



Zafira

- A Girl From Syria

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CHAPTER 1

New Kid at School

After their sports lesson, Anna and her classmates burst into their classroom. They have just won a volleyball tournament and they are very happy - and very loud. At first, they don't notice that their teacher is already there.

Ms. Bartos is writing something on the blackboard. When she finishes, she stands to one side. On the board, in large letters, is the word ZAFIRA. The pupils read it and grow quiet.

'Zafira? What's that?' Sascha asks finally.

'A magic word?' Anna asks.

Ms. Bartos looks around and smiles mysteriously. The pupils grow even quieter. All eyes are on Ms. Bartos now. She is good at explaining things.

Once again she doesn't disappoint them.

'It's Arabic and means something like "bright and shiny",' she says.

'Is it the name of a star?' says Mara, a pupil who almost always knows everything.

'Good guess,' Ms. Bartos laughs. 'But it is a girl's name. The name of our new pupil. You'll get to know her shortly. She comes from far away...'

'From Bavaria?' Andy shouts. He is also new to the school. He moved from Rosenheim about nine months ago.

'A lot further away, Andy. She's from Syria,' Ms. Bartos answers.

'There's a war in Syria!' Mara says quickly.

'The people have to run from the bombs,' Sasha adds. He has seen it on television.

'In my sister's kindergarten there's a boy from Syria. He doesn't say a word the whole day,' Sofia says.

'That's because they speak a funny language in Syria,' Sascha laughs.

Ms. Bartos tries to hold back a smile. 'You mean a *different* language, Sascha! Arabic is a very old language, which is spoken by over 200 million people.'

'Wow! And how many people speak German as their mother tongue?' Mara wants to know. She always wants to get to the bottom of things.

'Maybe half as many,' Ms. Bartos says.

'Why is it called mother tongue and not father tongue?' Andy asks.

'Because children usually learn to speak from the mother, I think.' Ms. Bartos smiles, happy that her class is showing so much interest in the topic.

'But why do we say *fatherland*?' Mara asks.

Ms. Bartos thinks for a moment, and then says, 'Perhaps because it was the role of the old Teutonic fathers to defend the land they lived in.'

'Can the new girl speak a little German?' Anna asks a practical question.

'I don't think so,' Ms. Bartos replies.

'But how can we talk with her? We can't speak Arabic,' says Anna.

'Just speak German and be nice to her. She will know by the sound of your voice and the look in your eyes that she is welcome. She'll soon understand some words and begin to speak in a few weeks. Children learn a language fast. Much faster than adults,' Ms. Bartos explains.

'That's true. My little brother could only say a few words at first, words like "auto" and "mama". Now, only one year later, he's learned to talk!' Elise says with a laugh.

'Children have a place in their brain for a second mother tongue. Nature programs them that way,' Ms. Bartos says. 'It's practical. For example, if the mother and father speak two different languages.'

Everyone is looking forward to seeing the new girl. Suddenly, the door opens and there she is! She is a little thinner and taller than Anna and has chestnut-brown hair. Her round, dark brown eyes look a little frightened as the principal leads her into the room.

Behind him is a slender woman in a long gray coat. Her hair is hidden under a dark blue headscarf. It is Zafira's mother.

'Welcome to class 4a, Zafira,' says Ms. Bartos and shakes hands with the girl and her mother.

'You can sit over there, next to Anna,' she says, pointing to the seat by the front window. The chair next to Anna is empty. Her friend Iris moved to Cologne a week ago.

Zafira looks around anxiously. She steps back and reaches for her mother's hand. She didn't understand the teacher's words, but she does understand that she should sit next to a girl she doesn't know. She hesitates.

Suddenly, Anna gets up and goes over to her. 'Come with me!' she says and takes Zafira by the hand. 'You can sit beside me!' Zafira doesn't understand Anna's words but she does understand her gesture.

She plucks up her courage and follows Anna.

The principal says goodbye and accompanies Zafira's mother to the door. Zafira takes a last anxious look at her mother as she leaves.

'Don't be afraid,' Anna says and takes Zafira's hand again. 'My name is Anna!' She smiles and points at herself. 'And you are Zafira!' She points at Zafira's blue shirt.

Zafira smiles. She understands. She sits down beside Anna.

That was four weeks ago. Since then, something surprising has happened. Zafira is still a bit shy, but she now understands a lot of what the pupils say. And when she is feeling confident, she

says, 'My name is Zafira. I come from Aleppo in Syria. My mother's name is Nesrin. My father's name is Sinan. I live on Uhland street.'

And, with every passing day, she understands a little more. But for her classmates, things are more difficult. They don't understand what Zafira is saying when she talks with her mother. They also don't understand why she is sad sometimes or why she runs and tries to hide when a plane flies over or when the boys make a loud noise by stepping on their milk cartons.

Ms. Bartos tries to explain Zafira's behaviour. 'She comes from another country. She has had some terrible experiences, things she can't talk about yet. Perhaps one day she will tell us about them. She is wise, wiser than all of us,' says Ms. Bartos and puts her arm around the girl. 'She can speak Arabic and even a little English. And - who knows? - maybe one day she will be able to speak better German than you!'

CHAPTER 2

An Interesting Math Lesson

But it is not only Zafira who learns. The others in the class learn something new every day - about Zafira and the country she comes from. Ms. Bartos places a large map on the map-stand and shows the class where Syria is.

'Just as far from here as Jerusalem!' Mara is amazed.

'The capital is Damascus, which is maybe even older than Jerusalem,' Ms. Bartos explains. 'Before the war there were as many people in Damascus as in Hamburg. But now the situation there is very bad. Many of the people who lived there have been killed in bombings or have fled. The houses and most of the wonderful buildings have been destroyed. The same as in the beautiful old city of Aleppo, where Zafira comes from.' The teacher turns to Zafira and says, 'Please show us Aleppo on the map.'

Zafira hesitates, and then stands up and goes to the front of the room. 'Here is Aleppo! My hometown,' she says and places her finger on the map.

Ms. Bartos explains that Zafira didn't come from the middle of nowhere, but from a land with a very old culture, a land in which a terrible war is going on.

Suddenly, the bell for recess rings.

'Come on!' Anna says to Zafira. Together they go to the school grounds. Anna gives Zafira half of her sandwich. 'Do you like it?' she asks.

'Very good!' Zafira nods and laughs.

After recess, the bell rings for the math lesson. As the pupils are taking out their books, Ms. Bartos says, 'We call the numbers we work with *Arabic numbers*. Does anyone know why?'

'Because they were invented in Arabia?' Anna asks.

'Not exactly,' says Ms. Bartos. And then comes another one of her interesting explanations: '2000 years ago there weren't any written numbers. People counted on their fingers or with the help of rows of pearls and mussels. Back then there lived in India wise scholars, who observed the movements of the stars.'

'They were called astrologers!' says Marek, who often visits the planetarium with his father.

'These learned men wanted to write down their calculations,' Ms. Baros goes on. 'Ten fingers weren't enough. They needed large numbers. Then they had a very clever idea: they invented the zero. The nothing. An empty circle. A hole. But this cipher makes the number next to it ten times as big.'

Jonas laughs. 'But in the song "From Zero to Hero", zero means a nobody, doesn't it?'

Ms. Bartos nods. 'That shows us that it all depends on your standpoint. A zero before a one is also worthless.'

