Opening extract from

Kiss the Dust

Written by

Elizabeth Laird

Published by

Egmont Books Ltd

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Preface

The Zagros mountains are like a long spine of high peaks. They start in the north at the eastern end of Turkey and go southwards, separating the plains of Iraq in the west from Iran in the east.

About twenty million Kurdish people live in the foothills of the Zagros and in the fertile valleys that lie between the high peaks. The international borders of Iran, Iraq and Turkey run right through the Kurdish areas, so there are millions of Kurds in each of the three countries.

The Kurds have lived in the Zagros mountains since history began. Although they are Muslims, they are not the same people as their neighbours, the Arabs and Persians. They speak their own Kurdish language, wear Kurdish clothes, tell their own stories and have their own customs and traditions.

The Kurds do not have a nation state of their own. They are ruled by others, by Turks in Turkey, Arabs in Iraq, and Persians in Iran.

At the end of the 1970s, fighting broke out between the Kurds of Iraq and the government of Saddam Hussein. The *pesh murgas*, as the Kurdish fighting men were called, fought successfully at first for a homeland of their own.

But the Iraqi government's response was ruthless. They bombed and gassed Kurdish villages, executed Kurdish fighters and their families and completely destroyed many Kurdish towns and villages. Thousands of refugees escaped across the mountains to Iran.

But by this time, Iraq was at war with Iran, and to the Iranians, Kurdish refugees were enemy aliens. The

Iranians couldn't let people from an enemy country settle wherever they wanted to in Iran. They sent the refugees to remote camps in the deserts of the south or the mountains of the north.

This is the story of one Kurdish family. The people in this book are not real, but their story is like that of thousands who have been forced to run away from Iraq across the Zagros mountains.

1

Sulaimaniya, Iraq
Spring, 1984

It was just an ordinary day like any other. Tara and her friend Leila, dressed like everyone else in uniform navy skirts and pale blue blouses, walked out of the big gates of the Secondary School for Girls in the centre of town, swinging their heavy school bags. It was that short time of year between the icy cold of a northern Iraqi winter and the blasting heat of an Iraqi summer when the sky is a melting cloudless blue and every plant seems to be in flower.

"Don't let's go straight home," said Leila. "I want to look round the shops."

Tara hesitated. Her mother was strict about her getting home in reasonable time.

"I'm not sure," she said. "Daya gets worried if I'm late."

"Oh, come on," said Leila. "Your mother won't notice if it's only ten minutes. And you can get something for Hero."

"Good idea." Tara linked her arm through her friend's and swung her bag up onto her shoulder. Her three year old sister Hero had chicken pox. It was hard work keeping her amused. A packet of

crayons or something might keep her happy for a while.

The main road that led to the centre of Sulaimaniya wasn't usually very busy, but today it was choked up with a lumbering convoy of army jeeps and lorries that churned up clouds of dust. Tara and Leila hardly noticed them. Since the war with Iran had started four years earlier, they'd got used to seeing the army everywhere. They shouted to make themselves heard above the roar of the heavy engines.

"What did you get in your English test?" said Leila.

Tara made a face.

"Bad marks as usual. I don't think Mrs Zeinab likes me. She's always getting at me. I think she's mean."

"She's not really," said Leila earnestly. Tara squeezed her friend's arm. It was just like Leila to stick up for Mrs Zeinab. She never criticized anyone. She was so softhearted she'd feel sorry for a flower when its petals started to drop.

"I'm hopeless at English anyway," said Tara. "It's so difficult. And we've got miles of irregular verbs to learn for homework. I'll never do it."

"Yes, you will. I bet you know half of them already."

"I bet I don't."

"No, honestly. Go on. I'll test you. Um . . . *bite*."

"*Bite*, er, *bit* . . . oh, I don't know. *Bited*?"

"No, *bitten*."

"See what I mean?"

"Try another. *Break.*"

"*Break, broke, – broken*!" recited Tara triumphantly.

"Brilliant! You see? You do know them Some of them anyway. *Bring.*"

"*Bring, bringed* . . . Hey! Watch out!"

The last truck in the convoy had slowed down and got left behind. It suddenly roared up to close the gap, swinging dangerously close to the side of the road.

"It nearly hit us!" said Leila angrily.

Tara didn't answer. She had jumped back right under a branch of richly scented blossom that was dangling over a high garden wall. She was breathing in lovely gusts of perfume. They seemed to go to her head. She reached up, picked a spray of flowers and tucked it into Leila's buttonhole.

