

# AMAL UNBOUND

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## Chapter 7



I prepared breakfast for my mother and stepped into her room. The sun was well into the sky, but the curtains were still drawn. The baby lay asleep next to her.

I had now missed nine days of school. My mother was still not better. She managed to come out of her room now and then to get a glass of water. Last night, she even sat listlessly with us in the courtyard for our evening meal. But she wasn't improving fast enough, and the longer I was away from school, the further I fell behind.

"I brought you breakfast," I told her. "I added onions to the omelet the way you like."

"Set it on the side table," she said.

"Amma, you need to eat to get your strength," I said.

“I think I need to rest even more.”

I knew I should sit with my mother and encourage her to eat, but it wasn't as if she listened to me these days. I glanced at the window. Sunlight peeked from behind the curtains.

“I'm going to go to the market. We're out of ginger and peppers. Hafsa said they got a shipment of those biscuits you like. I could pick some up.”

“No, thanks. But take Safa and Rabia with you.”

“Parvin can watch them. It will take me twice as long if I take them.”

“Your father doesn't like you going to the market by yourself.”

It was no use protesting. Gripping Safa with one hand and Rabia with the other, I tried to measure my pace so they could keep up with me. The cool morning breeze and clouds thankfully shielded us from the otherwise oppressive heat.

The market was a ten-minute stroll, well past the tailor shop and the pharmacy, to the town that bordered our village. This was where nearly everything was, including the open-air market with all sorts of different stores and the vendors who sometimes showed up outside with carts of samosas and kulfis.

“What has the S sound?” I asked my sisters as we

walked. “Who can find something with the S sound first?”

Safa craned her neck, studying the brick houses lining the road. Hira, the butcher’s wife, waved to us from her front step as we walked past.

“Street!” Rabia pointed to the ground. “And stairs.” She waved toward a neighbor’s concrete steps.

“And Safa!” Safa grinned.

“Good job!” I patted their heads and picked another letter. This game I came up with was working! It kept them by my side. I thought I wanted to teach students closer to my own age, but I loved helping my sisters learn. Maybe I’d make a good primary teacher.

The open-air market came into view. We walked past Basit’s butcher shop. He cleaned off a leg of lamb, readying it to hang on a ceiling hook along with the day’s other fresh cuts of meat. The sweet maker next door studied his ledger next to the glass display of sweets in rows of orange, yellow, and pistachio green.

I could already hear the chatter of my neighbors before I stepped inside the produce store owned by Hafsa’s family. It was the most popular store in the market. People even came from neighboring towns to buy from them because they had the best selection. I squeezed past a group of women examining the eggplants and made my way up to the blue crates filled with tomatoes, jalapeños, and

radishes. My family's oranges and sugarcane were packed along the back wall. Not for the first time, I wondered how many other little stores all over Pakistan our produce might reach. I loved imagining all the far-flung people eating food that grew from the earth behind my house.

Grabbing what we needed at the market, I paid Hafsa's father, Shaukat, who seemed grateful I kept my hands so firmly on Safa this time. Last time, she knocked a stool into the wall, sending a shelf of spices crashing to the ground.

"The roof!" I looked up.

Shaukat looked at me.

"I thought something was different," I explained, pointing at the ceiling. "The blue tarp is gone. You fixed the hole."

"I did. Was hoping to make do longer with the tarp, but the wind last week tore it right off. Had to replace the whole roof."

"Well, it looks nice. And it's good it's fixed, isn't it?"

"It's never good to borrow from the Khan family." His jaw tightened as he rang up my order. "But sometimes you have to do things you don't want to."

Shaukat's words lingered in my mind as I left the market. Just like he didn't want to borrow money, I didn't want to leave my mother when she still hadn't recovered. But the longer I stayed home, the further I fell behind

at school. I couldn't keep this up much longer. Amma needed help. We had to do something.

"Amal!" my classmate Farah's mother called out to me from a distance. She walked at a steady clip toward us.

"Mariam Auntie!" Rabia turned to me. "That starts with an *M*, right?"

"Good job!" I said. "Here." I dropped change into her palm. "Go get some kulfis from the man over there."

The girls hurried to the vendor as Mariam approached.

"Don't you look pretty in that shalwar kamiz," she said when she drew near. She reached out and smoothed the collar. "When I saw the floral pattern, I knew it would be perfect for you. Told your mother a little bit of lace would add some pop to it."

