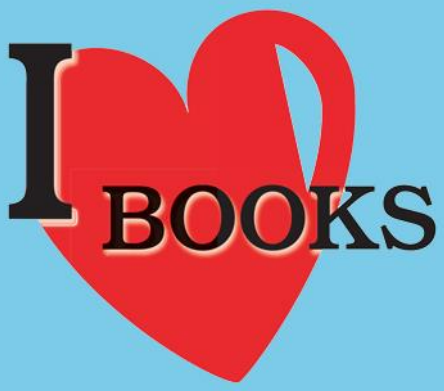

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Opening extract from

Welcome to Nowhere

Written by

Elizabeth Laird

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WELCOME TO NOWHERE

ELIZABETH LAIRD

ILLUSTRATED BY LUCY ELDRIDGE

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For my grandsons: Fergus,
Ilias, George and Iskander

Georgia
Armenia
Turkey
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FOREWORD

The civil war in Syria, which has brought destruction to all parts of that ancient and beautiful country, began in March 2011, when a few schoolboys in the southern city of Daraa wrote a slogan on the wall of their school. It read: *The people want the regime to change.*

The authorities were nervous because of the revolutions which had taken place in other parts of the Middle East, and they reacted with extreme severity. The boys were arrested and tortured in prison. This harsh response enraged many people, who were already angry with their brutal government. They went on marches and demonstrations. The government responded with bullets and arrests. People began to die. Trouble spread to other cities and soon the whole country was engulfed in a civil war.

One of the results of the unrest was the rise of a new movement inspired by an extreme and fanatical version of Islam. Known as ISIS in the West, and Daesh in the Middle East, the fighters of ISIS conquered parts of northern Syria and Iraq and have encouraged and inspired acts of terrorism all over the world.

ISIS did not appear on the scene in Syria until after the events described in *Welcome to Nowhere*, and their cruel

ideology would have appalled Musa, Omar and their friends in this book.

Another result of the turmoil in Syria has been that millions of people have been forced to leave their homes. Half the entire population of Syria has had to find shelter in other parts of their homeland, or outside Syria in neighbouring countries. In Jordan, for example, one in six of its population is now a refugee from Syria.

Some people have undertaken the long and dangerous journey to find peace and safety in Europe. Some have been successful and are now trying to make better lives for their families and children. Others have sadly died on the way, or have been turned back by increasingly anxious European countries.

Two generations ago, by the end of the Second World War, countless millions of Europeans had been forced to flee from their homes. We honour the memory of those who helped them to escape from the misery of war and settle in new places. How will history view us, and our treatment of today's refugees?

Elizabeth Laird

PART ONE

SOUVENIR

CHAPTER ONE

My hometown is a brilliant place. *Was* a brilliant place, I suppose I ought to say. It's called Bosra and it's in Syria. It's not too big, so you can't get lost, and in the middle of the town there's a huge tumbledown city of Roman ruins – whole streets, temples, a theatre, you name it. Tourists used to come from all over the world to see Bosra. Personally, if I'd had all their money, I'd have gone somewhere cool, like Dubai, or New York, or London, but then I'm not that crazy about history.

Looking back now, those days in Bosra seem like a sort of dream. Everything was ordinary and peaceful. My father worked in the tourism office (a sort of government job) and Ma did everything at home. What with school and my two jobs, I was busy all day long, running to keep up.

My early job (five to seven in the morning) was in Uncle Ali's hardware store. Baba, my father made me do that one. Then there was school till 1 p.m., home to

gobble down my lunch, and I was off to work at the ruins with my cousin Rasoul.

Being with Rasoul was the best part of the day. He had a shop selling souvenirs right beside the old Roman theatre. Rasoul was the most amazing person in the world to me. He was twenty years old, funny, handsome, knew everything about sport, had the latest stuff – he was the person I wanted to be when I grew up.

My job was to try to get the tourists to choose our shop instead of one of the others that lined the route to the ruins. Tourists notice kids more than grown-ups, so it made good sense. And I was brilliant at selling. I'd got this excellent technique.

'Antiques, nice and cheap! Lovely rugs, in a heap!' I'd chant in English, doing a sort of hopping dance. 'Camel bells, No bad smells! Come and see! Buy from me!'

That was just about all I could say in English, except for 'Hello, what is your name?' and 'My name is Omar', which we'd learned in school. A young man with long blond hair had made up my rhyme for me. I think he was American. He'd spent a whole afternoon sitting in front of Rasoul's shop, watching me trying to get the tourists to come in, and then he'd scribbled down the rhyme and taught me to say it. The tourists always looked round and smiled at me when they heard it, and some of them did actually come and buy things.

Rasoul was proud of me for being such a good salesman and he got me on to selling postcards. He gave them to

me for 20 cents a strip. Each strip had ten cards that you could drop open dramatically in front of the tourists' eyes. He let me keep nearly all the profits too, and I was building up a secret hoard in a plastic bag stuffed under my mattress.

When there were no tourists around, and Rasoul was busy chatting to the other souvenir sellers, I used to lose myself in my favourite daydream. One day, when the stash of postcard money under my mattress was big enough, I'd buy a donkey and rent it out to the guys who gave rides to the tourists. With the money I'd get another, and then another, till I had a whole string of hee-hawing trotters. With all the money I'd make, I'd get my own shop. It would be even better than Rasoul's. I'd arrange everything in a really interesting way and put up notices in English. My sister Eman would tell me what to write. She loved school, and was brilliant at English. Soon I'd be so rich I'd buy a car, a big white one with darkened windows, and I'd get a gold necklace for Ma, who'd start loving me more than my annoying brother Musa. Then . . .

