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A HOUSE WITHOUT WALLS

ELIZABETH LAIRD

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For Leen and Zain


Georgia
Armenia
Turkey
Iran
Cyprus
Syria
Lebanon
Daraa
Iraq
Israel and Palestine
Jordan
Saudi Arabia
Kuwait

CHAPTER ONE

Here are some basic facts about me:

My name is Safiya and I'm twelve years old.

I'm a Syrian from Damascus.

I'm a refugee, but I *hate* that word!

I'm a girl.

Perhaps I should also mention that my teeth stick out a bit.

So far, that's nothing special. I mean, there are loads of other people like me (maybe with nicer teeth).

So here are some slightly more interesting things you might like to know:

We had to escape in a hurry from Syria (more about that later) and came to Jordan, the country next door. That's where we live now. At least they speak Arabic in Jordan, so I didn't have to learn a new language.

I've got a twin called Saba, but I've never even met her! Well, we must have met inside our mother but we were separated when we were a few weeks old.

My mother died when we were still tiny and no one ever talked about her. She was from Jordan, actually, so it's not surprising that we ended up here. To be honest,

I never used to think much about her. How can you miss someone you never knew? Once or twice I tried to ask my Baba about her, but he always got upset, so I changed the subject. It's weird, though, because now that my life has been turned upside down I think about her all the time.

Auntie Shirin, Baba's strict older sister, came to live with us after our mother died. She was a very fussy housekeeper and scolded me all the time. 'Why don't you ever put your clothes away, Safiya?' she'd say. 'Don't you know what cupboards are for?'

I've got an older brother called Tariq who's fifteen and is very annoying. He thinks he's right about *everything*!

So here's the thing about being a Syrian girl. Boys can go where they like and do what they like, talk to anyone, walk to school on their own, meet up with friends in town. But girls have to stay at home. If I went even a little way from home on my own, my whole family would be shamed. It's just the way it is, but it doesn't mean that I like it, especially when Tariq or Auntie Shirin tell me off for silly things like not tying my hijab tightly enough, or laughing too loudly in front of other people.

And here's another thing about being a Syrian girl. You mustn't dream of ever disobeying your father. I mean *ever*. And that includes talking back to him. But no one can stop you saying things in your head! That's why I talk to myself all the time.

Saba, my twin, was taken away after we were born

because she had something blocked inside her and she needed to be rushed off to America for treatment. My uncle Hassan was going there for work, anyway, and he and his wife didn't have any children, so they offered to take Saba with them. It was their dream come true! Even when Saba was totally cured they didn't bring her back. In the end, they adopted her.

You might think it's a bit strange that Baba let his daughter go, and allowed us twins to be split up, but I think he was lost and panic-stricken after our mother died. Anyway, in Syrian families, everyone's really involved with everyone else's children, and uncles and aunties often adopt nephews and nieces.

But I don't think it was fair that no one bothered about how Saba and I would feel.

When I was very young, I never thought much about Saba. We lived in a beautiful ground-floor flat in Damascus, with a tamarind tree in the shady courtyard, marble floors and huge plummy sofas piled with cushions. There was a photo of the three of us, Tariq, Saba and me, on the china cabinet behind the dining table. Tariq was a cute three-year-old and Saba and I were tiny babies. I had my eyes open in the picture. Hers were shut and her head flopped to one side. Otherwise, we looked exactly the same. I was so used to it being there I never looked at it.

Then, when I was about seven, I started talking a lot about my twin.

'Saba's allowed to have ice cream every day,' I'd announce.

'I'm quite sure she isn't,' Auntie Shirin would reply.

'Well, anyway, she can wear her pink party dress whenever she likes,' I'd say mutinously.

Auntie Shirin wouldn't bother to answer.

An inspiration struck me one day. I'd just learned to write, and was proud of being so clever.

'I'm going to write a letter to Saba,' I told Baba as we sat eating breakfast one Saturday morning.

