

THROUGH MY EYES
series editor Lyn White

Zafir

PRUE MASON



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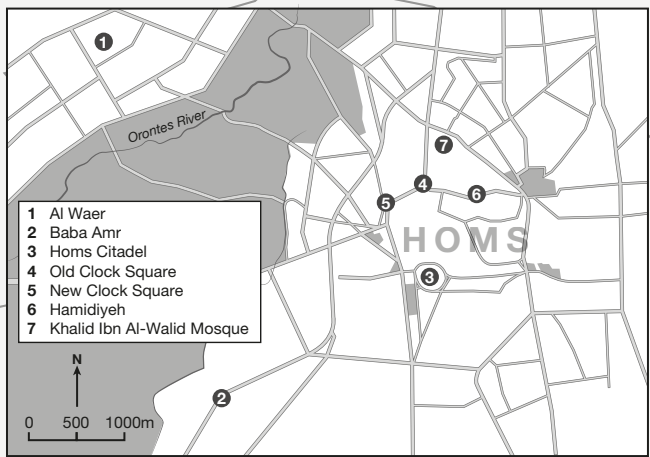
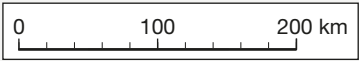
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For Bassel and Lina







Chapter 1



Zafir shivered. It was an icy morning in the city of Homs and the wind felt sharp enough to strip the skin from his body. Tetah, his grandmother, had said it might even snow. Zafir hoped it would, but he wished winter didn't have to be this cold. Although he was wearing a scarf, long trousers and a sweater under his school blazer, he still had to sit on his hands to keep them from turning into icicles as he hunched on the front seat of the old yellow taxi.

'Is it going to snow?' Zafir asked Abu Moussa, the taxi driver who took him to school every day. There was no bus from Al Waer and after what had happened in Dubai, Mum didn't want to own a car.

'It isn't cold enough yet,' replied Abu Moussa. He spat out the window. It was always down just for that purpose. A freezing draught blasted through the car. The cold air swirled around Zafir and made the gold-framed verse from the Qu'ran that hung from the rear-view mirror twirl like a mini merry-go-round.

They were travelling on the ring-road that circled the city. Although they had to travel further, it was a double-laned motorway and there wasn't as much traffic so it didn't take as long as driving directly through the city.

Abu Moussa was wearing his brown winter thobe, long gown, with a red-and-white checked cotton shemagh draped around his head and sandals without socks. Zafir wondered if Abu Moussa didn't think it was cold because of the huge grey moustache that covered half his face.

'Does the wind here ever stop?' Zafir asked.

'The bird flies higher into the wind,' replied the taxi driver as if that answered the question. 'Alhamdulillah, praise God! But if this saying is true then aeroplanes must watch out when flying over Homs.' He laughed as if what he'd said was really funny. Zafir started to laugh as well. He couldn't help it. Abu Moussa's cheerfulness spread and warmed him.

Finally the taxi driver wiped his eyes with the end of his shemagh and pointed to a line of trees growing on the side of the motorway. None were completely upright: the trunks and branches leaned towards the east, clearly showing the direction of the prevailing wind that funnelled into the gap between the coastal mountains to the west and the north of Homs. 'Such is the strength of the Homs winds,' he said, 'that all visitors remark on the bent trees.'

Zafir shrugged. He was a visitor once. He'd never noticed the bent trees but he'd liked Homs then. It used

to be brilliant coming to stay with Tetah because as the only grandchild he got spoilt. She lived in the old area of the city that had winding, narrow streets built for donkeys, not cars. It was like going back in time. Pops was always happy coming back to his hometown and he took them to all the tourist places like Crac des Chevaliers, the famous crusader castle up in the hills. They always came in summer. The scent from the white jasmine that grew on every corner and along the streets was so strong that Zafir had never noticed all the bad smells from the oil refinery and the fertiliser plant or how much rubbish there was in the River Orontes.

Now, six months after the excitement of moving to Homs from Dubai last July, Zafir wasn't so pleased about living here. Even Mum didn't like it now and it had been her idea to move in the first place. Pops had found a job as the head doctor at the new training hospital in Homs, and it had seemed like a good idea to get away from Dubai after ...

