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Author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Amal Unbound*

Aisha Saeed

OMAR RISING



When the
system
is broken

You
have to
Rise UP!

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Aisha Saeed

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For every Omar out there—never stop believing in yourself.

Chapter 1

A gust of wind blows through the field as my friends and I wrap up our soccer game. It rustles through the neat rows of sugarcane growing behind us and sweeps over the orange trees in the distance.

“That does it!” Fuad shouts. He kicks the soccer ball toward me. “I’m never playing with either of you again. I mean it this time.”

“Don’t be such a sore loser,” Zaki responds. “It was a fun game.”

“Only because you and Omar cheated,” Fuad says, pointing at me.

I tilt my head. “Why is it whenever you win, it’s a hard-earned victory, but if anyone else does, they’re cheating?”

“Admit it,” Zaki says. “Omar’s last goal was epic.”

“Fine,” Fuad says grudgingly. “It wasn’t that bad.”

“I’ll take it.” I grin. Coming from Fuad, halfhearted praise is basically a standing ovation.

The soccer ball rolls until it settles next to my foot. As I kick it up to prop it under my arm, a wave of sadness washes over me. Fuad always vows never to play with us again, but this really *is* the last time I’ll be kicking the ball with him. There have been so many lasts lately. My last walk to the market yesterday. My last time feeding the chickens this morning. And tonight will be my last night sleeping in my own bed.

Tomorrow, everything will change. Tomorrow, I head to boarding school: the Ghalib Academy for Boys. Which means very soon my home, my village, and scrimmage games like these will no longer be part of my ordinary, everyday life.

It’s not that I don’t want to go. I filled out the forms myself. Asked my teacher for a recommendation. Sorted vegetables at the produce stand and cut sugarcane in the fields to save up for the application fee.

When I got the call, my mother’s eyes lit up like a thousand stars. She hugged me so tight I thought she’d never let go. The son of a servant getting a scholarship to a place like Ghalib? It opened up my world in ways I could only

begin to imagine. Now better things are actually within reach, like college and a job that earns enough money to buy a home for my mother and me. A *real* home, with bedrooms and sofas and rugs, not a one-room space where we've strung up curtains that we pretend are walls. Ghalib is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to re-write my destiny.

"Isn't that Amal?" Zaki asks. He points toward the gravel road that slices through our village.

Following his gaze, I brighten. Fuad and Zaki are good friends, but Amal is like family. My mother works for her parents, and we live on their property, behind their house. Born three days apart, we've never known life without each other.

"Your mother asked me to find you," Amal says when she approaches with two of her younger sisters in tow. "She said it was important."

"Time for your partyyy!" Amal's three-year-old sister sings out.

"Safa!" Amal grimaces.

"But don't say anything," says four-year-old Rabia, placing a finger solemnly on her lips. "It's a surprise!"

"It's okay." I laugh, looking at Amal's stricken expression. "Auntie Fozia asked me for a list of my favorite sweets the other day. And Fuad let it slip when we started playing."

"No one can keep a secret except me, huh?" Amal exclaims.

"Nope. Never." I shake my head.

"Everyone's just excited for you," says Zaki.

"Tell me about it." Fuad rolls his eyes. "My dad won't stop going on and on. 'Why can't you be more like Omar? You need to apply yourself.' If I didn't like you so much, I'd probably hate you."

"I just got lucky." I flush.

"There's no lucky about it," Amal says. "You earned it fair and square. Tomorrow will be amazing."

"Tomorrow?" Zaki repeats. "But school doesn't start till next week."

"Ghalib starts a week earlier," I remind him.

"So today really *was* the last soccer game?" Fuad's expression falls.

"It's not like I'm moving to Jupiter," I say. "I'll be back. Winter break. Summer—"

"Yeah," Fuad interrupts. "But it won't be . . ." His voice trails off.

But I know what he was going to say. And he's right. It won't be the same. Not even close.

"So, are you ready for the *partyyy*?" Amal teases as the six of us walk down the road toward her home.

"I tried *all* the sweets," Safa says.

“The laddu was my favorite!” Rabia chimes in.

“Thanks for the taste-testing,” I tell them.

When we reach the front door, Amal looks at me. “Pre-tend to be surprised, okay? Please? Everyone’s so excited.”

“I’ll do my very best,” I promise.

But it isn’t hard to look surprised. As soon as Amal opens the door, my jaw drops. Her home is packed! Neighbors fill the main room and spill into the courtyard outside. Fairy lights are strung along the windows.

“There’s the man of the hour!” Auntie Fozia sings out. She stands beside a table covered with trays and trays of sweets.

Everyone claps and cheers.

“Wow.” I blink. “Thank you!”

“Great work, Omar.” Amal’s mother ruffles my hair.

“Always knew you could do it,” says another neighbor.

“That’s right.” Auntie Fozia nods. “Not every day someone from our village heads off to one of the most prestigious schools in Pakistan.”

“More like not *ever*,” her daughter Hafsa chimes in. “You’re the first to get into a school like that, but you won’t be the last!” The crowd laughs.

“Oh.” I shift. “I don’t—”

“It’s true.” Amal’s father, Uncle Imtiaz, smiles. “You carry all of our pride with you, Omar. Carry it well.”

Looking at everyone's beaming faces, I'm filled with a warm glow. I thank my neighbors, then grab a plate and fill it with carrotty gajrela, yellow laddus, and sticky-sweet jalebis. So many desserts I can't fit them all on my plate—I'll have to come back for seconds, maybe thirds! My friends and I settle at the edge of the open-air courtyard as Banu and Shamu, the two farm kittens, beeline straight for me. Shamu sidles up to me and purrs. Banu sniffs the sweets on my plate.

"Sorry," I say. They know I'm usually reliable for sneaking them leftovers. "Pretty sure cats can't have jalebis."

Fuad picks up a round laddu. "All right. Who can catch this in their mouth?"

"What do I get if I do?" Zaki counters.

"Ultimate respect?" I suggest.

Fuad leans back and torpedoed the sweet at Zaki. It bounces against his nose before landing in his lap. We burst out laughing.

I glance at Amal refilling trays. The kittens at my feet. These people. This place. It's all I've ever known. Soon, it will become a memory.

I know I'm leaving to make a new life—a better one—but I hate how beginnings have to be tied to endings. That in order to start the next part of my journey, I'll have to leave all I know behind.

Chapter 2

What a nice party,” my mother says the next day. She sits on a stool by our partly opened front door, mending an old sweater. “You did a good job pretending to be surprised.”

“Wait!” My eyes widen. “How’d you know I knew?”

“Nothing stays secret in this village.” She chuckles. “Least of all a party. Although I never let it slip, and you and I *live* together!”

I glance at my mother. *This* is the part I’ve tried not to think about. It’s been the two of us as long as I can remember. My father died soon after I was born. Once I leave, she’ll be alone.

Amal pokes her head around the door. “All packed?”

"I think so," I tell her. "But I keep feeling like I'm forgetting something."

"It's okay if you do. My dad can always drop it off. The school isn't that far away."

"It's far enough."

"Only twenty kilometers," my mother chimes in.

"May as well be two hundred. It's too far to get home much. I won't be back until winter break."

"Probably for the best," my mother says. "You're there to focus on your studies. Not everyone gets this kind of opportunity."