"Go on," she said. "Sing a song. You know, like Najleh Fathee in 'Springtime'." She clasped her hands together on her chest and rolled her eyes up to the sky.

Leila giggled.

"Stop it!" she said. "You are awful. Someone might see us!"

The usual crowd of midday shoppers were out and about in the streets of Sulaimaniya. A group of children was gathered round the entrance to the pastry shop, looking longingly at the sticky piles of honey cakes set out on trays in the window.

Three very correct ladies, unrecognizable under

their all-covering black veils, were looking at the contents of the vegetable seller's baskets, pinching the tomatoes to see if they were firm, and discussing the price of potatoes.

On the corner of the street, the tea house was already full of men, talking business over their tiny glasses of hot sweet tea, and shooting backgammon pieces backwards and forwards on the boards.

Outside the mosque, four high school boys stood clustered round a friend, who was excitedly reading to them from a paper he held in his hand.

"Let's go over to old Mr Faris's shop," said Leila. "I should think he'd have something for Hero, and he might have some new film posters in too."

Tara was about to plunge across the street in her usual impetuous way, when the quiet of the town was once again shattered. Two army jeeps, horns blaring, came screeching down the road and squealed to a stop outside the mosque. A dozen soldiers, rifles in hand, leaped out.

Afterwards, Tara could see the whole scene as clearly as if it were a film still unrolling in front of her. The shocked faces of the shopkeepers, peering out from their doors, the children by the window full of sweets, the huddle of veiled women, the men in the tea shop, their glasses in their hands, the turbaned mullah who had appeared in the doorway of the mosque, the four boys in their crisp white shirts, the paper they had been reading fluttering to the ground.

What happened next seemed as unreal as if it really was a film. A short nervous looking officer marched across to the boys. He shouted an order. One of them bent to pick up the paper he'd been reading and gave it to the officer, who held it between his thumb and forefinger as if it might infect him. Then he tore it up, dropped it, and ground it under his foot.

He stepped back, and shouted an order. The soldiers ran forward, two men to each boy, grabbed them by the arms and pressed them against the wall of the mosque. The officer seemed to have lost control of himself. He was almost screaming.

"Enemies of the state! Spies! Shoot them!"

The soldiers looked round at him uneasily. The officer yelled again.

"Are you disobeying orders? Shoot!"

Four of the men knelt in the dust and raised their rifles to their shoulders. The mullah, his green cloak flapping round him, ran out of the mosque gate, waving his arms helplessly.

"No! No!" he shouted. "Stop! They're only boys! Don't shoot!"

The officer fumbled at the leather holster in his belt with shaking fingers. He pulled out his revolver, pointed it at the bewildered mullah, and fired.

At the sound of the shot the whole street seemed to flinch. Tara and Leila clutched each other, hardly able to believe their eyes. The mullah, his cloak billowing out round him, sank

to his knees and toppled forward into the dust, groaning, and clutching his shoulder.

The boys suddenly made a dash to escape. They darted free of the soldiers' grasping hands, and seconds later had disappeared round the corner of the mosque into the next street. But one of them, the boy who had been reading from the paper, wasn't fast enough. A soldier's outstretched foot tripped him up. He fell sprawling in the road. The officer dashed up, and stood over him. Helplessly, the boy looked up, and saw the look in the officer's eyes.

He raised a clenched fist.

"I die for Kurdistan!" he shouted. The sound of a shot ripped deafeningly through the air. The boy jerked convulsively, his arms and legs twitched, and then he lay still.

In the awful silence that followed, a crow left its perch on the minaret and flapped slowly down to settle above the gate of the mosque.

The officer, still brandishing his revolver in the air, turned to face the ring of terrified faces that watched him from every corner of the street.

"Look!" he shouted. "Look at this traitor! I'm warning you, anyone who helps the Kurdish rebels will die like him, only it will be more painful! Look at his blood! Go on! Stare at him! Don't forget, any of you!"

As suddenly as the jeeps had burst into the street they had gone. At once everyone ran forward to the wounded mullah and the dead boy, lying in the dust. Tara shut her eyes. She

didn't need to look. The whole scene was printed on her mind. She didn't need that stupid officer to tell her not to forget it. She never would. She never could. In all her life she'd never seen anything so brave as the way that boy had died.

She found she was trembling. Her knees felt weak. Beside her, Leila was sobbing. Tara suddenly felt terrified. She pulled at Leila's arm.

"We've got to get out of here quickly," she said. "They might come back!"