Zafir felt the pain again. But it had started to hurt less when he thought about the car accident. About how when the police came to tell them that Giddo and Siti, Mum's parents, had been killed, Mum had not believed it until Pops came home from the hospital and said it was true. The worst thing was that Giddo had been about to retire from his job as director of the Dubai Hospital where he'd worked for over thirty years. He and Siti were always talking about returning to live in Damascus, especially since Mum's only brother, Uncle Ghazi, had left Dubai to go to university there three years ago. Mum

always said that her parents never would leave Dubai. She was right.

In the end, it was Mum, Pops and Zafir who had moved to Syria because Mum found it too hard to live in Dubai without Giddo and Siti. She'd said that in this new year, 2011, everything was going to get better. Zafir hoped she was right, but he still missed Dubai and his friends.

The burbling roar of a car engine behind them cut into Zafir's thoughts. He couldn't see the car because in the lane directly behind them was a silver-bellied petrol tanker, probably on its way from the refinery to Damascus, and alongside them, blocking anyone from passing, was an old farm truck full of potatoes with a cage of chickens perched on top. Zafir knew the chickens would be off to be sold at Maskuf market in the Old City, which was close to Hamidiyeh, the Christian quarter, where Tetah lived. A long, loud blare behind them all made the farm truck accelerate. It cut in front of them, making Abu Moussa mutter under his breath. A red car, a Russian-made Lada 112 with dark windows and fat gold-rimmed tyres, raced by, the engine growling like an angry beast.

'Nice car,' said Zafir.

Abu Moussa pulled out from behind the farm truck and sped past it, waving his hand out the window at the farmer, who took no notice of the angry gesture. The red Lada was not far ahead of them.

'Shabiha.' Abu Moussa spat out the window, then started to sing. 'Wain inti halla'a, where are you now?' he wailed.

The brake lights of the red car ahead came on suddenly. Abu Moussa pressed hard on the taxi's brakes. The back door of the Lada opened and a pile of clothes landed with a flop on the side of the road. The Lada accelerated away.

It was only when Abu Moussa pulled on the steering wheel so that the taxi swerved around the bundle that Zafir saw a hairy arm flung out. Then he saw that attached to the pile of clothes there were two legs. One foot still had a sandal on it.

'We've got to help,' shouted Zafir when his brain finally registered what he had witnessed. He had never seen a dead body before. 'We must take that man to hospital. Pops will help him.'

Abu Moussa kept driving and singing, looking straight ahead through his large dark sunglasses.

Zafir could feel the pulse in the side of his head throbbing. He wanted to scream at Abu Moussa, but Pops had drilled into him that you have to stay calm in an emergency. He said that people could die if everyone around them panicked.

Stay calm, Zafir tried to tell himself, but instead he found himself thumping the dashboard with his fist.

'We've got to stop.' His voice sounded shrill to his own ears. They had to stop because that was the other thing Pops had always said – you might be the only one around who could save a person's life, even if all you did was call the Red Crescent ambulance.

Of course! Zafir pulled out his phone. Was the number '999' here, like it was in Dubai? Then he had

a better idea. 'I'll call Pops,' he said. 'He'll know what to do.'

But before he could dial any number, Abu Moussa stopped singing.

'With all respect to the honourable Dr Haddad, he cannot help that man.'

'Do you think he was dead?' Zafir asked, still hardly able to believe what he had seen. 'We still should have stopped.'

Abu Moussa shrugged. 'The shabiha has taught that man a lesson they believed he needed to learn.'

'The shabiha? Who are they? And why would they do something like ... like this?'

'Forget them,' said Abu Moussa. 'You aren't old enough to know about such things.'

'I'll be thirteen in ten days,' said Zafir. He'd be glad not to be twelve anymore. It was an age when everyone thought you were too young to be told anything.

From behind them they heard the sound of sirens.

'The shurta, police, are coming,' Zafir said. He was relieved. 'They'll take care of the man.'

Abu Moussa spat again and then, in the most serious voice he had ever used with Zafir, he said, 'Zafir, this is shabiha business. For the sake of yourself and your good family you must not remember what you have seen. Ahsan lak, it is better for you.'

The image of the outflung hairy arm and one bare foot, the other with a sandal on it, was etched into Zafir's brain. He was grateful now that he'd never seen the man's face. What if his eyes had been open?

Zafir shivered. 'I guess the shurta will catch them.'

Abu Moussa snorted and then started wailing about love again. Zafir couldn't hear the sirens anymore and the usual stream of cars and trucks were going about their business like nothing had happened. Like nothing was wrong. Zafir wondered why no one ever talked about anything important that happened in Homs. Uncle Ghazi had said that foreign media called Syria the 'Kingdom of Silence' – was this what he meant?