"People are desperate to get in," Amal adds. "I'm thinking of applying to the girls' school next fall. Hafsa's working on her application now."

"Iqra?" I look at her. "That's great! Of course you should!"

"I'm only *thinking* about it," Amal says quickly. "There's a lot that needs to happen first, like seeing if I even get in and figuring out how we'd pay for it. It's expensive."

"Well, I think living inside a school would be the ultimate dream for you."

"Very funny, Omar."

"Who's joking?" I grin. "And don't get me wrong, I'm excited about Ghalib . . . I am."

“You should be! And if you need us, we’ll be only a phone call away,” Amal says.

My stomach unclenches a little. This is true. Amal always knows the exact right thing to say to help me feel better.

“I’ll call every day,” I promise.

“Uh, every day?” She laughs. “I don’t think so. Between school, soccer, chess club, and whatever, you’re not going to have time to think of us, much less call.”

“Mr. Adeel said at orientation that the astronomy club is exploring exoplanets this year. I’m definitely joining that.”

“And soccer, for sure,” Amal says.

“Don’t know if I’ll make the cut. They won the regional championship last year.”

“But you’re so good!” Amal says. “How about archery? And robotics. I’d sign up for those if I were you.”

“Maybe all of the above?” I grin.

“Now, wait a second,” my mother interrupts. “You two sound like Safa in a candy shop.”

“It’s just exciting to have so many choices! But you know what *I’m* most jealous about?” Amal asks.

“Hmmm, I wonder. The library, maybe?”

“Don’t joke! You’re so lucky, Omar. I hear Ghalib’s library is enormous. Let’s pick a title and do a book club when you’re back for winter break.”

“Amal—”

“I’ll even let you pick a book on outer space or science fiction.”

“Amal, listen. I think our book-club days are over for a while,” I tell her. “I doubt I’ll have time to read for fun. Classes are supposed to be really hard.”

“You can try. If I could find time to read while catching up on an entire semester of school, you can squeeze a book or two in.”

I bite my lip. She’s right about that. Amal went through a terrible time this past year and had to drop out of school. Life only recently returned to normal for her, and she had to work so hard to catch up. The last person who needs to hear any complaints from me is her.

“Oh! I almost forgot.” I reach into my pocket and pull out a necklace. It’s a thin loop with a sparrow pendant. I saved up to buy it for Amal last month, but Safa immediately broke the clasp.

“You fixed it!” Amal exclaims.

“It wasn’t too hard. Your father lent me pliers, and I bent the broken bit back in place. The tough part will be making sure Safa doesn’t get her hands on it again.”

She looks down at the sparrow and then at me. Her expression grows clouded.

“I’m going to miss you,” she says.

“I’ll miss you, too.” I swallow.

“What’s with the long faces?” my mother asks. She stands and drapes an arm around each of us. “This is a new adventure. It’s what all of us have been hoping for.”

There’s a knock on our door. And then—

“Omar?” Uncle Imtiaz peeks in. “I’m ready when you are.”

I pick up my suitcase and step into the yard. The hot August sun beats against my skin. This same sun will be there to warm me at Ghalib, too.

Uncle’s motorcycle idles in the distance. My mother pulls me to her and hugs me. When we part, tears fill her eyes.

“I’m proud of you, Omar,” she says. “I can’t wait to see all you will do.”

“For us,” I tell her.

“For us.”

Chapter 3

I've always known what I wanted to be when I grew up. In fifth grade, I'd read the classroom copy of *Our Galaxy* so many times, my teacher got the next book in the series, *Beyond the Milky Way*, just for me. There are over four thousand known planets orbiting outside our solar system and scientists find new ones each year. That's what I want to do. Discover planets. Maybe even entire galaxies. But right now, as Uncle Imtiaz's motorcycle speeds over potholes, I hang on and hope he doesn't personally launch us into another solar system.

Arriving at Ghalib Academy's parking lot, I take in the shiny sedans of all shapes, colors, and sizes. I've never seen so many cars in one place. Back home most of us get around

on foot or motorcycles or take rickshaws. But there's no brightly colored rickshaw in sight, and our motorcycle is the only one here.

Kids hurry across the lawn toward a tent that says *Student Registration*, their mothers and fathers not far behind. My chest tightens. Everyone here is with their parents. Am I the only one who's come alone?

"Registration line's filling up." Uncle unties my suitcase from the rear. He gestures to the tent. "Shall we?"

I hesitate. One of his workers quit a few days ago and orange-planting season is fast approaching. He took time out of his day to even bring me here. But before I can say any of this, he speaks again.

"This is a big day," he says. "Your mother will want all the details."

"That's true." I crack a smile. "Thanks."

Butterflies dance in my stomach as we approach the tent where kids laugh and high-five each other. In the distance I see Marwan and Jibril—two seventh years I met at orientation—but otherwise, it's a sea of strangers.

"Name?" a lady with red-framed glasses asks when it's my turn.

"Omar Ali."

"There we are. First name in the pile." She hands me a folder with *SB* stamped on the front.

“What does this mean?” I point to the letters.

“Oh that? Don’t worry.” She waves a hand. “They’ll explain at assembly next week.”

I wasn’t worried until she told me *not* to worry. I want to ask her more, but Uncle taps my shoulder. “Let’s see your room before I have to leave.”

“The rooms aren’t too exciting,” I warn. “They pack so much into them you can touch one bed with your foot while sitting on the other.”

“In that case, let’s hope you have a good roommate.”

I hope so, too. Having a roommate—a total stranger I’ll share a room with for a year—is the weirdest part about all this. I run my hand over the pouch in my book bag where I stored a baggie of guava-flavored candy. My summer roommate was great—Kareem, a scholarship kid like me. Tall, lanky, and full of jokes, he always kept a stash of candy on him and was quick to share it. I hoped bringing some would be a good icebreaker, but mostly I’m just hoping I’ll get a roommate as nice as him again.

I lead Uncle across the main campus to where the dorms are situated. But when I punch in the three-digit code from summer, the door doesn’t budge.

“I got it!” A boy hurries over to us. He’s taller than me by a foot and his floppy black hair is draped over his forehead.

“It’s one-three-five.” He punches in the code. “They

change it every month. Didn't you get the email?"

"Oh. I don't have an account set up yet."

"No big deal." He smiles. "If you didn't register at home, you can get it set up at the computer lab. There's information on all that in your folder."

Emails. People here have probably used email since they were babies. Another thing to add to the list of stuff I'll need to figure out quickly.

"I'm Faisal, if you have questions, I'm in the upperclassmen dorms. See you!"

"Kids here seem nice," Uncle says, as we step inside. I check my sheet: 2-2. My room is the second one on the second floor.

We enter and the space is set up just like the room I had for summer orientation. Two twin beds with nightstands on opposite walls. Next to each, a wooden dresser, a desk, and chair.

"This is a *fantastic* setup!" Uncle exclaims. "One of my cousins went to a boarding school and there were six boys to a room there." He glances around and then at me. "It's really happening, isn't it? You did it, Omar."

"I can't believe it."

"Believe it." His eyes crinkle with a smile. "May the pride we all feel in you lift you up and help you succeed. Ameen."

I bite my lip. I know everyone rooting for me is a good

thing. But right now the weight of that responsibility sinks in me like stones.

Uncle hugs me goodbye. I watch him disappear down the stairs. And then he's gone. Back to our village. Back home.

