

THROUGH MY EYES
series editor Lyn White

Naveed

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To my three girls



*By the time I become a big man I think Afghanistan
will be peaceful and rebuilt. And it will not be
destroyed again. The children will not allow it.*

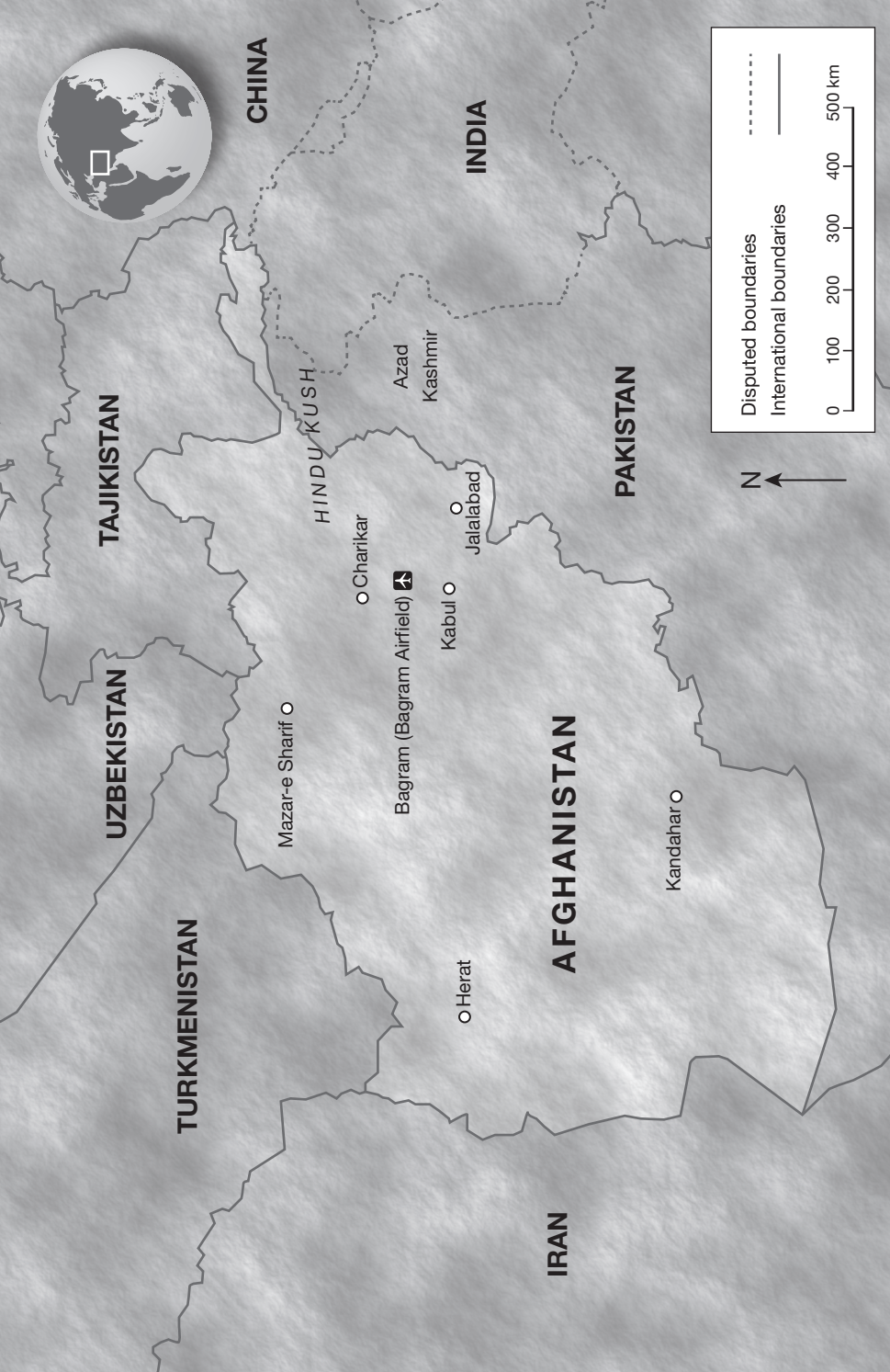
BULTAN, AGE 9

*One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can
change the world.*

MALALA YOUSAFZAI

If it's the truth you want, ask a child.

AFGHAN SAYING





Chapter 1



The explosion jolts him awake. He sits up, gasping for air, heart thumping.

Was the blast real? Perhaps it had only happened in his head, a bad dream. He'd had plenty of those, nightmares real as real. *Demons of the dark*, his father called them.

Push them away. They'll only poison your thoughts. Seek the light and they can't hurt you.

The boy peers hard into the tiny room where he lives with his mother and sister. He listens intently. But the room gives nothing back. Its mud walls hunch over him. The two windows, holes patched with plastic bags, look down like a dead man's eyes. The blanket covering the low doorway to the outside shifts in the morning breeze: a mouth that might speak but only sighs. He catches a whiff of its stale breath, a mix of smells he knows well – garbage, diesel, sewage, dust. He grimaces. But almost immediately his father's words are there again.