She found she was too trembly to walk, then the strength seemed to come back into her legs, and holding Leila's arm she started to run. A few minutes later they were back in their own familiar street.

"Why?" panted Leila, tears still streaming down her cheeks. "Why? Why?"

Tara gritted her teeth. Leila might be the kindest person in the world, and brilliant at English, but she wasn't clever at all when it came to the big things, like the way people behaved, and the reasons why they did things.

"You know why," she said. "That boy was a Kurd, like me."

"He must have been in league with the rebels, I suppose," said Leila doubtfully.

"They didn't bother to stop and ask before they shot him, did they?" Tara said furiously. "And anyway, the pesh murgas aren't rebels. They're freedom fighters!"

Leila walked on in silence.

"You don't understand anything, do you?"

Tara said. "The Kurds . . ." she stopped. It was no use. There was no point in discussing it with Leila. She was an Arab, although she had a Kurdish granny. Whether you were Kurdish or Arab hadn't bothered the two of them much until today. Suddenly it seemed the most important thing in the world.

They had reached the big double gates that led into Leila's garden.

"See you tomorrow," Tara mumbled, and ran next door into her own house.

2

Tara's mother, Teriska Khan, was sitting in the kitchen cross-legged on a cushion, coaxing Hero to eat. She looked up in surprise as Tara burst in through the door, threw down her bag, and then dropped down onto the rug beside her, and burst into tears.

"What is it? What's happened? What on earth's the matter?"

Tara shook her head. She couldn't say anything. Hero tore off the table napkin tied round her neck and pushed her bowl away. She wasn't very hungry, and anyway, she didn't want Tara interrupting her lunch. She liked having her mother all to herself.

Tara picked the napkin up and tried to tie it round Hero's neck again.

"No! Ow! You're hurting me!" Hero wriggled out of reach, and looked crossly at her. Then she grabbed the napkin and gave it to her mother. "Daya do it! Daya put it on!"

Teriska Khan settled her back into her place on the cushion, tied the napkin again and popped a piece of banana into her mouth.

"Be quiet, Hero. Eat up your lunch. Come on, Tara. What's happened? Just tell me."

Tara blew her nose.

"Oh, Daya, it was so awful, you wouldn't believe it. Leila and I went to the shops after school . . ."

Once she'd started talking, Tara couldn't stop. The story poured out of her. And when she'd told it once, she found herself beginning all over again. Though she'd stopped crying, she still felt shaky all over. She just wanted to talk, and talk, and talk.

"It was so horrible! You can't imagine! It was so awful, I just felt stunned."

"Yes, you must have done," said Teriska Khan. Tara looked at her in amazement. Her mother looked shocked and horrified, but she didn't seem especially surprised by what had happened. She was shaking her head and making sympathetic noises, but all the time she was chopping bits of banana up for Hero. It was as if Tara was telling her a story she'd heard before.

Tara started to feel irritated.

"You don't understand, Daya," she said. "It might have been Ashti! They were his age or even younger! Only sixteen, some of them, I'm sure." At the thought of her brother, she suddenly sat bolt upright.

"Where *is* Ashti, anyway?" she said. "Shouldn't he be at home by now?"

Teriska Khan started clearing away Hero's lunch dishes.

"He went into Baghdad this morning with your father. They'll be home late tonight. Ashti doesn't need to go into school every day, now that he's finished his exams."

She looked at Tara thoughtfully.

"I'm sorry you saw that today," she said. "We've tried to keep you out of it all. We wanted you to have as happy a childhood as possible before . . ."

"Childhood!" interrupted Tara indignantly. "Daya, I'm nearly thirteen!"

"I know you are, darling, and I suppose we've protected you for too long."

"Protected me from what?"

Teriska Khan stood up, and began to clear away Hero's dishes.

"From what's going on," she said. "From what's happening to us Kurds."

"What do you mean?"

"We've tried to keep you out of all the politics. The arrests and executions. The pesh murgas fighting the government. It's been much worse since the war with Iran started. The secret police are everywhere. They're scared of Kurds, even of boys like the ones you saw today. They hate us because they're scared."

"Hate us? You mean the Arabs hate us? Leila's an Arab. She doesn't . . ."

"Of course she doesn't, darling. I said the government hate us, not ordinary Arab people. There are millions of Arabs in this country who've got no more reason to love this

government than the Kurds have. Some have even less in fact."

