled at me, see it on to the bat. I lived for my cricket, and my family. Everything was good – well, mostly.

Every night I went to sleep wishing I would score more runs the next day or take more wickets, and I prayed I would be a little taller in the morning. I would measure myself against the mark Mother had

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made on the wall. The next day I would often score more runs, or take more wickets, or both, but I was never any taller. Hanan was still taller than me every morning and she was two years younger than me.

Then the war came to our town and I had other worries, more serious worries. I do not know to this day why the war came. It was on the morning of my





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tenth birthday, I remember. We heard the planes in the sky, and then the bombing began. We were in school. There was nowhere to hide, nowhere to run to. At the end of that day our home was in ruins, our school too. Many of my friends had died. I was there when they were buried. I helped to bury them. Father died too, when the planes came again the next morning,



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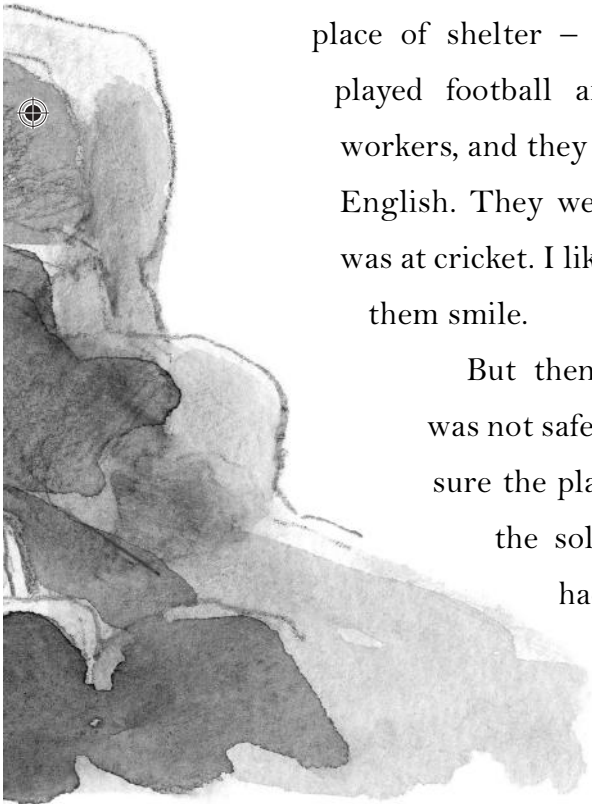
and so did most of our sheep. Then we discovered Hanan was missing. We looked and we called, but we never found her. Only Mother and I were left. We had nothing, no shelter, no food, no father, no sister, no daughter.



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The aid workers came after that, and they brought us food and tents, and built us a refugee camp. We weren't a family any more. We were refugees. We lived in that camp a long time. The aid workers were from England, and they were kind to us. They smiled at us, and we liked that. It cheered our hearts. There were doctors and nurses, who were good to us. It was cold through that winter, but we survived. The refugee camp was never a home for us. It was a place of shelter – that's all. Sometimes we played football and cricket with the aid workers, and they taught me to speak a little English. They were amazed at how good I was at cricket. I liked to amaze them. It made them smile.

But then one day Mother said it was not safe for us to stay, that she was sure the planes would come again, or the soldiers. Many in the camp had decided to leave, and we would go with them.



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So Mother and I, and a few others, we left the camp in the middle of the night and began to walk. We walked for weeks and weeks. We walked over the mountains, through the desert, followed where others went, all of us with only one thing on our minds. To find somewhere far away from the war, anywhere, that was a place of peace where there was food and water and shelter, where we could be safe. How long and how far we walked I do not know.



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Sleep was our only comfort. You can forget when you are asleep. Waking up was the worst part of every day. I wanted only to stay where I was, curled up on the ground, and never get up again. I was so tired, too tired to care any more.

Mother saved my life every morning. She would never let me lie there. She always said that if I didn't get up, and walk on, I would die, and she wasn't going to let that happen. She would tell me sometimes that





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she could smell the sea, that I had to be strong and brave, like Father and Hanan had been. She promised me that beside the sea there would be a boat waiting for us, to carry us to safety, to a new life in a new home where there would be lots of smiling people like the aid workers and doctors and nurses in the camp, and where there was no more war and no bombing. All I had to do, Mother said, was to put one foot in front of the other. Her love and her promises were all that kept me walking.

There were wire fences, there were lorries, there were trains, there were more refugee camps. The police beat us. There were people who yelled at us to go home, others who took us in and fed us and gave us warm clothes, and smiled at us. We never knew what to expect.

But Mother and me, we put one foot in front of the other, and we walked.