"Thank you for sewing it," I told her. "It fits me perfectly."

"How is your mother?"

"Tired, but she's doing okay."

"A girl, I heard?" She shook her head.

I knew everyone wanted to have a son, but I was getting tired of hearing this. Wasn't she once a little girl, too?

"Tell your mother I'll come this afternoon to check in on her. She must have some hand-me-downs she needs fixed up for the baby."

I thanked her before continuing on our way. I laughed

when Safa smacked her lips on our way home. White syrup dripped down her chin onto her dress.

“You can’t do anything without making extra work for me, can you?” I said.

I handed the groceries to Parvin when I got home and grabbed a towel to wipe Safa’s face. My father sat at the table in the living room. He sorted through an assortment of papers scattered across the desk.

“Is everything okay?” I asked him. “You’re home early.”

“It will be,” he sighed. “Work is busier than usual, and your mother’s still in bed.”

“We should phone Raheela Bibi. She’ll know what to do.”

“It’s not something the midwife can cure.”

“Then maybe we can take her to the doctor?”

“What she needs is time. She’ll get better soon enough.”

“But the thing is”—I fidgeted—“I’ve missed a lot of school now, and exams are coming soon. I was hoping I could go back to school tomorrow.”

“Amal . . . Safa and Rabia need you.”

“Parvin could watch the girls until we came back.”

“Parvin has her own work to do, you know that. Your sisters aren’t her responsibility.”

“She won’t mind! She loves the girls—”

“Enough, Amal!”

The sharpness of his voice silenced me.

“I’m sorry, Amal. But this is how it has to be now. You’re the eldest daughter. Your place is here.”

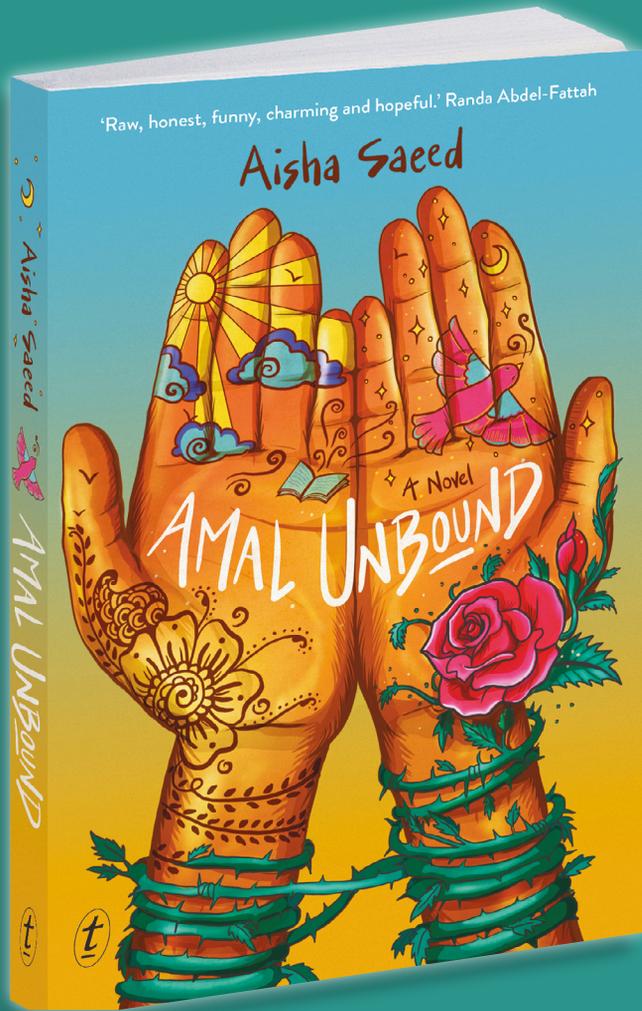
I wanted to tell him it wasn’t my choice to be the eldest, but I held my tongue. Why did this random chance have to dictate so much of my destiny?

“In a week or so, we can see how things are going,” my father continued. “But in any case, remember, you have already learned a lot. More than many of the neighborhood girls. You can read and write. What more do you need to know?”

I always thought my parents knew me well. So how could he ask me that?

What more did I need to know?

The whole world, Abu, the whole world.



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