"Hey, Omar, looks like we're neighbors!" a voice from across the hallway calls out. I recognize Humza from the summer. "I brought the Mohamed Salah jersey I told you about. Wanna check it out?"

"I'll be there in a second," I tell him.

I rest my suitcase on my bed and look out the window. The soccer field is right below my window and some kids are already playing. At the edge of the field there's a wall with a mural teeming with students doing all sorts of cool stuff like playing instruments, shooting hoops, scoring goals, and even doing science experiments. Bunsen burners are fired up and beakers ooze with smoky liquids. Straight across from me, the figure of a boy peers through a telescope up at the sky.

I squeeze the windowsill until my fingers grow white. I'm only twenty kilometers from home, but I'm in a whole different orbit. Still, there is no room for homesickness or regret. For the next few years, Planet Ghalib is home.

Chapter 4

They roomie,” a voice calls out, and Kareem saunters into the room holding a worn duffel bag.

“No way!” I brighten. “We’re roommates again?”

“Looks that way.” He gives me a fist bump. “I was worried it’d be Naveed.”

“Naveed?” I raise my eyebrows. “He’s great!”

“Don’t get me wrong! Love the guy. But remember how he snored? We could hear him down the hallway.”

“True.” I laugh. “His roommate slept with headphones on.”

“I sleep as light as a cat, so that would’ve been awful.”

“Where are your parents?”

“They didn’t need to walk me up. My duffel bag was pretty light.”

He shrugs like it doesn’t matter. But I get it. Kareem’s a scholarship kid like me. His parents probably didn’t have time to linger. He sticks his duffel bag on his desk.

“Brought something for you,” I say. I pull out the bag of candy and toss it to him.

“Guava!” He sits down on his bed and pops one in his mouth. Leaning back, he closes his eyes. “Mmm. I thought no one could beat Danawala’s stall back home, but *this* is good candy.”

“Next time I’ll get you the lychee-flavored ones. The candy shop sells out of those as soon as he makes them.”

“Thanks, Omar! I owe you.”

“Pay me back with a soccer scrimmage once we’re unpacked? We have a great view of the field from here.”

“Thinking of trying out for the team?” He cranes his neck to look out the window.

“I don’t know,” I say. “But, yeah, maybe. I’m definitely joining the astronomy club. What about you?”

“Debate club for sure,” he says. “Made it to semifinals at my last school. Think I’ll try out for basketball, too.”

“Maybe after we kick the soccer ball around, you can show me how to play basketball?”

“You’ll be learning from the best!”

There's a knock at the door. It's Naveed.

"The gang is officially back," Kareem exclaims. He gives Naveed a fist bump. We join him in the hallway.

"I'm so glad we're on the same floor again!" Naveed pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Remember Jibril? He's my roommate. I can't figure out if he's nice or not. If he's mean, can I squeeze in with both of you?"

"Jibril? He's great, besides who'd be mean to *you*?" I playfully swat his arm. "Listen, we're going to play soccer once we finish unpacking. I saw some—"

"Move over." A gruff voice interrupts us. It's a man in a three-piece suit accompanied by two servants in plain shalwar kamiz carrying enormous suitcases.

We step aside as they brush past us into the room next door. A boy with short spiky hair emerges from the staircase. His eyes are locked on the screen of his fancy silver phone.

Naveed looks at the boy and then back at us. "Okay . . . well . . . see you all later." He darts down the hallway.

Before Kareem or I can move—an angry voice—the man's—ricochets against the cinder-block walls next door.

"They must be joking! How can anyone live in a room like this," he barks. "I'm not paying for a new gym so Aiden can live in a prison cell, am I?"

A prison cell? Kareem and I exchange glances.

Moments later, he storms past us. The hallway vibrates from his angry departure.

“Nice guy,” I say under my breath.

The boy looks up from his phone. His eyes meet mine.

“What?” He frowns.

“Oh,” I begin. “Nothing. I just . . . hi. My name’s Omar and this is—”

But before I can finish my sentence, he stalks into his room, slamming the door shut behind him.

“He’s a friendly one,” I say to Kareem, as we retreat into our room.

“Must take after his dad.”

I laugh and we get to work organizing our things. I unpack my clothes and set a photo of my mother and me on the nightstand. I tack up my poster of the Milky Way. Kareem’s taping up a photo of cricket legend Wasim Akram by his bed. In a few minutes, our room looks a little less stark, and a little more like us.

Glancing into the hallway, I see Aiden’s servants still waiting around. The older one leans against the cinder-block wall, his eyes half-closed.

I grab my chair and drag it toward the door. “Would you like to sit? We have another you could also borrow.”

The older man eyes the chair and hesitates. “Thank you, but we’re fine standing,” he finally says.

I can tell that's not true by how uncomfortable he looks. He's old enough to be my grandfather. I'm glad my mother was never treated this way. Amal's family feels like our own. But I know this is the lot of many servants—expected to stand at command while awaiting the next order from their employer. It's the fate I'm here to avoid.

"Please, chota sahib." The other man puts his palms up. "We're happy to stand. Really."

I wince at the term *little sir*. They don't know I'm more like them than most people here.

When Aiden's father returns, we edge closer to our open door.

"Well, they can say goodbye to the rest of the gymnasium money," he says.

"So, we're leaving?" Aiden asks.

"For now, you'll stay."

"But you said if they couldn't change my room, we'd go!"

"I know what I said, but—"

"You're really going to make me stay? In this dump?"

Dump? Kareem mouths silently.

"I thought it was a prison," I whisper.

Kareem flops backward onto his bed and laughs.

"You *could* have been at Aitchison." The man's voice grows harder. "If your grades had been better, I wouldn't be sending you here in the first place. How about instead

of complaining, get your marks where they need to be. In the meantime, be grateful I got you a single.”

“That man acts like he owns the place,” I whisper.

“Sounds like he does own the gym. Aiden should move in there. It’s definitely bigger than the dorms.”

“Plus, all the basketball you can play.”

“Now *that’s* the dream.” Kareem grins.

After they leave, Aiden’s door slams with such a shuddering force, the wall between us trembles. Loud music fills the air. Angry. Pulsing. The floor beneath us vibrates.

“I’d take Naveed’s snoring over this.” Kareem grimaces.

“He’ll cool off soon,” I say.

“We were going to play soccer anyway.” Kareem says. “Let’s join those kids out back.”

I side-eye Aiden’s closed door as we leave. Maybe the room is small to him, but a prison cell? And this place with its stately brick walls, winding pathways, and lush manicured lawns a dump? Both of us are at the exact same school, but we see it so differently.

Chapter 5

The alarm clock goes off early the next morning.

“Too soon.” Kareem groans. He burrows deeper into the sheets.

I stifle a yawn as I sit up. I went straight to bed after speaking with my mother last night, but I tossed and turned for hours. It’s not that the bed was uncomfortable. The thick, padded mattress was softer than my woven charpay at home. But it wasn’t *my* bed. And then there were all the unfamiliar noises, like the creaking pipes and the low roar of the air-conditioning.

There was also the problem of my mind refusing to turn off. How hard would classes be? Would I get laughed off

the field at soccer tryouts? And my mother . . . was she lying awake, too, in our newly empty home?

I rub my eyes and get out of bed. If astronauts can fall sleep in zero gravity, I should be able to get used to my new bed and the sounds of this place.