'That's silly,' said Tariq. 'She's American. She speaks English. You can only write in Arabic.'

'Oh.' I thought about this for a moment, then said, 'That doesn't matter. Baba can translate it into English for me.'

Baba patted my hand

'That's a lovely idea, *habibti*. I really wish you could, but your uncle seems to have changed his email address and I haven't been in touch with him for a while.'

Did he sound sad? I was too young to notice, but looking back I think he did.

I stopped talking about Saba when Farah and her family moved into the flat upstairs. Farah was in the same class as me at school, and almost at once she was the only person I wanted to be with. Saba faded out of my mind, as if she'd been an imaginary friend.

CHAPTER TWO

My father is a lawyer. In my opinion he was the best lawyer in Damascus, maybe even the whole of Syria! Being a lawyer seemed like a boring job to me when I was little – I'd wanted to be a film star, an astronaut and run an ice-cream shop all at the same time. Baba was out all day and usually came home late. Even on Fridays and Saturdays (the weekend in Syria) he'd do nothing but talk to clients on his phone, or read through piles of papers with his glasses on the end of his nose.

It slowly dawned on me that being a lawyer in Syria wasn't boring at all. In fact, it could be horribly dangerous.

Syria's my country and I'll love it forever, even if it doesn't love me, but I always knew that bad things were going on. Everyone got along fine as long as they minded their own business and never, ever, said anything bad about the government. There are secret police called the *mukhabarat*, who have eyes and ears everywhere. Sometimes it seemed as if you only had to think a rebellious thought and they'd come knocking on your door and drag you off to prison.

I think it was all that suspicion and repression that made things go so wrong. I mean, you can't keep the lid on a boiling pot forever. In the end, the steam's got to escape. And, when people did start shouting about change, the government wouldn't listen. They just tried to ram the lid down even harder on the pot. No wonder it blew off, and a full-scale civil war began.

The weird thing was that our lives went on in nearly the same old way in Damascus while the war raged elsewhere. Other places in Syria, and even the suburbs of Damascus, were being bombed to bits, but our part of town stayed more or less safe. I got used to passing burnt-out cars on my way to school, and stopped noticing the ragged holes in the front walls of some of the buildings where shells had blasted through the concrete.

I felt jumpy, though, all the time. I kept worrying that the fighting would come near us. At night I could sometimes hear explosions in the distance and I had to put my head under the blankets.

Once the war started, the *mukhabarat* were busier than ever, spying on anyone they didn't like the look of.

'You've got to be really careful, all the time,' Baba warned Tariq and me, one arm round each of our shoulders and his face unusually serious. 'Never, ever talk about politics. There are spies everywhere. Some of your teachers will be informers. Even some of your school friends.'

'I don't even know what politics is, Baba,' I protested.

He turned me to face him and took my hands in both his own.

'All right. Just remember this. Everything in Syria is perfect. We have the best government and the fairest legal system in the world.'

'But it's not true!' I objected. 'You're always saying—'

'Safiya!' Auntie Shirin said, shocked. 'Don't speak to your father like that!'

Baba let go of my hands and ran his fingers through his thick black hair. He looked desperately worried.

'You don't have to warn me, Baba,' Tariq said, trying to sound important as usual. 'If I hear people saying anything dodgy, I just walk away. We all know which teachers are the informers in my school, anyway.'

'That's just it – you don't!' said Baba earnestly. 'You really can't trust anyone, ever, outside our own immediate family. You must understand, both of you.'

'I can trust Farah,' I said.

'Not even Farah,' said Baba.

'That's—' I began indignantly.

He caught hold of my hands again.

'Listen, *habibti*, I'm a lawyer.'

'I know *that*!'

He went on as if I hadn't interrupted.

'And sometimes I have to speak up for people the government doesn't like.'

'That's good, isn't it? To make sure they're treated fairly?'

Tariq snorted.

'Fairly? In Syria?'

I ignored him.