But what's the point of going on about those old dreams? How could I know what was going to happen? Nobody saw the disaster coming, especially not me. I wasn't quite thirteen, after all.

I can remember the day when I realized that everything was going to change. My dad shook me awake as usual

just after half past four in the morning.

'Going to lie there all day, are you? Come on, Omar. Get up.'

It was dark, of course, but a shaft of light shone out from the kitchen across the corridor and I could see Ma standing by the stove, heating water for tea, with steam coiling round her head.

'You push him too hard,' she called out to my father. 'Let him get his rest. He ought to be fresh and ready for school, not going out to work at this time of day.'

'School!' scoffed Baba. 'Have you seen his latest marks? He's lazy. He should learn to work, pay his own way, like I did at his age.' Then he went into the kitchen for his tea.

A cough came from the bed opposite mine. My older brother Musa was awake. I could see his open eyes glittering in the dim light.

'It's all very well for you,' I said nastily, making a face at him. 'Lazybones. You haven't got to do slave labour in what is practically the middle of the night. Stay there all day. Go on. Enjoy yourself.'

And then I felt bad because Musa would have had to come with me if he'd been able to. He's got cerebral palsy and he can only walk slowly. His hands jerk about too. To show that I was a bit sorry I shot a sort of play-kick at him. He aimed a feeble punch at me but missed, as I knew he would. He can't control his muscles at all first thing in the morning.

'Nearly had me there,' I said.

He grunted as if I'd annoyed him.

What's the matter with you? I thought. *I was only trying to be kind.*

I'd got one arm in the sleeve of my school shirt and was struggling to pull it down over my head (I'd grown out of it really and the sleeves were too tight) when I thought I heard Ma say, 'When are you going to tell the children?'

And Baba answered, 'In my own good time. No need to rush things.'

I yanked hard, got my head through, and looked at Musa. He was struggling to sit up.

'Did you hear that?' I whispered. 'Tell the children what?'

'I don't know,' he croaked. 'You'd better go. I'll get it out of Ma. Tell you later.'

At least, I think that's what he said. Musa doesn't speak clearly. He sounds as if his tongue is too big or something. I'm used to it but even I don't always understand him first time. I hesitated but I knew Musa was right. He can get Ma to tell him anything. He's her favourite out of all of us. I really mind about that sometimes, especially when he's in one of his mean moods.

Anyway, I put it out of my mind, ran into the kitchen, grabbed the flap of bread and lump of cheese that my sister Eman was holding out to me (she's three years older than me, and one and a half years older than Musa) and was

halfway out of the door when she screeched, 'Come back here and comb your hair! Do you want everyone to think you're a homeless tramp?'

I made a face at her, muttered something rude about bossy sisters, ran my hand over my hair to smooth it down, and was out of the flat at last. It was already after five and I'd have to run all the way to Uncle Ali's hardware shop. It was February and freezing cold, with ice frosting up the car windscreens, but at least the run would warm me up.

Uncle Ali was old and grouchy but I liked him, even though I hated getting up so early to work in his shop. He always had a glass of hot tea ready for me when I arrived. We didn't say much to each other first thing, because I knew what to do anyway. The stands had to be wheeled out on to the pavement, then the shop had to be swept out, and all the pots and pans and plastic bowls arranged outside. He paid my wages directly to Baba, but he sometimes gave me extra tips. He didn't tell Baba about those, and neither did I.

That day Uncle Ali was grumpier than usual. He was always crusty on top, but I knew he had a soft heart, and that he actually liked me a lot, so I didn't mind his sharpness. That morning, though, I couldn't do anything right.

'Mind what you're doing!' he snapped, as I accidentally bashed the side of the stand against the door frame. 'Do you want to ruin me? Is that it?'

Then, when I started sweeping out the shop, he barked,

'Careful! You're raising the dust! You'll get everything filthy!' And he grabbed the broom from my hands and began to swish it about so violently that he raised billows of dust himself.

I didn't know what to do next, so I went outside to brush down the stands, and nearly bumped into the nosy man who owned the electrical goods shop further along the street. He started when he saw me, then he pushed me out of the way, went to the door of our shop and called out, 'Are you there, Uncle?' (Everyone calls Uncle Ali 'Uncle' for some reason.) 'How's your family? Is everyone well?'

Uncle Ali took his time answering.

'Yes, thank God,' he said at last, then slowly came out of the shop.

'You can't take anything for granted.' Mr Nosy's sharp eyes were darting round the shop, as if he was looking for someone. 'There's trouble everywhere. Tunisia, Egypt – terrorists trying to stir things up. At least we have a strong government in Syria. Law and order's what we need. Round up the troublemakers and shoot them, that's what I say.'

'If you say so,' said Uncle Ali distantly.

Mr Nosy took a step towards him.

'Your son's at university, isn't he?' His eyes had settled on the door at the back of the shop, as if he suspected that Uncle Ali's son might be hiding behind it.

He waited, but Uncle Ali only nodded.