As I brush my teeth and slip into my uniform, the sleepiness vanishes. I look at myself in the mirror and grin: Navy blue jacket? Check. Striped gold tie? Double check! It's happening. After all these months of counting down, today is the first day of my new life!

Morning barrels forward at such a breakneck pace I can barely catch my breath. Back home we had one classroom. Here we hurry from class to class as fast as we can to beat the bell. And there are *so many people* here. Elbows and shoulders knock against me as I race down the hallways. It's like trying to maneuver through the asteroid belt.

When it's finally time for lunch, I breathe a sigh of relief. The dining hall looks like the expensive restaurants I've glimpsed on TV, with its cream tablecloths and low-hanging lights. Back at my old school we brought our food in cloth sacks and ate on the lawn beneath a shade tree.

"How is it already lunchtime?" Kareem groans. We step into a line stretching practically to the door. "This day is going by at warp speed."

“Really? It feels like it’s dragging on forever and we’re still only halfway done.” Naveed adjusts his glasses. “The teachers go too fast, I can’t keep up. I missed a *bunch* of things.”

“Don’t worry,” I tell him. “We’ll compare notes after school.”

We reach the food and my mouth starts to water. Sizzling trays of chicken kardhai, saag, and steaming hot rice and naans rest underneath warming lights. This spread is fancier than some wedding buffets I’ve been to. A friendly man with neatly parted hair replenishes the naans as I approach.

“Everything looks delicious,” I tell him.

“Doesn’t *taste* too bad either.” He winks. “Enjoy.”

I thank him and fill my plate.

The three of us settle down at an empty table by the back doors.

“Finally!” Kareem exclaims. “I was about to pass out from hunger.”

“Is there always so much food?” I ask them. Kareem and Naveed have both been at private schools before.

“Yep!” Kareem says in between shoveling food into his mouth. “And this chicken is amazing! Miles better than the eats we had at my other school.”

“Did you both get the email from the guidance counselor, Mrs. Rashid?” Naveed asks between bites.

“You mean the questionnaire with five hundred prompts?” Kareem asks.

“Twenty-three,” Naveed corrects him. “She said we could schedule an appointment to see her if we need extra help.”

“Right.” Kareem snorts. “Nice try.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Take it from me,” he says. “The guidance counselor at my old school tried that. You can’t let them see you sweat. Don’t give them a reason to say you don’t belong. As far as Mrs. Rashid goes, everything is always going great.”

“Are you sure?” Naveed frowns. “The handbook said she’ll email each month to check in on our progress.”

“One hundred percent positive.” Kareem grabs his water and gulps it down. “Just hope she’s not sending us those long questionnaires each time. Like we don’t have enough to do.”

I pull out a notebook and jot down a reminder to set up my email. I’m only halfway through the day and the list of things to do keeps growing.

A bell trills outside the door.

“And that’s that.” Kareem tosses his napkin onto his tray.

“Time’s up? Already?” I stare at him. “I’ve barely touched my food.”

“Twenty-five minutes go fast,” Naveed says.

“They should call it the food Olympics.” Kareem glances at my plate. “Omar, you’ll have to pick up your time if you want to make the cut!”

I look at my plate. Twenty-five minutes to get in line, grab our food, *and* eat? I wolf down a few bites as fast as I can before returning my tray.

“Hey, Omar!” Marwan calls out. He’s with Naveed’s roommate, Jibril. “Soccer was awesome yesterday! Re-match after school?”

“Definitely!” I reply.

“Speed up!” Kareem urges me and Naveed as we jostle through the crowds. I look back at Jibril and Marwan’s retreating figures. They’ve been in almost all my other classes, but I guess we’re in different English sections.

“Why’d they put this class so far apart from the others?” I groan.

“What kind of soccer skills can you have if you’re tired after a little jog?” Kareem teases. “Last one left complaining is the loser.”

“Never!” I pick up my pace.

“Think Aiden’ll be in this class, too?” Naveed asks. “I don’t know why, but he makes me nervous.”

I bite back a laugh. *Everything* makes Naveed nervous. But he’s right. Aiden’s been in almost every section we

had. He barely speaks, but his presence is like a black hole swirling in the back of each class.

“Are we going the right way?” I ask. “This is far!”

“I haven’t been in this wing, either.” Naveed checks the schedule. “It says ‘Administrative Room Three.’”

Maybe there’s a misprint, I’m about to say when we reach the assigned room.

“Did one of you ring the fire alarm or something?” Kareem asks. “Because it looks like we’re heading into detention.”

“Yeah,” I say. “The main office is right next door.”

The late bell sounds as we step inside. The space is smaller than any of the other classrooms. There are a few desks and an oak table with a swiveling chair at the front of the room. Standing next to it is the teacher.

Or—I realize—*not* a teacher. I recognize him from the photo in the welcome letter in our student folder. He’s Headmaster Moiz. The head of our school. He wears a gray suit. His arms are folded. He looks like he’s never smiled a day in his life.

He studies us silently and now I’m wondering if Kareem’s right. *Are we in trouble?*

“Timeliness is of utmost importance,” he finally says. His voice echoes off the back wall. “We cannot expect to be taken seriously if we don’t show our teachers the

respect they deserve. Part of respect is arriving where expected on time.”

“Sorry.” Naveed’s face is the color of a ripe tomato. “W-we won’t be late again.”

My cheeks burn as we take our seats. It’s our first day of school! No one else said a word when students stumbled in a little late. But I’m pretty sure saying any of this will only get us in more trouble.

“As you may know, I’m Headmaster Moiz,” he says. “This year, I will also be teaching English to the scholarship students.”

Kareem and I glance at each other. He raises his eyebrows.

“I hope a more tailored approach will provide better outcomes this year,” he continues. “English is where kids like you are most deficient.”

Kids like us? He said it like we’re invading aliens.

He goes over his expectations, but before I can scrawl any of it down, he’s passing out assignments for the week. I try to keep up with everything he’s saying. Weekly quizzes. Monthly tests. Essays. All our other teachers just handed out class descriptions and asked us to introduce ourselves. Does he think this is our only class?

When I look up, Headmaster is looking right at me.

“Is there a problem?” he asks.

I shift under his piercing gaze.

“No, sir,” I manage to respond.

“I should hope not,” he says. “It’s your first day. It only gets more complicated from here.”

He turns to the whiteboard and starts to jot down the spelling words for the week. I push away the sinking feeling that washes over me. We’ve been here less than five minutes, but I can tell the headmaster’s already decided he does not like me. But teachers always like me! It’s not like I’m a genius, but I’m responsible. I work hard and get excellent grades.

I copy the spelling words and remind myself, *It’s only the first day of school*. Even if I didn’t make the best first impression, I’m going to do so well in this class, he’ll change his mind and see he was wrong about me.

Chapter 6

Mr. Adeel holds the door wide open for art class with a smile that's even wider. His bow tie is fantastic: green with yellow polka dots.

"Omar, great to see you!" he says.

After Headmaster Moiz's class, Mr. Adeel's kindness is like an oxygen tank in outer space. He was our orientation guide over the summer and is easily the nicest teacher I've ever had. At least I'll be ending each school day on a happy note.