'What it means,' Baba said carefully, 'is that the government doesn't like me much either. If the *mukhabarat* think that I sympathize with anyone – or any idea – that's critical of the government, I'll be arrested. And you know what that means.'

'Torture,' said Tariq, looking worried. 'Years in prison. No trial. Maybe even . . .'

I shivered.

Baba silenced Tariq with a look.

'There's no need to scare your sister. Nothing will happen to me if we're careful. Don't talk – ever – about anything you might see or hear at home.'

After that, it became a sort of instinct to be suspicious of everyone. The other girls at school were the same. We couldn't even say that we liked one teacher more than another in case the person we didn't like was one of *them*. No one used social media after the war really got going. It was too risky to share anything about yourself.

Sometimes a girl would come to school with red, puffy eyes and her friends would whisper, '*Her brother disappeared at a checkpoint. Her father's in prison. Her uncle's been tortured.*' After that, we'd all stay away from her, as if she had the plague. No one wanted to catch it.

CHAPTER THREE

In spite of all the worry, Farah and I still had fun together. I went up to her flat most days after school and never wanted to go home.

Farah had a sweet little baby sister, and her mother was totally different from Auntie Shirin. She was kind and untidy, and there were deep smile creases in the corners of her eyes. She was always cooking something delicious in the big warm kitchen, pushing her messy hair back from her face with the back of her floury hand.

'You're a beautiful girl, Safiya,' she said one day. 'I hope you know that.'

'I'm not,' I mumbled. 'My teeth stick out and my spots . . .'

'Oh, those things can be fixed. The main thing is that you've got a wonderful personality. You're so strong and fearless. I'm glad you're Farah's friend. You're good for her.'

And then she crushed me in a hug. I wasn't used to being hugged, and I wasn't sure if I should put my arms round her or not.

Sometimes I was so envious of Farah that I wanted to

cry. Her family made me see how much I'd missed not having a mama of my own.

Although the fighting was bad in other parts of Syria, you could still get most things in Damascus – they were just more expensive. I went with Farah and her mother one day to buy shoes. Farah wanted a pair of blue sparkly slippers. She got them, of course. Her mother could never say no. But I had Auntie Shirin's voice ringing in my ears.

'Nothing silly,' she'd said as she'd put the money into my hand. 'You need sensible black lace-ups for school that will last. I won't have you being spoiled like that Farah you're so fond of.'

I hated it when she was mean about Farah.

The next day during break I was sharing Farah's chocolate bar (she always gave me half) when a girl called Bushra saw us and came over. I groaned. Bushra was big and loud and bossy. No one liked her. For some reason, she was always getting at Farah and me. Perhaps she was jealous because we were friends.

She poked her face into mine and said, 'I saw you yesterday in the shoe shop. You and her bought the same ones, I bet. Think you're something special, don't you?'

I felt the blood rush to my head.

'We are! We're best friends!' I burst out. 'I bet you wish you had a friend, but who'd want to be friends with a bully like you?'

Then Farah started frantically pulling at my arm. She dragged me away, round the corner of the corridor.

'Are you crazy?' she hissed. 'Bushra's an informer! Her father's one of *them*!'

'You mean he's in the – in the . . . ?' I couldn't bring myself to say the dreaded word.

'Yes! Didn't you know?'

Goose bumps were running down my arms.

'Explains a lot,' I said, trying to sound brave. 'No wonder everyone's nice to her, even though she's so mean.'

I'd spoken too loudly.

'Shh!' Farah looked over her shoulder. 'Safiya, *menshan Allah*! For God's sake! Be careful!'

As we went back to our classroom, I looked up at the portrait of our president, Bashar al-Assad. That morning, like every other morning, we'd had to stand together and shout, 'We pledge our souls and our blood to save you, Bashar al-Assad!' Now his eyes seemed to follow me as I turned the corner of the corridor and bolted up the stairs. The sight of him made me shiver.