'So why aren't our numbers called *Indian numbers*?' Mara wants to know.

'Because they came to us from Arabia. Arabic scholars translated the Indian astrology books into Arabic more than a thousand years ago. Then, when the Arabians came from Africa to Spain, they brought the numbers with them. That's why they are called Arabic numbers, even though we now write them a little differently than the Arabians.'

'What did numbers look like before?' Mara asks.

'All over Europe people used Roman numbers right up until the Middle Ages. You can still see them in many old inscriptions: on churches, castles and cemeteries, in old books or in museums. The Romans used a stroke for the number one, an X for ten and a V for five.' Ms. Bartos laughs and adds: 'There is an expression in German which comes from Roman numerals: "jemandem ein X für ein U vormachen", which means to make a ten out of a five.'

'Does it mean to cheat someone?' Mara asks.

'Yes, it does. But do you know why?'

Silence. Not even Mara can answer that question.

'Our U comes from the Latin letter V, which also stands for five. When, for example, a Roman barkeeper wrote down a V for five cups of wine, he could easily change the final bill by making the V into an X by just adding two little strokes.'

'That's a dirty trick,' says Sascha. 'The barkeeper doubled the bill!'

'Very dirty!' Paul nods.

'If he had added a zero, the bill would have been ten times as much,' Mara says, pleased with herself for being so clever.

'But the Romans didn't have a zero!' Anna laughs.

'That's right,' says Ms. Bartos. 'Now get out your books, please. You're lucky that you can use the zero to count with instead of Roman numerals.'

Zafira didn't understand everything Ms. Bartos said, but when she opens her book, she smiles. Math is her favorite subject. She understands everything. Numbers are her friends! They speak to her directly - without words.

As time goes by, Zafira discovers many other things she can understand without words, a fact that means a lot to her. That is why, along with Math, the subjects she likes best are Art, Sport and Music. She can feel, for example, whether a piece of music is meant to be fun, happy or sad. Music 'speaks' directly to her heart.

It is like that, too, in Art. She can draw things she can't put in words. Sometimes when she doesn't know the right word, she draws a picture of what she means. In fact, she continues doing this even after she is able to speak German fluently. For example, when she wants to explain to Anna that she doesn't like fish at all.

'I don't either,' Anna laughs. 'Only fish fingers. They don't have any eyes.'



CHAPTER 3

Anna's Birthday

Shortly before the fall vacation, Anna makes plans for her birthday.

'This time I'll invite only girls. Boys are too stupid. All they think of is winning. They want to win all the time,' says Anna. She remembers what happened at her party last year. The games were fun, but the boys won almost all the prizes.

'No boys? Really?' her mother asks.

'Nope! No boys!' Anna replies. 'But I've invited my Syrian friend Zafira. She's really nice!'

It is the first time that Zafira is in a German home. And she is at a birthday party! Almost everything is new and different than at her home in Syria, where there was mostly nothing to celebrate. The little yard of the row house has been decorated with balloons and Chinese lanterns. Anna's mother has baked a birthday cake. Anna manages to blow out all the candles on the cake in one breath. Zafira finds the lucky penny in her piece of cake. Surprised, she stares at it.

'It will bring you luck! That's great!' Anna laughs.

'Would you like cocoa or tea?' Anna's mother asks.

'I'll have what the others are having,' Zafira answers.

Everyone is looking forward to the games. There are prizes for the winners. They play lots of games, including 'Simon Says' and 'Musical Chairs'. For more than an hour, the girls shout and laugh, and in the end they are all tired but happy.

Following the games, Anna's mother serves homemade ice-cream sundaes, the perfect refreshment on such a warm day.

'Is it as warm today as in the deserts of Arabia?' Sofia asks.

'Almost,' Zafira replies.

'Was your home a tent?' Mara wants to know.

Zafira has to laugh before she can answer. 'Yes, we lived in a tent. A short time. In Germany! In the refugee camp. At home in Aleppo we lived in a house, just like you. Aleppo is a large city.' In a sad voice, she adds, 'It was a large city. There's almost nothing left of it now.'

'Did you ever have a camel?' asks Sofia, who loves to ride horseback.

'No, I didn't,' Zafira says with a laugh. 'Camels are for tourists and in the desert. Not in the city. Not in Aleppo. In Aleppo it's like here: there are many cars.' She lets out a sad sigh. 'There *were* many cars.'

'What do you like better about Germany?' Sofia asks.

'The streets are clean. It is quiet and peaceful. No people with guns. No houses without windows. No piles of rubbish...'

'And what do you miss the most?' Anna wants to know.

'My father,' says Zafira.

CHAPTER 4

Airplanes and Fire Crackers

'I know why Anna didn't invite you to her birthday party,' Alice says to Erik. 'She thinks you're stupid.'

'We'll get her for that!' says Andreas. He loves to hassle girls! Andreas and his friends are at the corner by the bakery, lying in wait for the girls on their way home. As soon as the girls appear, the boys set off fire crackers. They laugh their heads off at the sight of Zafira running and screaming. She comes to a stop at the door to the bakery. She is shaking and can't stop crying.

'Idiots!' Anna shouts at the boys. She runs over to Zafira and puts her arm gently on her shoulder. 'Don't you see how scared she is?' she cries.

But they just laugh at her. 'We were only having some fun!' one of them says.

'It was nothing. She shouldn't put on such a show!' Sascha scoffs. 'She reacts like that even when we only step on our milk cartons.'

'Yeah, and you are too stupid to understand why!' shouts Anna in an angry voice. She can guess why loud noises cause Zafira to panic.

The boys laugh and walk away. Anna turns to Zafira. She hates to see her crying like that. She gives her a paper tissue and says, 'Come with me. I'll buy you a croissant.'

But Zafira doesn't want a croissant. She is sobbing. She doesn't want to talk. She can't talk. She can't find the right words.

The next day Zafira's mother comes to school. She can't speak German well enough to explain the feelings inside her, so she speaks English when she talks with Ms. Bartos about why Zafira panicked. 'The loud noises made by the fire crackers reminds Zafira of gunfire in Aleppo, when the ISIS soldiers ran wildly through the streets of the city, shooting at everything in sight,' she explains. 'Zafira's best friend was killed in one of those attacks. She was playing with her cat in front of her house at the time. I saw it happen from my window!' she says and brushes a

tear from her eye. And then she goes on to tell her about how the rebels hijacked the bus in which her husband drove people to work every morning. She doesn't know what happened to him or even if he is still alive.

The next morning, during the math lesson, Ms. Bartos talks to the class about the situation in the country Zafira comes from. About how terrible war is and how terrible it is when people with weapons attack each other.

She explains why Zafira is so frightened by the sound of exploding fire crackers.

When she finishes, the boys lower their heads in shame.

Suddenly, one of them says, 'We're sorry!' It is Alex, known for having a big mouth. He surprises everyone by going over to Zafira and giving her his hand. 'I'm sorry for what happened,' he says softly.

Zafira doesn't look him in the eye, but a little smile crosses her face.

That night, Zafira lies in bed but can't sleep. The sound of an airplane coming in for a landing at Hamburg Airport has woke her up. And suddenly, her mind is full of the memory of the time the planes came buzzing over her house in Aleppo like dangerous wasps...