The walls inside the classroom are filled with art prints. There's a Hall of Fame board with artwork by previous students on the back wall, and papier-mâché trees hang from the ceiling. The open space behind our desks is crowded

with easels, baskets of beads, and other art supplies stacked on shelves. Paint-spattered smocks hang on hooks along the wall. Even Aiden's negative energy wafting over like fog from the back of the room feels muted here.

Mr. Adeel dims the lights and flips on a projector.

"This semester we're exploring art movements as a tool for change. And next semester you'll make an art project of your own!"

"Fun!" Humza exclaims. Other kids murmur excitedly.

I sink in my seat. An art project sounds like the exact opposite of fun. I can't remember the last time I tried to draw anything. I'm no artist. I have no idea how I will catch up to people who've taken courses like these their whole lives. But as I sit back and look at the slides flashing on the screen, I'm amazed at all the different art forms: paintings, statues, murals, and large-scale art installations; I feel myself relax a little.

"Many artists work in response to the times they live in," Mr. Adeel says. "They aim to evoke a response. It could be awe, discomfort, or even repulsion, but the goal is to make you *feel*. It's why art is a great way to shed light on important social justice issues. At the end of the year, you'll also be presenting on an artist of your choice, so make note of the ones who speak to you."

Speak to us? The pictures on the screen are interesting, but none of them speak to me. Or maybe I just can't hear them.

"How's your first day going?" Mr. Adeel asks me when the bell rings and we start to leave.

"It's been nonstop," I admit. "There's so much information to process, it's like I'm already behind."

"Trust me, you're not the only one feeling that way. Just 'fake it till you make it.' You'll get there. And remember, the first week is toughest. It gets easier from here." He glances at the wall clock and grimaces. "Quick favor? I have a meeting I need to jet to in five minutes. Since you're done for the day, mind leaving this file at the front desk for me?"

"Of course." I take a manila folder from him.

Fake it till you make it. I turn Adeel's words over as I walk to the administrative wing. Kids hurry past me. They're laughing and chatting as they head toward the dorms. Are they faking it? Doesn't look like it to me.

Stepping into the administrative office, my feet sink into plush carpeting, it's like I'm walking on clouds. As I set the file on the counter, a deep voice booms from down the hallway. Headmaster Moiz. I know he's not going to burst forth from his office like a gust of wind and drag me inside to berate me, but the sooner I'm out of here the better.

Back out in the hallway, I hear a laugh that sounds like Kareem's. I frown. All the way out here?

But there it is again. Kareem. His voice is coming from a narrow corridor to my left. Craning my neck, I see him by the entrance of an open door. His back is to me.

"I know. I know. Study like your life depends on it," he says. "Got it." He pauses. I hear a muffled response. "Yes, Abu! I swear I'm eating properly!"

Abu? What is Kareem's father doing here?

A man emerges from behind the doorway. I take a quick step back, out of sight. Peering from the edge, I see he has wavy brown hair like Kareem.

I turn and hurry the opposite way, taking the long way back to the dorms so they don't spot me.

My head spins. Kareem's father is at Ghalib. He never said anything about it to me. Why is he keeping it a secret?

Chapter 7

The soccer field is the best thing about Ghalib, but the rec room's a close second. Stepping inside after dinner tonight feels like the perfect way to cap off my first day. Two boys from biology are playing foosball in the back of the room next to Jibril and Marwan, who are battling it out on the Ping-Pong table. A few kids sit at a table by a bay window, their eyes fixed to glowing tablets in their hands.

I settle down on a sofa across from a sleek black TV hanging on the wall, right next to Naveed and Humza who are fighting for the remote. I stifle a laugh. Their scuffles for the remote were a regular fixture during orientation weekend, too.

“That’s it. Omar decides!” Humza tosses the remote to me. “What do you pick? Soccer or *Maheen Matters*?”

“She’s the one who gives out the advice you’re always sharing, right, Naveed?” I ask.

“*Cheesy* advice!” Humza interjects.

Naveed gives an exaggerated gasp. “It’s so not cheesy.”

“Sorry, but Humza’s right,” Marwan calls out from the back of the room.

“It’s a thirty-minute episode,” Naveed protests. “Your game will still be going on and no one will have probably scored a point anyway.”

They watch me, a kid who only ever rarely glimpsed a TV back home, like the fate of the world rests on my shoulders.

“I’ll go with *Maheen Matters*,” I finally say.

“You can’t be serious!” Humza gasps.

Naveed grabs the remote from me and holds it up like it’s a trophy. He flips through the channels until a woman appears. She’s sitting across from a man in a blue shirt and dark jeans. “I’m here with Feroz Hashim. He’s joining us to share his acting journey and how he became the person he is today.”

“Yeah, right, this is way better than soccer.” Humza sulks.

Feroz talks about the auditions he’s bombed. The struggles to define his acting career.

"I finally decided to stop chasing the jobs I thought I needed to go for the ones I really connected with. It's like that line in *Hamlet*," Feroz tells Maheen. "'To thine own self be true.' And then just like that, I got my big break. And the rest"—he laughs—"is history."

"Feroz is living proof of what I always tell my viewers," Maheen says. "Work hard on what you truly believe in and persevere. If you do, anything is possible."

"See?" Naveed says triumphantly. "That was some good advice, wasn't it?"

"Naveed." Kareem walks in and settles onto the arm of the sofa as a commercial comes on. "This stuff rots your brain."

"Is that why she's got the number one talk show in the country?" Naveed counters, crossing his arms.

I bite back a laugh. Naveed second-guesses himself about pretty much anything, but apparently not about Maheen. I study Kareem's profile. I haven't seen him since I stumbled upon him earlier today. Did he see me before I hurried away? If he did, I can't tell.

"Speaking of Shakespeare." Humza leans back. "Do you have Mr. Mattu for English?"

"He's the best!" Marwan exclaims. "We're going to watch the film version of *Macbeth* once we finish reading the play."

My face grows warm. How do I explain that the head of our school is also my English teacher? Before I can think of how to respond, the show resumes.

“Whoa, is that Daniyal Mahmood?” Marwan exclaims. “My dad flew me and my cousins to Karachi to see him in concert last month. He’s so good!”

Naveed beams like he invited Daniyal onto the show himself and I’m relieved everyone’s forgotten about English teachers.

The guitar strums and the music is catchy; even the kids over at the table slip off their earbuds to listen. Marwan asks me to play Ping-Pong with him. I’ve never played before, but I get the hang of it pretty easily.

Maybe Ghalib will be like this, too. Maybe I’ll get the hang of all of this. Maybe it’s only a matter of time.

Chapter 8

Lights flicker on around the field as I play soccer with my friends.

“Omar! Humza’s on your tail!” shouts Marwan.

I kick the ball with all the force I can muster. It whips into the air full speed toward the soccer net. Jibril dives for it, but the ball ricochets off the net.

“How did you *do* that?” Jibril kicks up the ball and cradles it under his arm. “I could’ve sworn you were aiming to the right.”

“Fake out,” I reply.

“You haven’t done a fake out all week!” Humza exclaims.

“You have to know *when* to do it, or it won’t work!”

“Not to be a downer, but are you *sure* we’re allowed to

play soccer this late?” Naveed glances around. “We’re the only ones out here.”

“It’s Friday! Lights out is later on the weekends, remember? Besides, did you hear anything that says we couldn’t?” Humza asks.

“Well, no—” Naveed begins.

“We’re allowed to have a life outside of studying. I think even Maheen would agree!” Humza playfully punches Naveed on the shoulder. “You worry too much!”

