

CHAPTER 5

New Beginnings

Asma could barely sleep in her tent that night. Not because the scorching Za'atari heat makes her sheets annoyingly sticky, though that certainly didn't help. But because it was the eve of the day she had been awaiting for weeks: teacher training day.

A Jordan-based NGO called We Love Reading was offering an opportunity to train teachers of young children. Its staff had been posting notices and spreading the word around the camp. Interested potential teachers should arrive at the training center at eight o'clock in the morning to receive their materials and complete a brief orientation.

It was as if, somehow, during the worst period of Asma's life as her child had recently passed away, there was a renewed sense of potential in miserable Za'atari. Something inside her awakened for the first time since leaving Dara'a. Asma remembered her love for school, reading in the dark back at home until she could no longer keep her eyes open. Sleeping in her uniform. Rushing to school each day.

Still, she also remembered other things.

She remembered her insecurity whenever a teacher asked a question. She remembered how, though she had vividly dreamt of being a teacher when she was a child, she was extremely shy despite desiring to speak up. And she knew that she had not overcome that lack of confidence in the past few years.

But, after the loss of her child, Asma had told herself she would do everything within her power to ensure all children in Za'atari received the love they deserved. Every precious child. She had missed the opportunity to be a teacher in Dara'a; now was her opportunity in Za'atari.

This morning, in fact. At dawn, Asma woke up and walked swiftly to the training center. She arrived first and was at the head of the line in front of the door. Shortly after eight o'clock, an older woman came to the door with a name tag: Rana. She smiled politely at Asma and let her and her followers into the building. The meeting began.

"I was afraid that she would ask me about my education, because [I thought] all of the others had college degrees – and I did not."

Rana, who was the NGO's founder, gave a presentation on the teaching program. Asma could hardly pay attention, still unsure if she would be eligible. At the end, it was time for the would-be teachers to formally register and receive their teaching materials at the front of the room. Asma walked up gently, feeling certain that her lack of credentials – her time lost – would halt her second chance at this dream.

"But when I went up to the front, they only asked me for my name. They gave me a book bag full of children's storybooks. I was so happy."

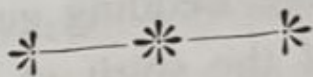
That night, Asma, like she had many years ago as a girl in Dara'a, read books for hours on end. This time they were children's stories meant to uplift the next generation in Za'atari.

"I was reading those books all the time. I even put them beside me on the bed while I was sleeping."

Her childhood dream from Dara'a could possibly be recaptured, albeit in a much different place, in the wake of an unthinkable tragedy. Still, she was ready. "I told myself:

"Andee amal."

"I have hope."



"Hold out a bit longer," Yasmina would tell herself. This life – of tents, morning bread rations, dust, lack of water, and loneliness – was not the life of her past, and it was not to be her future.

But heading home was not an option ... yet. Yasmina would get updates from her family members, friends, and former clients back in Dara'a about the status of life in Syria. Some of her close relatives had returned to Dara'a, so, like many residents of Za'atari with loved ones back home, she had direct insight. She would talk on the phone regularly with them.

As she waited to hear news of peace back home, she could not find it within herself to start life anew, to establish a shop in Za'atari. Even as weddings were a part of the fabric of life in Za'atari – people were still getting married, after