CHAPTER 5

Zafira's Exciting Story

Zafira remembers clearly what it was like when the alarm sounded from the nearby mosque, the signal that once again an air raid was just moments away. Her mother woke her and put on a heavy jacket over her pyjama. She pressed the little green rucksack that was always packed and ready to go beside her bed in Zafira's hand and together they hurried down the stairs. 'Pascha, my Pascha!' Zafira cried, just as they reached the door. She pulled herself free and ran up the stairs to her room to get her toy hippo. She always took Pascha with her, wherever she went. It was a present from her dad.

'Quicker!' her mother shouted, as Zafira came back down the stairs with her cuddly toy. It was so worn from being cuddled that not even a zookeeper would recognize that it was a hippo! Like most of their neighbors, Zafira and her mother hurried to the cellar of the bakery, because of its thick walls. They heard the bombs exploding, and the cries of people running for their lives. At last, the steel cellar door closed behind them.

Fifteen minutes later, minutes that seemed like hours, it was all over. The buzzing of the planes faded in the distance.

The baker was the first to go outside and take a look around. When he returned, his face was as white as snow. 'Horrible,' he said. 'It looks horrible. But the raid is over, I think.'

'Come,' Nesrin said and took Zafira by the hand.

The moon was shining when they went outside. What they saw in the moonlight was too terrible for words.

When Zafira saw the hole in the wall where her front door had been, she was shocked. The door lay broken in the middle of the street, blown out by the explosion of a bomb. Safran, the spice seller's dog, lay dead beside it. On the side of the street some distance away, she could see what looked like lifeless bundles of clothes. She closed her eyes tight, to keep from seeing even worse sights.

Piles of rubble and pieces of broken glass crunched under her feet as she and her mother climbed the stairs to their apartment in the second story.

The glass in the windows in the children's room was broken.

The force of exploding bombs had made a mess of her room.

She could see into the apartment below through a hole in the floor next to her bed. Everything lay in ruins there, too.

She discovered some of her toys, blackened by fire. Her doll Hope lay there, a present her father had given to her at the end of *Ramadan*. Its legs were missing.

Zafira began to cry. At first her eyes were so full of tears she could hardly see. When they finally dried, she looked through

the broken window onto the scene below. The other side of the street had been hit harder. Fire flickered from holes in the windows on the house opposite, thick smoke poured out into the street. The balcony, on which the blue flowerpot with the beautiful oleander had stood, lay broken to pieces in the street below.

Zafira pressed Pascha to her chest and ran to her mother. She was in the kitchen, at the back of the house, where the air was not as smoky.

Nesrin held her tight and said resolutely, 'Come on, we've got to get out of here!', and then she quickly packed the most necessary things for herself and her daughter in a bag.

'Where are we going?' asked Zafira, looking on. 'To Grandma's?'

Her mother nodded. 'I've just talked to Rami on the phone. He is going to take Lucy to her Turkish grandparents in Adana. He will take us with him to the mountains to Grandma and Grandpa. It's only a bit out of his way. We are meeting him at the railway station while it's still dark. Come, hurry, we've got to go!'

Zafira quickly got her little red backpack and clamped Pascha under her arm. She couldn't leave home without him!

Sadly, she looked around. She had to leave her books and all her other things behind her.

CHAPTER 6

The Flight from Aleppo

On their way to the railway station Zafira and her mother saw firemen and others who were desperately fighting the fires in the ruined houses. As soon as they put a fire out, it started up again. Ambulances raced through the streets. Paramedics carrying stretchers crossed the street in front of them. Zafira's schoolhouse was on fire, too. It was also Nesrin's school, where she had taught English for many years.



At the railway station there were lots of people with small children. All of them had the same idea: to get out of the city! They hoped that a train or one of the busses that normally stopped there would come along.

'Will a train come? Who knows?' said an old woman. 'During the last air raid the bombs damaged the tracks. They are probably still damaged.'

'Back when I was a boy, things were very different. The famous Orient Express stopped here,' murmured an old man on crutches, who was leaning on the side of a house. 'Yeah, yeah, the good old days...!'

Zafira and her mom were lucky. They weren't waiting for a train or a bus, but for Rami, her father's friend and colleague. He was to meet them at the taxi stand at the railway station.

Zafira liked Rami. Before the war, he had been a bus driver just like her father. But he had lost his job when he was caught smuggling cigarettes. After that, he drove an old taxi left to him by an uncle, who had fled to another country some time ago. Now that old car was their chance to escape the city.

'What's keeping Rami?' murmured Nesrin nervously, looking at her watch again and again.

'There he is, Mom!' shouted Zafira, and pointed at the dusty old taxi coming toward them.

'There were roadblocks everywhere. I couldn't get here sooner!' Rami said as he jumped out and opened the doors. As soon as

mother and daughter got in, he quickly put the luggage in the trunk and drove off.

The people at the station looked on enviously. They all wanted to leave Aleppo as soon as possible, too. They all had the same wish: safety and security. Somewhere...

Zafira sat next to the 3-year-old Lucy in the back seat. Lucy laughed happily and held out her little hands to Zafira.

'Grandma!' she said, 'Are you coming with me to Grandma?'

'Not to your Grandma, to mine!' Zafira replied.

Little Lucy had visited her grandparents in the Turkish city of Adana the last time two years ago. Zafira had last visited her grandparents, who lived in a mountain village in the north of Syria, a year ago. The occasion was Grandpa's 60th birthday. The way to Lucy's grandparents went close by the little village on the Turkish border, where Zafira's grandparents lived.

In peacetime, the trip took four to five hours.

But now they had been driving the whole day and half the night, because the clever Rami was using side streets, smuggler routes and desert roads. In that way, they avoided the checkpoints set up by the masked and heavily armed rebels, who lay in wait along the main roads.

After a while, Lucy grew very tired and fell asleep.

Her pacifier fell out of her mouth and Zafira put it back.

Then she took her hippo into her arms and closed her eyes.

Finally, she fell asleep, too.

'It's not far from here!' Rami said to Nesrin a couple of hours later. She was struggling to stay awake.

Rami looked worried. Even though it was still dark, he could see that most of the farms on the side of the road and on the mountain sides were empty and the fields had been laid waste.

CHAPTER 7

The Village in the Mountains

When the taxi turned into the bumpy road that led to the village where Nesrin's parents lived on a little farm with a few cows, goats and sheep, she and Rami couldn't believe their eyes: the whole village had been completely destroyed!

A few minutes later, Nesrin stood silently, looking at what had been her parents' home. It had burned to the ground.

She sat down on the stone steps in front of the windowless building and cried.

The ISIS rebels had been there! It was frightening to hear about them on TV or read about them in the newspapers, but it was a thousand times more frightening when you were personally affected.

The many jars, cans and bones that lay scattered around the fireplace in the garden showed that the rebels had camped there for some time.

After the villagers had fled, the rebels had slaughtered a goat and helped themselves to the food supplies that had been left behind, before setting the house on fire.

They had cut off the branches of the old olive tree in front of the house, the one her family had been so proud of, and used the wood for cooking their food.

'I'm sure your parents escaped to the mountains,' Rami said in an effort to console Nesrin, who was crying uncontrollably. But Nesrin went on crying. 'Come on! We can't stay here!' he said finally.

'And we can't return to Aleppo, either,' Nesrin sobbed. 'Our apartment is too badly damaged to live in, and most of our friends have left the city.'

'Then come with us for now!' Rami said. 'Come on, let's move on before the children wake up. This is a sight we don't want them to see...'