I feel a pang of sympathy for Naveed. If worrying was a sport, Naveed would be a world champion. I glance at the mural along the edge of Ghalib Academy. Closer up, I see that there are graduation caps lining the top and that some of the mural’s paint is peeling. Parts of my favorite portion, with the telescope, are discolored from the beating sun. I know everyone who has a window facing this side of the school can see the telescope as easily as me, but when I look at it from my desk when I’m studying, it feels like it’s there just for me. A sign from the universe to keep at it.

“Have you seen Kareem?” Marwan asks. “He missed soccer yesterday, too.”

“I looked for him in the library,” Naveed says.

“He probably went back to work in our room,” I say quickly, and try to change the subject. “Did you see the

email we got about assembly on Monday? We get to join clubs after that.”

“Omar, we have to try out for soccer!” Marwan says.

“I’m signing up for chess,” Naveed says. “I beat all my cousins at it back home, even the older ones. They get so mad when a kid beats them.”

“Remind me not to play you.” I laugh. “Sure. I’ll try out for soccer, Marwan. And I’m definitely joining the astronomy club.”

“Astronomy sounds fun,” Humza says wistfully. “Not sure I’ll have room after all the clubs I *have* to sign up for.”

“Are there required clubs?” Naveed asks.

“Required by my dad. I have to join debate. And newspaper. He was the editor back when he was a student here.”

“My dad’s *also* making me sign up for newspaper.” Marwan makes a face.

“It’s like they want us to be their clones,” Humza complains.

Listening to them, I think about my own dad. He died when I was a baby. I don’t know much about him, but he probably couldn’t ever have imagined me at a school like this; I hope he’d be proud. Watching my new friends complaining, I think about how different we are. For them, Ghalib is a given. It’s part of their family legacy.

For me, it's a life raft. Still, I make a mental note to check out newspaper club. If their parents think they should join, they probably have a good reason.

"What're they doing?" Naveed points to a group of students putting folding chairs out on the lawn near the gym and setting up a wheeled machine with a glass top.

"Friday movie night, remember?" Humza says. "Let's grab some front-row seats."

As we walk over, popping noises come from the machine and a buttery scent fills the air. Of course this school would even have popcorn on movie night!

"Hey!" Kareem jogs over to us. "Glad we all got here early for this."

"At last, the mystery man arrives," Humza remarks. "Out fighting crime? You missed soccer again!"

"Oh, sorry." Kareem blushes. "I was—I was at the library."

Naveed frowns. "I swung by earlier but didn't see you."

"Probably just missed each other," I say. "So much work to do, I should've been there, too."

"Classes are brutal," Humza agrees. "Most of the teachers seem to think they're the only ones giving us work."

"Yes!" An ounce of relief creeps in. Humza's been attending schools like these his whole life and he also thinks it's a lot.

Grabbing a seat, I spot Aiden. He's standing on the walkway by the dorms watching the gathering crowd. But he doesn't join us. Instead, he stalks back toward our building.

"Social as always." Humza snorts, following my gaze.

"He hasn't said a word in any class I have with him," Marwan says.

"So he doesn't just look down on us scholarship kids, huh?" Naveed says.

I wince. It's not that our being here on scholarship is a secret, exactly, but it is the first time it's been said aloud. I study Humza's, Jibril's, and Marwan's expressions. None of them react to this new information.

"Guess he's an equal opportunity hater." Humza shrugs.

"Yeah, and he thinks this place is a dump so that must make all of us a little dumpish." Kareem says.

"Is *dumpish* an actual word?" Naveed frowns.

"Not yet, but new words crop up every day," Kareem replies. "You watch, Aiden'll petition for it to be in the official dictionary."

I settle down next to them, and relief floods my system. No one seems to care we're scholarship students. Naveed brings over a paper bag filled with popcorn and a tin full of triangle-shaped snacks—which I learn are nachos.

I've never had anything quite like it before—all cheesy and salty and delicious.

Every seat is full by the time the movie starts. The crowd stops talking and I can feel the excitement. This is what I was hoping it'd be like here, and for now I don't feel the ache of homesickness.

I look back at our dorm building. The light in the room next to ours turns on. Aiden really is a swirling dark cloud, but I can't help feeling a little sorry for him. He's the one missing out.

Chapter 9

I'm sleepy." Kareem yawns as we grab seats in the auditorium for our first assembly.

There's a podium set up on the stage and behind it a screen flashes images of smiling students wearing the same uniforms as we do. I glance down at my shiny tie. My mother made me practice tying it so many times my hands had ached, but even as I start my second week here, I don't understand why this strip of fabric is so important.

"I was so scared I'd be late!" Naveed says, taking a seat next to me. "There aren't enough sinks and showers for all of us and Aiden was taking *forever* at the last sink even though it was obvious he was done."

"Doesn't shock me," I say.

"Just another entitled rich boy." Kareem shrugs. "Schools like this are full of them."

"How's Jibril as a roommate?" I ask Naveed. "You guys getting along?"

"He's fine, except for the mornings," Naveed says. "If I ask him anything, he looks like he'll bite my head off."

"Sounds like he's not a morning person. I'm not really either," I tell Naveed. "Besides, you're basically the perfect roommate. You keep that place so neat, you could eat off the floor!"

"Yeah, we'd have trouble *finding* our floor." Kareem laughs. "Maybe Omar and you should trade places for a while!"

"It's not that bad!" I protest. "Is it?"

"Nah, I'm just messing with you." Kareem grins.

"Well, consider yourself lucky to have a quiet roomie, Naveed." Humza leans in from the seat behind us. "Marwan's nice and all, but he talks nonstop. Did you know he has four cats back home? Two parakeets? He skis with his parents every winter in the Swiss Alps and flies there in the family jet. I think I might know his height, weight, and blood type by now."

I laugh, but before I can reply, the lights dim. The chatter fades. Headmaster Moiz walks up to the podium.

“To our students, both returning and new, welcome.” His gravelly voice booms out of the microphone. “As an alumni of this fine academy, it is a great pleasure to welcome the future generation of the brightest and best our country has to offer.”

An alumni? I blink at this new information. It’s hard to imagine him my age, wearing a uniform and sitting in one of these seats.

The headmaster introduces us to the deputy headmaster, who’s as stern looking as he, the bursar Mr. Rashid, and his wife, Mrs. Rashid, the guidance counselor. I recognize her from student registration day. Headmaster Moiz fills us in on the school’s expectations and our responsibilities.

“And finally, that brings me to the topic I know you are all waiting to hear about: extracurriculars,” the headmaster says.

Extracurriculars! At this, I perk up. My mind buzzes with all the possibilities. Astronomy club’s a given and I’ve been eager to check out archery ever since Amal mentioned it.

“The gymnasium next door is set up with Ghalib’s offerings, but before I dismiss you, if your student folder had the letters *SB* on it, you won’t be heading there quite yet, so please remain seated.”

SB. Those two letters were stamped on my folder. When Mrs. Rashid handed it to me on arrival day, she told me not

to worry about it. But now I can't help but worry as I watch everyone get up to leave. Soon only about a dozen of us remain. Besides Kareem and Naveed, I recognize a couple of faces, including Faisal, the boy who helped me punch in the dorm code.

"We're in trouble. We are. I know it." Naveed's face is pale. "But I—I don't even know what we did?"

