

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 would open 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 rewrite 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. "Fozia Auntie asked me for a list of my favorite sweets the other day. And Fuad let it slip when we started playing."

“No one around here 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. “Pretend 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!” Fozia Auntie 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.” Fozia Auntie nods. “It’s 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, Malik Uncle, 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 torpedoes 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.