Nesrin took a last sad look at the ruins that buried the memories of her childhood, and then got in the car.

'Chin up!' Rami said to her and stepped on the gas.



At the Turkish border there was a problem because Nesrin had no entry documents for herself and her daughter.

But Rami was in luck. He knew one of the border guards.

In the past, they had done some very successful smuggling together. When Rami slipped him some money - most of the cash he had with him - he let them through into Turkey.

As they were driving through the fertile valley in which the city of Adana lay, the sun was just coming up.



CHAPTER 8

At Lucy's Grandparents in Adana

Rami's parents-in-law were thrilled to see Lucy again, and took her in their arms.

'Lucy, dear!' shouted her grandmother and pressed the child close to her heart. At that moment, she caught sight of a woman and a child getting out of Rami's car. Surprised, she gave him a questioning look.

Rami introduced the two of them. 'These are our friends, Nesrin and Zafira,' he said. 'They are here...uh, because...I'll tell you about it later.'

'And Enisa, where is Enisa?' Maryam, Rami's mother-in-law, wanted to know. Enisa was her daughter.

'We tried again and again to call you, but the telephone connection was broken off,' Enisa's father said nervously.

'No wonder. All hell was loose in Aleppo,' Rami said with a sigh. 'I couldn't reach you either, and when I called on my way here I couldn't tell you what happened - not on the telephone. I felt I must tell you personally.'

'What is it? What's happened to her?' cried Enisa's mother desperately.

Rami sighed and looked at his parents-in-law sadly. 'Enisa was in a bus that was stopped by ISIS rebels a week ago. Zafira's father was the bus driver. She was on her way to work.'

'Oh my God!' Maryam cried. She was a Christian and came from Syria. 'Are you saying that the rebels have kidnapped our daughter?'

'*Inschallah!*' sighed her husband Asmi, Arabic for 'so God will'. If their daughter was in the hands of the ISIS rebels, all they could do was to pray for God's help.

Rami spoke of the horrible bomb raids on Aleppo and said how good it was to be in Adana, in safety.

'Well, please sit down,' said Asmi, trying to remain calm. 'I'll get you breakfast.'

Ever since he had retired, he made breakfast for his wife every day. That was very unusual for a Turkish husband, but as a young man he had been a steward with the Bagdad Railway and had cooked for the passengers. He loved to cook.

'He's the only man far and wide who can cook so well,' his wife said, looking at him proudly. She was still holding Lucy, who cuddled up even closer to her. Maryam sighed and said, 'Come with me, children, and I'll show you the bathroom and your room.'

She led them up the stairs where the bedrooms were. Lucy's grandmother opened the door to a sun-filled room on the east side of the house. 'This was Enisa's room - Enisa is Lucy's mom.' In the left hand corner beside the window was the little bed that Lucy had slept in during her last visit. On the wall to the right was a sofa.

'My bed and my teddy bear!' Thrilled, Lucy hurried over to the bed in which the teddy bear lay.

'Zafira and her mom can sleep here. And you can sleep in our bed with us, my dear Lucina,' said Maryam and put her arms around her grandchild. Lucina was Lucy's baptismal name, which Maryam had chosen for her. She liked the name, because it meant 'the shining one' and she wished the child a bright future.

Nesrin went over to the window. Outside was a neat garden with a little pond and a tiny fountain. From the branch of a tree hung a swing with ropes shining in the sun.

'How pretty,' Nesrin sighed.

'And peaceful,' Zafira added.

'Will you play with me?' Lucy asked and took Zafira by the hand.

'Breakfast first!' came the grandfather's voice from below. The smell of fresh flat bread and Turkish coffee filled the air.

'Now you are at *my* Grandma's,' said Lucy proudly to Zafira, as they brushed their teeth in the little bathroom.

'My mom said that *my* Grandma wasn't home. She didn't know that we were coming!' Understandably, Nesrin hadn't told her daughter the whole truth.

Zafira slept well that night. There were no bombs, and she felt safe.

'We can't stay here forever, Zafira,' Nesrin said to her daughter the next morning. 'And we can't go back to Aleppo.' Then she told Zafira about what had happened in her grandparents' village, choosing her words carefully. 'Grandma and Grandpa probably hid from the rebels in the mountains,' she said finally.

'Where the fields are?' said Zafira. 'I had a lot of fun there, playing with the kids from the village. There are all kinds of deep caves there!'

'I hope that's where they are,' her mother answered softly.

'So what do we do now?' Zafira wanted to know.

'We're going to try to get to Hamburg, where Aunt Selina, your dad's sister, lives.'

'Hamburg - is it far away?' Zafira asked. She was still worn out from the journey from Aleppo to Adana. 'As far as America?' America was the farthest place Zafira could imagine.

Zafira's mother asked Rami for a map. 'First of all, we must reach Europe. Then Germany. Hamburg is a large city in Germany,' Nesrin said and ran her finger across the map. She showed Zafira Istanbul, where the continents of Asia and Europe came together, the Mediterranean Sea, the boot-shaped form of Italy and finally, farther north, Germany and the city of Hamburg, where her aunt and family lived.

Zafira suddenly remembered what her dad had often said: 'Go to Selina in Germany if anything should happen to me!' His sister and her husband had emigrated to Hamburg ten years ago. They had opened a small Syrian restaurant in the port area. Selina had often encouraged her brother Sinan and his family to follow her. In the last letter she had sent to him, she had written:

Dear Sinan, dear Nesrin, dear Zafira,

Come and live with us in Hamburg. It is peaceful here. There are no bombs...

Easier said than done, especially if you have no money for an expensive plane ticket, no job and no entry permit.

'Maybe Haluk can help,' Rami said.

'Haluk? You mean Haluk the fisherman? I don't know,' his mother-in-law murmured. 'He may have connections, but there is something about him that I don't like.'

'I know what you mean, but the thing is, he may be able to help us,' Rami grumbled, smiling to himself. He had known lots of people his mother-in-law certainly wouldn't have approved of. He and Nesrin and Zafira had been in Adana three days already and he didn't want them to wear out their welcome.

Besides, he was impatient to return to Aleppo to search for his wife and his friend Sinan, Zafira's dad. He hadn't given up hope that both of them were still alive in spite of the terrible scenes from the war in Syria he saw every evening on TV, pictures of the cruel ISIS rebels, who said they wanted to build an Islamic theocracy and killed anyone who refused to join them.

'Murder in the name of God! That's not right!' said Rami in a loud voice, as he watched the news with his parents-in-law after the children had gone to bed. They were watching a report about the latest horrible acts carried out by those so-called 'holy soldiers'. 'How can anyone believe in a God who approves of such things?' he said angrily.

The next morning Rami made plans to drive to the nearby fishing port of Mersin to look for Haluk, the fisherman, whom he had known since his childhood.

'While Rami is away, I'll show you around our charming town!' Lucy's grandfather said to his guests. 'Do you know how old Adana is?'

'As old as you?' Lucy asked.

'Much older,' Her grandfather laughed. 'Over 3500 years old!' he said, and then he proudly began the tour of 'his' town.

He showed them the modern mosque with its six little towers, reflected in the waters of the Ceyhan River.

'Our mosque is the largest in Turkey and the bridge to it is the oldest stone bridge in the world! It looks the same as it did back when the Roman Emperor Hadrian had it built. It was a part of the famous Silk Road, used since ancient times for the transport of spices, gold and cloth by camel caravans to places like Damascus, India and China. At the time, it was the most important trading route in the world.'