Before I can respond, Headmaster Moiz summons Faisal to join him onstage.

"You lot"—the headmaster tells us—"are our Scholar boys. Thanks to the generosity of our alumni, we open up a small number of spots each year for scholarship kids like you."

Kids like us. There it is again. He makes it sound like we snuck in here without permission.

"Faisal is one of our star scholarship students." He nods to the boy. "I'm proud to say he's graduating with the highest of honors this spring. Do seek him out after we're done here. He may be able to answer your questions from a different perspective.

"Scholar boys are required by our bylaws to complete five service hours each week," Headmaster Moiz continues. "You will receive details about this in a forthcoming email, but tasks will include chores like grounds maintenance,

kitchen work, and laundry duty. As this is a significant time commitment in addition to your studies, Scholars will not participate in extracurricular clubs their first year.”

What? No astronomy club? No soccer?

“But why?” I blurt out.

The headmaster turns to me. His lips press into a thin line.

“The board believes extracurriculars make it difficult for new students to stay focused on their studies. Next year, extracurriculars will be discussed on a case-by-case basis.”

I sink into my seat. It’s fine, I tell myself. It’s not like the school back home would’ve had archery or robotics or chess club. And cleaning up after meals—it’s nothing I haven’t done before. It’s a simple enough requirement in exchange for the chance to be here.

But it still hurts.

“I’ve been a headmaster for twenty years and seen far too many Scholars stumble.” Headmaster Moiz’s gaze returns to me. “Some graduate and go on to do great things. Many, however, do not. I hope all of you will prove to be the exception and stay through until the very end. Be mindful of your opportunity. You are lucky boys indeed.”

A burst of laughter floats into the auditorium from the gym next door.

Lucky.

What about the boys on the other side of the wall? Picking whichever activities they'd like because they were born into families who can pay their tuition. He's right. I'm lucky. But it's hard to feel that way right now.

Chapter 10

you coming?" Kareem asks me.

The other scholarship kids are heading to the gymnasium like the headmaster instructed us to once he wrapped up his talk. But I can't move. Why would I go there? To look at what I can't have?

"I'm going back to my room," I finally say.

"Are you sick?" Naveed asks worriedly.

"I'm not sick . . ." My voice trails off. At summer orientation we toured the campus and our future classrooms. We were told all about Ghalib's stellar reputation, but why weren't we oriented to the fact that scholarship kids would be second-class citizens?

I look at Naveed and Kareem. They're waiting for me. Maybe it's better to shrug it off and go along with them. But I don't trust that I won't start blubbering when I see all the activities I can't be part of.

"Don't worry, we'll cover for you," Kareem says. "I'm just peeking in to see if they'll let us shoot some hoops."

I watch them head out of the auditorium. I breathe in and out. I have to leave eventually. I have to get going.

When I step out into the hallway, a voice calls out.

"Careful!"

It's Kareem's father. He holds a mop and his clothes are splattered with paint.

"Watch your step. Floor's damp from a spill I just mopped up."

"Oh. Thanks," I tell him. ". . . I'm Omar."

"Omar." He smiles. "Nice to meet you. You're new, right?"

"Yes," I say.

"I'm Zamir. If you ever need anything, I'm always around somewhere fixing whatever needs fixing."

He nods at me and sticks his mop in his bucket, rolling it down the hallway. His easy smile—the light brown of his eyes—he's a bigger version of Kareem. And he's a janitor here at Ghalib. Is that why Kareem kept it a secret? Does he

worry people will think less of him? I wonder if his father knows who I am, or if Kareem's kept me a secret, too.

The doors to the gym are pushed open when I pass by and even though I know I shouldn't, I can't help it. I look in. Tables for the various activities are set out along the perimeter of the room and it's packed with kids milling around. A banner hangs from one of the tables with the words *Model United Nations*. Next to it the band crew proudly displays tubas and trombones alongside instruments I don't even recognize. The robotics, newspaper, and debate clubs are lined up along the other wall. And then I see it: A sleek black telescope, a painted poster board with glittering planets and meteors. Astronomy club. Humza leans down, writing his name on a sheet on the table.

My mother had teased me, saying that I'd be like Safa let loose in a candy store here. She shouldn't have worried. I'm on the outside looking in while everyone else eats to their heart's content.

I spot Kareem at the far side of the gym, playing basketball with a group of kids. He shoots the ball straight into the net. The kids around him cheer. Kareem grins and takes a deep bow. I swallow. Why can't I get on with things like him? The news from today doesn't change the fact that this school is the key to unlocking a new destiny. But even

as I tell myself this, tears fill my eyes. I take a deep breath. I can't cry. Not here.

"Hey." Faisal is suddenly at my side. "You okay?"

I clear my throat. "Yeah. I just . . . I didn't know about the extracurricular thing. Or the chores. It's no big deal. I'm glad to be here. But—"

"But it's still a punch to the gut, isn't it?"

"Yeah." My jaw unclenches a little.

"But Headmaster Moiz is right," he says. "Your first year is really tough."

"Isn't it hard for *everyone*?"

"It's . . . it's different for us," he says. "But on the bright side, they let you sign up for whatever you want after your first year. I'm on the track team. Newspaper. I even tried archery last semester."

So it really is just this year. My shoulders relax a little.

"If you ever have questions about how Ghalib works, you can always ask me," he says.

"I do have one question. How do chores work?"

"They're annoying, but not so bad," he says. "You can do stuff like fold towels and linens in the laundry room, that's a cinch. Dishes—washing, drying, putting them away—that's a breeze, too."

"Is that what you do?"

“I try to get chores done first thing in the morning,” he says. “Shuaib and Basem, the cooks, can always use extra help doing morning prep. Washing and chopping things.”

“And it keeps you behind the scenes.” That’s another part of the equation hitting me. If Humza and the others didn’t care that we were scholarship kids, they might feel differently if they see me taking out the trash.

Faisal studies me. “It stings a little at first,” he says gently. “Not going to lie about that. But it gets easier.”

He’s saying this to make me feel better. He has to be. How can it ever feel easier to be treated like a second-class student?

• • •

When I punch in the dorm code and push the door open, it bumps against something.

“Hey! Watch it.”

I realize quickly it’s a *someone*. Aiden. He glares at me, his phone in his hand.

“Sorry,” I begin. “I didn’t—”

“Yeah, you sure didn’t, charity case.”

Without another word, he walks up the stairs.

Charity case.

The words land like a slap. He said it like having a scholarship means I'm not part of the same species. I guess to him, I'm not.

I think of the going-away party at Amal's house. The laughter. The hugs. The desserts. Everyone had chipped in to buy me a leather bag that they presented to me in shiny gold wrapping.

Back home, everyone was proud of me.

Back home, everyone was jostling for me to be part of their team.

But I'm not home now.

Chapter 11

By the time the lights-out bell sounds on our floor that night, I'm ready to pass out. But as quickly as I close my eyes, they spring open. Chores. I completely forgot.

Kareem's back is toward me, he's lightly snoring. I want to sleep so badly, but I can't fall behind. Not this early into the school year. Sitting up, I slip on my sandals and pad to the end of the hallway to our floor's laundry room. Folding and sorting sounds like a simple enough way to get in my hours if there's anything there to take care of.