In every darkness there is light, Naveed. Never forget that. Always look for the light.

‘Yes, Padar,’ he whispers into the pre-dawn greyness that fills the room. ‘I will.’

He means it. He will never forget anything his father said. Never. And he does always seek the light, or at least tries his hardest to do so.

‘It’s just not that easy, Padar. Without you here the darkness seems so great.’

The darker it gets, the harder you must seek. Padar always had an answer, always a reason to see good, even when it seemed to be nowhere in sight. *The world lives on hope.*

‘You are right, Padar.’

Of course, there is much to thank Allah for, Naveed has to admit as he looks around the room they moved into barely a fortnight ago. It might be tiny and cramped, with a wide crack down one wall and a ceiling in need of repair, but it is a thousand times better than the tent they lived in for almost two years after Padar died. Perishingly cold in winter, unbearably hot and filled with dust in summer, its threadbare canvas was often torn or flattened by the strong winds that blew across the plains from the Hindu Kush.

The room is heaven by comparison – a solid roof over their heads, a place to call home. Mr Kalin charges far too much rent, but that only makes Naveed more determined to work harder and longer. After all, he is the man of the house now, the head of the family. It is all up to him.

He grits his teeth. Improvements, that's what they need. He'll make improvements to the room as soon as possible. A proper door to keep out the icy winds when they return next year. A thick mat for the earthen floor. A good charcoal burner for cooking and heating. The kerosene cooker they have now is old and dangerous.

Yes, that's it, improvements. Little by little he will turn this room into a real home. *Qatra qatra darya mesha*, as Padar would say. *Drop by drop a river is made*.

Naveed stretches, lifting his backside off the hard floor. That's another thing he'll get when they can afford it – a toshak, a proper sleeping mat. All he has now is a piece of cardboard. He dreams of owning a really soft toshak like his little sister's. Her sleeping mat comes from his grandmother and has extra padding. But then Anoosheh needs that; it helps her sleep when the pain becomes too great.

He glances across at his sister. She is sound asleep, curled up like a little ball. She cried out in the night, but then she usually does. His mother is asleep too. They look so peaceful it sends a rush of warmth through him, making him smile. They are the biggest reason he has to be thankful. They are his reason for living.

A second explosion startles Naveed, quickly followed by a third. Both blasts make the ground tremble, though they still don't wake his mother and sister. At least he now knows that the first explosion was real, and where it had come from.

Definitely not Taliban; too big for them. The blasts were from Bagram Airfield, the huge American base

about five kilometres away. The Americans liked blowing up things. They did it all the time.

He waits for more explosions. But they don't come. The aeroplanes continue, though; they will go on for a long time now. Bagram Airfield has been rumbling and grumbling every day of late, and well into the night. The Americans are leaving, flying out machinery, weapons and equipment every chance they get. It is said that by the end of the year the main forces will be gone, and Afghans will be in charge of their own future. Naveed can't imagine what that will be like; the Americans have been part of his life for as long as he can remember.

They came when he was only a year and a half old, after decades of struggle and strife – war with the Russians, civil war with the Mujaheddin, the cruel rule of the Taliban. Naveed's father had been thrilled at the time.

I knew there was a reason we called you Naveed, he used to say. The name meant 'good news, happy tidings'. It was Allah's way of telling us not to give up hope.

And at first the Americans were like a fresh breeze. They promised peace and stability. They promised to rebuild the country, a brand new Afghanistan where people could do and think and say whatever they wanted. Afghans began to hope once more.

That was thirteen years ago. How sour things had turned. The peace didn't last long, the stability crumbled to desert dust. The great wealth that poured into the

country was swallowed by foreign companies and local warlords; ordinary Afghans saw none of it.

And now, after all those years and all that promise, the Americans are leaving.

Good news? Happy tidings? Sometimes Naveed feels his name is like a bad joke.

He stands, waiting for another sound, one that always comes at this time in the morning, as sure as the sun rises. He walks across the room to the doorway, lifts the blanket and steps through into a small outside alcove that separates the room from the passing alley.

On a rickety table is a basin, beside it a jug of water. He pours a little of the chill liquid into the basin and begins making wud'u, cleansing himself for prayer, for the sake of Allah.

When finished washing, he stands up straight and takes a deep breath, waiting, anticipating.

A moment later, there it is.

‘Allahu Akbar.’

The voice of the muezzin wafts from the mosque on the other side of town, calling everyone to the first prayers of the day, the Namaaz e Sohb.

‘Allahu Akbar.’

The azan, the call to prayer, rings out again, and twice more, followed by further declarations from the muezzin in a long melodic song drifting through the air, beckoning to all.

Naveed listens, entranced by the beauty of the muezzin's voice. When the azan is finished, he raises

his hands in the air and, facing Mecca, whispers the words himself.

‘Allahu Akbar.’

Then, his hands folded across his chest, he begins to pray. He has much to thank Allah for.

And maybe a few favours to ask.