Azmi entertained them with fascinating stories about pirates who used Adana as their headquarters and attacked ships along the coast.

After that, he took them to the bazaar, to get some curry, cinnamon and other spices for Lucy's grandma.

While there, they also picked out some fresh fruit and other stuff for themselves. Nesrin stopped at a kiosk and bought kebabs and sesame rings for everyone. Lucy's grandfather got them drinks and they picnicked in the park.



'What a wonderful day,' Zafira laughed as they returned home late that afternoon.

Nesrin nodded her head. 'You're right about that. A wonderful and a peaceful day!' She smiled, trying to hide her worries about the unpleasant surprises the coming days might bring.

CHAPTER 9

In the Port of Mersin

Late that afternoon, while the others were taken on a tour of Adana, Rami drove to the fishing port of Mersin.

Fishermen sat on the quay cleaning their nets. Behind them, boats rocked gently in the water, which shone mirror-like in the morning sun. But he knew that the sea could be stormy and dangerous, too, and had claimed countless lives either because of bad weather, shipwrecks or pirate attacks.

'Does anyone know Haluk, the fisherman?' Rami asked a gray-bearded man, who was carrying a load of herring boxes back to his boat.

'Haluk?' The old fisherman laughed. 'Everyone here knows Haluk!' He put down the boxes, leaned on the quay wall and lit his pipe. 'But I can't say where he is hanging about.'

'Ask around at the Tantuni restaurant at the marina. His girl friend works there!' shouted a young man who was passing by with a load of fish boxes on a trolley.

His tip proved to be dead right. Rami couldn't believe his eyes when he caught sight of Haluk in the restaurant.

The ex-fisherman, wearing white jeans and a blazer, strutted toward him and called out happily, '*Merhaba*, Rami!', and invited him to a drink.

Rami was impressed. 'You're looking good, man. Is this your restaurant?'

'Not yet,' Haluk said with a grin, 'but I'm getting there.'

When they finished their drinks, Haluk treated him to a cup of *Kahve* - sweet and strong, the way Rami preferred his coffee. Haluk gave him a knowing look. 'You've come to me for a reason, am I right?'

'You guessed right.' Rami nodded and described the difficult situation he was in. 'I heard that you're the man who can solve our problem.'

'It's possible, yeah, maybe I can help,' murmured Haluk and looked around to see if anyone was listening. 'Can I trust you to keep this quiet?'



Rami nodded. 'You have my word,' he promised. 'But what will it cost me?'

'The passage to Europe without the necessary documents is risky business and comes at a price. But it can be done. I've helped hundreds of people!'

'How much?' Rami asked in a nervous voice.

'Normally 5000 Euros, but for you, my friend, I'll do it for half price.'

Rami took in a deep breath and let it out. That was still a huge amount of money and he doubted very much if Nesrin could raise it.

'For that much I could buy a first-class ticket,' Rami replied.

Haluk sneered. 'Then go ahead and buy yourself a first-class flight to Italy or Germany as an illegal alien without documents!'

Rami realized that Haluk was right.

'And how do you want to arrange this?' he wanted to know.

'That's my secret. But when you do business with me the results are guaranteed.' Haluk grinned. 'Otherwise, you get your money back!'

'What do we have to do?'

'You come to the harbor at night, at the right time. I'll call you. Give me your cell number. You have to wait until I've found the right boat and one of my friends is on duty at the harbor.'

They closed the deal by shaking hands. Just as they did thirty years ago, when they were in school in Aleppo and were on the

same football team. Rami said goodbye to his old friend with mixed feelings.

That evening, when Rami told Nesrin about his talk with Haluk and how much he wanted for the trip to Europe, she turned pale. 'I don't have that kind of money,' she said sadly.

'How much do you have?' Rami asked.

'About 1500 Euros. But maybe I could sell my necklace with the sapphire, the one I was given when I gave birth to Zafira. And my ring - a wedding present from Sinan. I could also try to get some money from the bank. But my account is almost empty.'

Rami managed to get a good price for Nesrin's ring and necklace from a gold dealer in the bazaar. Nesrin managed to get some money from the bank, but she still needed about 200 Euros. Rami and his parents-in-law gave her the rest.

'I'll pay you back,' Nesrin promised. 'Or Sinan will, if you find him...' She fought back tears.

Three days later, in the dead of night, Rami's telephone rang, and he jumped out of bed as if he had got an electric shock. 'I just got the call!' he whispered when he woke Nesrin and Zafira. Immediately, the two of them took their rucksacks and tiptoed out of the house. Rami's parents-in-law, both of them light sleepers, stood at their bedroom window and anxiously

watched them go. They continued to wave to them, even after Rami's taxi had disappeared, swallowed up in the darkness.

Zafira was still quite tired when they arrived in Mersin. She didn't really understand what was going on. Only that a ship would take them on the next leg of their journey - a ship, that a friend of Rami's had organized.

They drove quietly through the harbor area until they reached the remote, dark place Haluk had described.

Rami parked his taxi and looked around nervously. Finally, he spied a figure in a dark hoody coming out from behind a pile of steel drums. It was Haluk!

'Follow me,' he said softly and led the three of them to a small fishing boat he had tied to the quay.

'In this thing?' Rami cried angrily, as Haluk helped Nesrin and Zafira into the rusty old boat.

'Not to worry!' Haluk laughed. 'This is only a kind of shuttle. It will take them to a large ship. Look over there!' he said, pointing to a crowded fishing boat a few meters away. 'They're going the same way.'

Suddenly, a sturdy young man came up to them. Haluk nodded to him and said to Nesrin, 'This is Erkan, an experienced sailor. He'll take care of you! This is not his first trip.'

When Nesrin and Zafira found a seat in the boat, Rami passed them Zafira's rucksack and the two traveling bags. Rami's

mother-in-law had filled one of them with food and warm clothes, because she knew that nights in the north were cold. Erkan threw his duffel bag into the boat and climbed on board. Shortly after that, ten more people crowded into the little boat. 'Squeezed in like herrings,' Rami sighed and watched as the heavily loaded fishing boat with the dark figures in it sailed slowly out to sea. He stood there and continued to watch as other crowded and unlit boats sailed in the same direction. 'That must be quite a large ship that's waiting for them,' he thought. Feeling very tired, he went back to his taxi and set off for Adana. But that night he didn't sleep well.

CHAPTER 10

The Ghost Ship

'Mommy!' Zafira cried anxiously. She buried her head in her mother's soft headscarf, as the fishing boat sailed into the open sea. Now there was no land in sight, only once in a while the flash of a beacon light. Zafira was worried that Pascha could fall into the water, and held him tight in her arms. After all, a hippo made of cloth is not able to swim, not even in the Nile.

Luckily, Nesrin and Zafira had found a place to sit on one of the small seats on the long side of the boat. Most of the others sat on the floor of the boat or stood, holding onto the low railing.

'We're almost there!' shouted the bearded skipper, who hadn't taken his pipe out of his mouth the whole time.

He looked a little like Captain Haddock from the Tintin and Snowy comics, Zafira thought, remembering the comic book her father had once brought her.

It took about twenty minutes before they could see the dark shape of a large cargo ship in the distance.

'Is that our ship?' Nesrin was shocked when she saw the ship's rusty hull from up close.