Tara didn't usually find her homework especially difficult. She and Leila often worked together. Leila helped her with Arabic and English, while Tara tried (mostly unsuccessfully) to help Leila understand maths. Tara was good at maths. She liked to worry away at a problem until the solution untied itself like a knot coming undone.

Tonight it was different. Leila didn't come, and Tara was glad. She had too much on her mind. She felt scared. The war had been going on for years but it hadn't touched her somehow. She'd heard explosions in the night sometimes, and shots, and Kurdish girls at school had talked in whispers about relatives who'd disappeared, or news they'd heard about the fighting in the mountains, but she'd never really got involved. She'd known all sorts of things were going on. You couldn't live in Iraq and not know. But she'd shut her mind to it all. She hadn't wanted to think about it. It would be different now though. Seeing that boy die had made all the difference. She couldn't shut her mind to things any more.

She sat in front of the TV in the big comfortable family sitting room, fiddling with the gold stud in her right ear like she often did when she was worried. Her parents should have told her more. They shouldn't have treated her like a little kid. She was a Kurd too. She had a right to know what was going on. Anyway, she liked

thinking about serious things, about people being brave and noble and heroic. At least, she liked them in stories.

Suddenly she saw the boy's head lying on the pavement, with the bullet hole in it. She shuddered. Perhaps heroism wasn't all that great in real life. It was too quick and brutal and casual.

The programme was finished. Tara hadn't taken in a word. The news came on. She tried to concentrate. She hadn't bothered to follow it very closely up till now. There was a clip of the President at a military parade, and a lot of loud music. It was funny, she'd never noticed it before, but every news programme showed the Iraqi army winning, and hundreds of Iranians being killed or taken prisoner. But if the Iraqis were always winning why hadn't the war ended years ago?

She got up and switched the TV off. The house was unusually quiet tonight. When Ashti was at home he made enough noise for ten, even if none of his friends was visiting. And her father usually had several callers in the evening, who could be heard arguing and discussing in the formal sitting room near the front door that was reserved for Kak Soran's guests.

The air-conditioning hadn't been switched on yet. In a few weeks' time, when the blistering summer heat arrived, its continuous low hum would blank out any sound from the dark garden and city streets outside. But tonight Tara was vaguely aware of the noises of the cool spring

evening. There was a distant rumble of cars and lorries from the main streets of the town. A loud, crackling radio was blaring out music from some open window not far away.

What was that?

Tara's head jerked up. It sounded like shots. She'd often heard shooting after dark before, but Daya had always said it was just trigger happy soldiers taking pot shots at stray cats. And there wasn't only shooting either. Every dog in Sulaimaniya seemed to be barking. And the greyhound next door, that always scared her stiff when she went past the gates, was the loudest of all. She turned off the light, went over to the window and peeped out through the heavy black-out curtains.

The moon had come up. It made the garden look all silvery and unreal. The big hound next door sounded absolutely frantic now. It was jumping up against the dividing wall, rattling its chain and barking its head off.

Surely something else was out there? Tara peered forward, trying to see into the deep shadows by the wall. She was sure something had moved under the shade of the old almond tree. Yes! There it was again!

Tara gasped and opened the curtain wider. There *was* someone there. He was bent double now, running from the almond tree to the big clump of bougainvillia beside the kitchen door. A strange man! In their own garden! It could be a thief, or even a murderer! And her father and

Ashti were away in Baghdad. She and Daya and Hero were all alone.

"Daya!" shouted Tara, running out of the room. "Daya! Come here! There's a thief in the garden!"

Teriska Khan came racing out of her bedroom.

"Are you sure? Quick! Bolt the back door!"

They were too late. They burst into the kitchen to find that the man was in the house already.

He was tall, lean and deeply sunburnt. He wore the baggy trousers, tight jacket and sash of a mountain Kurd. A turban was tied round his head and the fringe dangled over one eye. His left arm was roughly bandaged with a bloodstained rag, and the long loose sleeve was torn right up to his shoulder. He carried a deadly looking rifle in his right hand, and he was just putting it down on the table when Tara and Teriska Khan dashed into the room.

When he saw them, the mouth under his drooping black moustache split open into a friendly smile, and he suddenly looked younger.

"Hello, Teriska," he said. "And who's this? Surely it can't be Tara? If it is, she's grown a lot since I last saw her."

Teriska Khan ran forward.

"Rostam!" she said. "They've hit you! Oh, my God, however did you get here? Tara, go to the medicine cupboard in my bedroom, and get some lint and a bandage. Your uncle's wounded."