Entering the room, a fluorescent tube overhead buzzes before turning on, revealing three large washers and dryers and a metal counter with a pile of folded towels. I open a dryer. A batch of warm towels are bundled inside.

Pulling them onto the counter, I start folding. Squaring the edges, setting each one to the side. There are so many people who keep this school running. Gardeners. Cooks. Maintenance people. I even saw some housekeepers gathering towels in the bathroom just this morning. They don't *need* us to do this work. They want to make sure we remember our place.

My thoughts drift to Kareem. He helped me troubleshoot my email this afternoon. We talked about our classes over dinner. But he never mentioned his father. Not once. I understand him not wanting to broadcast that information to the world, but why wouldn't he tell *me*?

"Hey."

I nearly jump out of my skin at the unexpected voice. Naveed. He stands at the entrance of the laundry room. His hair's matted, he holds his hand up to cover a yawn.

"Couldn't sleep either, huh?" I ask.

"I know this is weird," he says. "But the bed is almost . . . *too* soft?"

"Yes! I was thinking the same thing."

"And I guess we both thought we could find something to do here for our service hours. I don't want to get in trouble for falling behind."

"Great minds think alike." I gesture to the towels. "Plenty for both of us."

We get to work pulling all the clean towels out of the other dryers to fold, and I tell Naveed about my encounter with Faisal. “He told me he likes to help out in the kitchen. Cutting up stuff and washing dishes.”

“That’s a logical plan,” he says. “We can get it all out of the way before classes even start. Maheen always says success comes to those who seize the day.”

“Still”—I hesitate—“it kind of stinks, doesn’t it?”

“No,” he says without missing a beat. “It *definitely* stinks.”

We don’t say much more after that. We fold and stack until all the towels are neatly pressed into squares on the metal rack along with the other clean towels.

It’s not fun to have to do this. But it helps not being in it alone.

Chapter 12

Up early, huh?” Faisal says as Kareem, Naveed, and I step into the kitchen behind the dining hall. He has on an apron and stands in front of a cutting board, slicing apples. “Wash up and grab an apron.”

As we wash our hands, the door swings open again. Two men, one with a bushy gray mustache and neatly parted hair, and a younger one, enter. I recognize them from our meals; they always come and go mostly unnoticed, replenishing trays.

Faisal introduces us. The older man nods. “Great to meet you. Name’s Shuaib. Head cook. And this is Basem.”

Our task is simple. Chop fruit for breakfast and place

it in serving tins. Slice vegetables for the cooks to prepare for lunch.

“Faisal is the pro at getting his work done as efficiently as possible,” Shuaib says. He pulls out a vat of flour and pours it into a larger mixer. “Sometimes knocked out all his hours for the week in one day.”

“I usually do that when midterms or finals are coming up,” Faisal says.

As we slice and chop, the kitchen comes to life with conversation. Naveed nervously peppers Faisal with questions about how tough the history teacher really is, while the cooks gossip about the new swim coach.

I glance around, taking in my surroundings. Everything here is shiny and metallic. Even the counters and the wide sinks on opposite ends of the room gleam. But as different as it all is, there’s something familiar about it. The way the cooks joke with each other and us. The sounds of washing and chopping vegetables. It’s comfortable. It reminds me of home.

“What’s your favorite subject so far?” Naveed asks we put away bowls of honeydew and berries.

“Math,” Kareem says. “It’s the easiest by a mile.”

“Math is okay, but I like art,” says Naveed. “Mr. Adeel is so nice. And we get to paint in a few weeks.”

“Adeel’s nice and all,” Kareem says. “But his slideshows makes me want to nap. What’s *your* favorite class, Omar?”

“I think Moiz is the one to beat for the title of absolute favorite teacher, don’t you guys?”

Naveed’s eyes widen—then he howls with laughter.

“Honestly?” I continue. “I think he’s part grizzly bear.”

“Yeah, he really loves us scholarship kids, doesn’t he,” Faisal says.

“Well, it could always be worse,” Kareem says. “At my last school, we had this one teacher who made us write ‘I will not be late’ one hundred times on the chalkboard for every minute we were tardy.”

I guess Kareem’s right. It could always be worse. But studying my cutting board, I wonder: Isn’t it okay sometimes to be disappointed in what is?

Aiden’s words for us flash in my mind. *Charity case*. Even now, the words burn. I know he’s an entitled jerk who thinks this school with its enormous pool and horse stables is a dump. But he is right about me. I *am* here on charity. I think about Marwan who flies to a different continent so he can ski down a snowy mountainside. Practically everyone here has their own laptop and smartphone so they never have to set foot in the computer lab if they don’t want to.

I've always known I'm poor, but until Ghalib, I never *felt* poor.

"This was way better than folding towels in the dead of night," Naveed says, untying his apron.

"Folding towels at night?" Faisal asks. "I hope that's not what you just said."

"We didn't want to fall behind on chores," I tell him. "There were towels in the dryer last night, so Naveed and I got to work."

The chefs grow quiet.

Faisal lowers his knife. "Do you know how much trouble you could get into for being out of your rooms after lights-out?"

"But . . . we were doing chores." Naveed's expression grows pale. "We're supposed to do five hours a week."

"Lights-out are lights-out. Don't ever do that again." Basem shakes his head. "Good thing the warden didn't do a random check of your floor and find you. Last thing you want is to get yourself kicked out before you've even really started."

A chill goes through me. Kicked out?

"And those hours won't even count," Faisal continues. "There has to be a staff person supervising to sign off on your hours. Can't exactly ask anyone to sign off on work

you did after hours. You should have gotten an email with all the details. You better read it.”

My cheeks flush. Why *hadn't* I read the email yet? It was the first thing I should have done. The first thing I *will* do this afternoon.

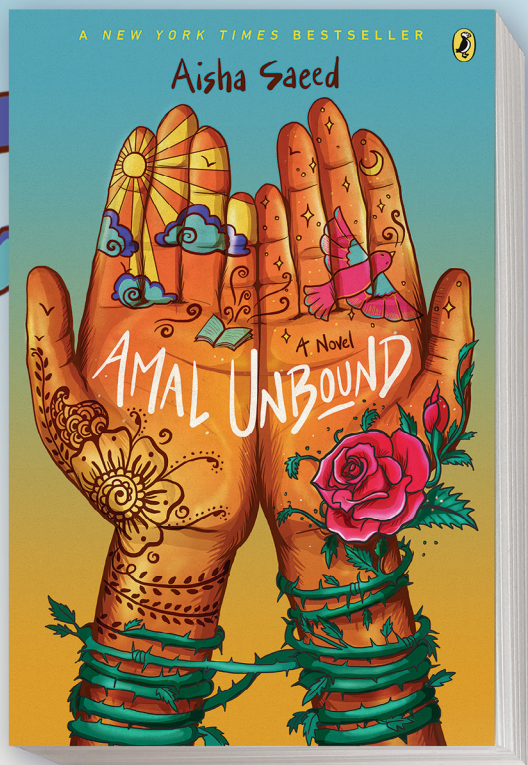
“Don’t worry.” Shuaib swats my arm kindly. “Bring the sheet tomorrow and we’ll sign off for today.”

“I can’t believe last night won’t count.” Naveed groans. “We folded all that laundry for nothing.”

“Consider yourself lucky you didn’t get caught.” Basem chuckles.

But nothing about this was funny. How could a school so hard to get into be so easy to get thrown out of?

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