'It's old but solid as a rock!' Erkan, the sailor, laughed.

'Otherwise I wouldn't be on it. And we've got a good captain.

He's a Syrian, like you.'

Nesrin felt better when she heard that. 'Everything will be fine!' she said to her daughter as their little boat came up next to the cargo ship.

The sea was calm and Erkan was easily able to fasten the boat to the anchor chain and the ends of the ropes that were let down from the ship's deck.

Zafira looked for the name of the ship. There it was! The word 'Hope' was written in freshly painted white letters.

'The same name as my doll's,' Zafira said sadly and thought of all the things she had left behind in Aleppo.

Nesrin sighed. Yeah, 'Hope'. Without hope life couldn't go on! She said a quick prayer and waited to see what would happen next. How in the world could all these people find a place on board this 'Noah's Ark'?

Suddenly, there was a loud noise. A rope ladder with wooden steps was thrown down the side of the ship.

'Get on it and climb!' Erkan shouted and pointed to the ladder.

'No way!' screamed a woman who feared high places.



'Mommy, should I go first?' Zafira asked. She didn't feel afraid. She was good at climbing, better than her mother. She had learned how to climb with the boys from her neighborhood. Together, they had climbed trees and clambered about ruins.

'Go ahead. I'll follow you!' Nesrin replied, trying to hide the fear in her voice.

Zafira climbed onto the first step, caught hold of the rope and pulled herself up.

Nesrin was right behind her.

Beside them, their baggage was pulled up on a winch.

It was a ghostly scene.

Fear was in the air.

'I couldn't have made it without you!' Nesrin let out a sigh of relief as she reached the deck. She held her daughter in her arms. Two strange figures with flashlights approached her. They told her in an unfriendly voice to move on and get into the ship. That was when Nesrin realized that the most dangerous part of their journey lay ahead of them.

'Don't worry. Hang on! In a couple of hours we'll be there!' Erkan said with a twisted smile, trying to make the worried passengers feel better. He gave Nesrin both of her traveling bags. Zafira had held on to her little red rucksack. Just in case. After all, she had put Pascha in it, so that she would have both hands free to climb the ladder.

'Women and children below deck!' came a loud, hard voice through a megaphone, first in Arabic, then in Turkish. 'There's food for you there!'

Was that the captain? Below deck? That was where cargo was stored, where cows and goats were transported.

At the access hatch to the cargo area they were given a blanket, a bottle of water and some bread.

'Just like an all inclusive hotel,' said someone with a dry laugh.

Zafira and her mother took the food and climbed down the steep stairs to the cargo area. It was obvious from the smell there that it was normally used for cows and goats. But at least there was a layer of fresh straw.

One of the sailors shone his flashlight into a corner and told them in Turkish that they could lie there. Next to them, a mother was preparing a place for her two children.

Opposite them, they saw a pregnant young woman. A two or three-year-old boy lay in her arms, so tired that he couldn't keep his eyes open. Finally, he fell asleep. His mother cried softly. Tears ran down her pale cheeks.

When Nesrin spoke to her, the young woman said that she came from Syria, too. 'I must find my husband. He has been in Italy for months now,' she whispered. 'This ship is my last chance to get there, before the baby is born.'

Another hour went by - it felt like an eternity - until everyone was on board and the anchor was raised. Nesrin realized from the unpleasantly loud, knocking sound that the ship's engine was directly under them.

'Soon we'll be asleep, dear,' she said and put her arms around Zafira. 'Then we won't hear it anymore.'

They ate another bit of flat bread, drank a little water and wrapped themselves in the blanket.

That night a strong wind came up. The ship rocked with the waves. The water and the flat bread in Zafira's stomach started to rock, too.

'Mommy, I feel sick!' she whispered to her mother.

'Come with me. We'll get some fresh air!' murmured Nesrin firmly. Together, they climbed the steep stairs from the cargo area to the deck.

Zafira had to vomit and hurried across the deck to where a large number of seasick refugees were hanging over the railing. After a while, she felt better. She looked out into the darkness. The ship was without lights. Like a ghost ship. And when the thin half-moon disappeared behind some clouds, the darkness was complete.

'Where are we now?' Nesrin asked Erkan as he was passing by. 'Somewhere between Cyprus and Crete,' came the unclear answer.

'Mommy, how can the ship find its way in the dark?' Zafira wanted to know.

'The captain has a compass,' her mother replied.

'A real sailor uses the stars as his guide,' said an old man who was standing next to them.

'Nowadays there's GPS,' laughed a young man.



CHAPTER 11

The Captain

The captain of the ship came from Damascus. A band of human traffickers, who charged huge fees for transporting refugees to Europe illegally, had hired him for the crossing. He had signed a contract a week ago in Istanbul. He had asked for time to think it over, but quickly realized it was an offer he couldn't refuse.

The contract said that he could take his whole family on board. They had managed to flee from Damascus to the Turkish town of Mersin.

For the captain and his family, the ship 'Hope' was a stepping stone to freedom and safety, to a life without bombs.

Furthermore, he would receive 15,000 Euros for his new life in Europe. A fortune! How could you say no to an offer like that? He stood on the bridge and stared into the darkness. He was worried. He was not happy about the plan for the journey. Just before setting out, he had learned that he was to scuttle the ship near the Italian coast and call on the coastguard to save the passengers. But what he had just discovered was a shock: there weren't enough lifeboats and lifejackets to go around!

Two days later, the terrible news spread all around the world: Many of the refugees on the stranded ship 'Hope' could not be saved.



CHAPTER 12

More New Kids at School

Zafira has been in Anna's class for almost half a year. She is no longer 'the new kid'. She can speak German quite well now. A few days ago Samir and Alima became the newest members of the class. Together with their parents, they had fled from Homs in Syria, because the war had grown worse there.

Ms. Bartos assigns them seats next to Mara. There is no problem about that. Thanks to Zafira, the class has learned how difficult it is to adapt to a new culture. They have become a little more tolerant.

'We've become an international class. Super!' Ms. Bartos says proudly.

When there is something important that needs to be explained, Zafira translates for Samir and Alima.

'Isn't it great to see how much Zafira has learned in just nine months!' Ms. Bartos smiles. 'I could never learn Arabic that fast.'

'I'll bet not even Mara could do that,' says Sascha with a grin.

'I can already count to ten in Arabic,' Mara says and gives Sascha a sharp look.

'And I can say 'hello' and 'please' and 'thank you' in Arabic,' Anna laughs.

Alima is pleased when Zafira invites her and her family to tea in the little downtown apartment in which Zafira and her mother now live.

'Your daughter is a lovely girl!' Alima's mother says to Nesrin.

'She helps Alima and Samir, too, whenever she can. She translates for them, when they don't understand something or when they have problems in school.'

'I'm pleased to hear that! Zafira learned German very quickly,' Nesrin says. 'Much faster than me. I'm proud of her.'

But German is not spoken that afternoon. There is a lot to talk about - in their native language, of course!

Alima's father Rami tells them how, with the help of Turkish friends, the family managed to make the dangerous flight across the sea to Greece. 'After that, it took us several weeks to make our way through Macedonia.'

'By foot?' Zafira shakes her head in surprise.

Rami nods. 'Yeah, it was a dangerous march.'

'How did you find your way?' Nesrin wants to know.

Rami shows her his cell phone. 'With GPS. I've got an app that works with an Internet connection - via satellite.'

He shows her some photos of the flight, including a picture of their baby child, Mimi.

'She was born during our flight, in a clinic in Skopje,' says Selma, the mother, and points to the six-month-old girl in the stroller.

'We stayed near Skopje for a while,' Rami goes on. 'People in Macedonia were very hospitable and helpful, even though many of them are poor. Later, when we moved on, a farmer with a horse and cart gave us a ride. After that, we continued on foot.

Finally, someone brought them to the Hungarian border. 'To get through Hungary we had to pay,' Selma explains. 'Together with other refugees we rode to Vienna in a furniture van. The worst was now behind us. From there we rode to Germany in a tourist bus that one of the group - with experience in such matters - had organized.'

'An escape agent?' Nesrin asks.

Alima's mom nods. 'We gave him money and Rami's watch. That's all we had.'

As always, when the adults talk about their old home country or about the dangerous flight, the children are all ears. Nesrin serves peppermint tea, sweet and warm, the way it was always served at home in Syria.

'When we arrived in Germany, it was freezing cold,' Samir says. 'We were given warm clothes at the reception center. We've been there for three months now. But as you know, the reception center is no home,' Selma tells Nesrin.

The children, too, talk about their new life in Germany.

'There are a lot of differences!' Alima says. 'Some things are better. Girls are free to do everything boys do.'

'And, of course, you like that,' Samir laughs.

'Yeah, I do. But why can't I take part in Physical Education and Swimming with the rest of the class?' Alima blurts out. She has been in a German school for two weeks.

'Haven't I explained that to you often enough?' Her father gives her a sharp look.

Nesrin looks at him and shakes her head. 'If Zafira hadn't learned to swim, she wouldn't be alive today,' she says slowly.

'She wouldn't have been able to swim to shore when our overcrowded lifeboat sank on the Italian coast.'

'And if I hadn't been allowed to climb around in the trees and ruins in Aleppo like the boys, I would have been too afraid to climb the side of the ship and would have fallen into the water and drowned,' Zafira adds.

'I think it's good that boys and girls have the same rights and can do the same things in school,' Alima says, surprised at herself for speaking out so freely. She had never before said anything like that to her father!

Rami is about to scold his daughter, but his wife calms him down. 'We are living in a foreign country that has given us a friendly welcome,' she says. 'We have food, we live in peace. No planes drop bombs on our house. No guns are shot in the streets. We are in safety. Alima is right. In the long run, our children will only feel at home here if we change some of our habits. And we must learn the language of our new home, so we can make ourselves understood.'

Alima's father didn't answer.

But two weeks later, Alima is overjoyed when she gets new sports shoes and a swimsuit for her birthday.

CHAPTER 13

Friends in a Foreign Country

Hamburg is Zafira's new home, but she hasn't forgotten her old home. Neither has Alima, her new friend.

'What happened after you swam to shore in Italy?' Alima wants to know. They have just had their swimming lesson, and are sitting on a bench outside in the sun, waiting for the school bus.

'I was too shocked to understand everything that was going on around me, but suddenly a lot of people came and helped us out of the water and gave us blankets and dry clothes. Most of them were ordinary people, but there were also sailors and policemen. They spoke Italian and English. It was a very confusing situation and I didn't understand much.'

'Yeah, that's bad when you don't understand the language....,' sighed Alima. 'What happened to the woman with the baby tummy and the little boy?'

'They were lucky. An Italian man lent her his *telefonino* and she was able to call her husband. He was waiting anxiously nearby and picked her and the boy up soon afterward. When he heard that we wanted to go to Hamburg, he advised us not to report to the Italian camp, because we would have to remain in Italy if we did.'

'Why's that?'

Zafira shakes her head and says, 'That's the law. You have to seek asylum in the land you enter when you reach Europe.'

'So how did you get to Hamburg?'

'That was really strange. Suddenly, a man came up to us and asked if we needed train tickets. Mommy talked with him. She gave him the last money we had. Then he took us to the railway station and bought us tickets for a train to Munich.'

'And Munich is in Germany?'

'Right. Mommy says the Italians were happy about every person who left the country, because every day more refugees were arriving by boat. Many of them slipped through the border and moved on, some to France, others to Austria or Sweden.'

'Like us,' laughs Alima.

'We went by train to Milan and then on to Munich,' Zafira continued. 'From there we called up dad's sister, Selina, in Hamburg. She and her husband came by car and picked us up. That's how we got to Hamburg. Once here, we went to the Central Reception Camp and got registered. it took a long time for them to check our life history and give us a visa and the

necessary documents. We lived in a container for three months, and then in an apartment with other refugees.'

'Just like us,' Alima says.

'Fortunately, we now have our own little apartment not far from where Aunt Selina lives. She gave me her old bicycle, so I can visit her often. And Anna, too,' Zafira says with a happy smile.

Later, Alima and Zafira are in Zafira's room lying on the floor, playing Pachisi, a very old board game that is a little like the German game, *Mensch ärgere dich nicht*. Alima's dad had painted the gameboard on a piece of wood. Alima looks at Zafira and says, 'You and Anna are good friends, right?'

'She is my German friend and you are my Syrian friend,' Zafira explains diplomatically.

'I'd like to have a German friend, too,' says Alima in a sad voice.

'I'll ask Anna if she will be your friend, too. I'm sure she'll agree,' Zafira says with a smile.

Anna does agree. She likes Alima! 'But you must always speak German when I am around,' she says to Alima and Zafira.

'Otherwise I won't know what you're laughing about!'

CHAPTER 14

A Difficult Situation

Anna and Zafira ride to school mornings on their bicycles now. When they get to Alima's, they get off their bikes and walk with her. It is clear to them that Alima's greatest wish is to have a bicycle, too.

But there are some problems: first of all, Alima's father doesn't think girls should ride bicycles. That's the reason Alima hasn't learned how. And now that they have their own little apartment, her mother thinks that there are other things the family needs more than a bicycle. A washing machine, for example. As it is, she has to use a vending machine in a cellar in the neighborhood to do her laundry with. It's a difficult situation.

But Anna is practical-minded and doesn't give up easily. 'First of all, you've got to learn how to ride a bike!' she says to Alima. 'Then you can talk with your father about having your own bicycle.'

Every afternoon, in the parking lot behind the super market, Anna and Zafira help their friend Alima learn how to ride a bike. 'Cool!' Zafira cries, when Alima succeeds in mastering an obstacle course after only a few days of practice. Alima is a good pupil. The two 'driving instructors' are pleased with her. 'Now we need a bike for Alima,' says Zafira. 'But they are expensive.'

'Maybe not.' Anna thinks for a moment, and then she has an idea. 'My cousin Jenny got a great racing bike for her birthday. I'll ask her if we can have her old bicycle. There's nothing wrong with it and it even has a gear shift.'

No sooner said than done. Jenny doesn't mind giving away her old bike. In fact, she is glad that someone can get some use out of it. Alima thanks her warmly and gives her a bouquet of flowers.

Anna's dad insists that the brakes get checked by the bicycle dealer, before Alima can ride the bike. Her mom buys her a funny bell with a little monster on it.

After that, the three friends go to the parking lot to practice some more. Alima's bike is a little smaller than Zafira's and rides much easier. Alima is happy at first, but then her face clouds over. She looks at Zafira and says, 'How am I going to tell my dad about this?'

Quite by chance, the traffic policeman will be coming to the school to give a bicycle safety test to the fourth grade classes the following week.

Class 4a will be tested on Wednesday. Everyone brings their bicycles with them and practice in the schoolyard on little 'streets' drawn with chalk. The curves are marked with red and white traffic cones.

Officer Meiners explains the traffic signs and the most important rules. Then the test begins.

At an intersection, Alima runs into Sascha.

'I was there first,' Sascha says.

'But she came from the right side and had right of way,' the officer explains.

Sascha gets a penalty point.

In the end the brakes and the lighting are checked to see if they work. Then they are all given a bicycle riding license.

'I'll show it to dad!' Alima says proudly, 'and then I'll tell him the whole story.'

CHAPTER 15

Thoughts at Night, Worries by Day

Zafira is happy that she has found two new friends and that she lives with her mother in a little apartment instead of in a container or on this horrible ship. She's thankful that she can sleep at night without bombs waking her up. And that she can walk down the street without having to climb over rubble, and that the windows in the houses aren't broken, and that she can go down town without fearing to meet men with guns coming at her.

But sometimes she can't sleep. Sometimes her thoughts keep her awake. They creep around her bed like ghosts and appear

in her dreams: scenes of ruined streets, of friends who are no longer there, and especially, of her dad, who she misses so much.

Zafira goes to the kitchen with Pascha to get a glass of milk. Her mother is there, sitting at the kitchen table. On the table is a newspaper article. She is crying. When she notices her daughter, she quickly brushes away her tears with the sleeve of her pajamas.

'I'm so happy that we are here!' she says and puts her arms around Zafira. 'All hell has broken out in Aleppo. The army is dropping bombs. They are trying to wipe out the rebels but are killing many innocent men and women. There is nothing left to the city but rubble.' She points to the photo in the newspaper. 'And in Alima's hometown, the beautiful city of Homs, it's the same. Many people who lived there have been killed in a bombing raid this week.'

She sits Zafira down in her lap. She is very homesick, and she can't hide it. She is glad to be in Germany, but she can't shake off her worries about her husband and friends in her war-torn land.

'What about Dad?' Zafira says softly.

'He's not in Aleppo. That gives me hope that he has escaped the bombs,' Nesrin sighs. 'I pray for him every day!'

But the news that reaches Nesrin the next morning is so terrible that she turns to her sister-in-law in desperation. 'Rami has just

called!' she says in tears. 'His wife was killed in an ISIS prison camp! And he was badly wounded when he and some friends tried to free the prisoners there.'

'And my brother? Does Rami know anything about Sinan? Was he in the prison camp, too?' Selina asks anxiously.

'Rami hopes that Sinan was able to escape. But maybe he only said that to make me feel better.'

'Where is Rami now?' Selina wants to know.

'In the hospital, in Adana. His parents-in-law are taking care of him. They also want to keep little Lucy with them. They love her so. Of course, they can't take the place of her mother.'

Nesrin hesitates. 'What do you think? Should I tell Zafira about this when she comes home from school?'

'I'll make us a cup of tea first,' says Selina. 'Then we can think about what to do...'

Nesrin and Selina decide not to burden Zafira with the terrible news from her old home.

'She has enough on her mind, trying to adapt to her new home,' says Selina resolutely. 'She has a right to be happy.'

Every time Zafira comes home in the afternoon, all pumped up with the latest news from school, Nesrin knows that it was right not to tell her about what she and Selina had talked about. And when she wakes up in the night, worried about her husband, she tiptoes to the kitchen to avoid waking up her daughter.

Zafira is happy again, in spite of all she has gone through. She has got friends, and she loves school and sports. She loves to laugh and her happy laughter is like medicine for Alima.

And when she learns that her grandparents managed to escape the warzone, after surviving a dangerous flight across the mountains to their relatives in Turkey, Zafira is overjoyed!

But Alima's father still finds it difficult to get used to the rules and customs of Germany. And he has mixed feelings about his wife's daily German lessons. But when he has to go to the local authority to apply for a renewal of his residence permit and his wife goes with him and helps him understand what is being said, he is proud of her, even though he doesn't show it.

CHAPTER 16

The Man with the White Beard

Zafira and her mother have been living for the past two years now in Hamburg. The city has become something like a second hometown to Zafira. She loves to take walks and bicycle tours along the Alster and the Elbe River, she loves the clean streets, the well-kept houses and the huge zoo. And riding on the Alster

steamboat or on the ferry across the Elbe River is a special treat for her! She loves being on the water.

With her Aunt Selina, she and her mother go on trips to the Baltic Sea. It is very different from the Mediterranean Sea but just as dangerous. Her aunt tells her stories about the warships and pirates that sailed in the Baltic, especially about the famous pirate Störtebeker. Her stories are fascinating, just like the ones Zafira loves to read. She takes out piles of books from the library and devours them like candy. She enjoys school. Next year she will be in high school. She wants to become a teacher, just like her mom.

Yes, Zafira is happy - but still, she misses her dad a lot. Even though she doesn't always show it. There is a photo over her bed of a smiling young man on a Mediterranean beach with his arms around her and her mom. Aunt Selina had it enlarged and put in a frame and gave it to Nesrin on her birthday.

'How old was I back then?' Zafira asks her mother one evening before going to bed, pointing at the picture.

'Three or four, I'd say,' her mom answers. 'And you were nine when we left Syria.'

'I've changed a lot!' Zafira laughs.

'We've all changed a lot,' her mom says. 'That's life.'

'That's for sure! I can't imagine you as a bald-headed baby,' says Zafira and pulls playfully at her mother's long, thick hair.

After that, she reads a bedtime story in German to her mother to help her make progress in her German course and understand everything better.

The next afternoon, just as Zafira is about to set off on her bicycle for Anna's, a taxi stops in front of her apartment house. A man with a white beard and a thin, pale face gets out. He asks her where the house with the number 46 is.

'Over there!' says Zafira, surprised, and shows the man in the shabby clothes the way to her house. Who does this odd stranger want to see? And why did he give her such a strange look? Is he a beggar maybe?

After that, she rides her bike to Anna's. Together they do their homework. They are just finishing when the telephone rings.

'Zafira, you are to go home quickly,' Anna's mom says. 'There's a surprise waiting for you.'

Puzzled, Zafira sets off for home.

She climbs the stairs to the second story. Her mother is standing in the landing and looks happier than she has looked for a long time.

'Zafira, dear, come quickly. Come and see who's here!'

Zafira stares at the man with the white beard, who is now dressed in jeans and a fresh shirt. Then she looks into his shiny dark eyes and asks, 'Daddy???'

Sinan says nothing, but takes his daughter in his arms. Zafira's heart swells with happiness. Dad! Poor daddy! Zafira can see that he has been through hard times. He looks very different than the happy man in the photo over her bed.



'Everything will be fine from now on!' Nesrin smiles.
The doorbell rings. Aunt Selina and her whole family have come with flowers and a shopping bag so full it is almost bursting!
'We've come to celebrate Sinan's return!' she cries happily and hugs her brother so tight that he can hardly breathe.
A few minutes later, they are all sitting close together at the living room table.
For the moment, they are not thinking about the terrible things that have happened.

And then they talk and begin making plans for the future.
For a new life in a new land. In peace.
With new neighbors and friends. A home for good perhaps?