

# Amir

and the

# Tinn Princess

M.T. KHAN

WINNER of the WATERSTONES  
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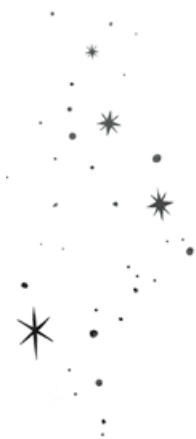
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*To my sisters  
for being my first friends*







## Prologue

It was an endless field of bricks and clay, of smoke and fire, and words and sway.

I was just a baby then, a bundle of giggles and round eyes, clinging on to Baba as he strolled over the world, *his* world, and spoke to me like I'd own it all one day. That the smoke curling out of the chimneys drew circles in the sky for me. That each man toiling under the sun did so because they served me. That every brick with Baba's name on it was also mine, because we shared our last name, our family legacy, our reputation and all the riches that came with it.

*"This could be yours."*

He spread his arms like an eagle, summoning the sun to wash over the kiln in glorious golden rays. I couldn't deny it. Watching it all from above, every move, the mechanical efficiency, our name on each brick



in the towering piles – even then, I knew it was grand.

*“You see, the reason we stand up here and those men below us, is because our family has worked hard for generations. We’re smarter than others. Stronger. Sharper. That’s why we sit at the top, Amir.”*

I stuck a finger in my mouth, babbling around it. *“Why they no smart?”*

*“It’s in their nature. Their fathers were lazy and dull, and spent all their money on cigarettes. A person’s wealth is decided by their decisions. When you look at someone poor, know that they made the wrong ones.”*

*“Bad decision,”* I repeated, not knowing what the words even meant.

*“Yes, beta, bad decisions.”*

I didn’t know it then, but I know it now. Just how much a string of choices can change the course of destiny, the status of a name, and the impression of a face.

And how decisions may not be decisions at all.



## CHAPTER 1

# On Top of the World

“Do you know why you’re here, Mr Rafiq?”

“Here” is the inside of the headmistress’s office, her desk square and imposing, shelves lined neatly with thick books, and the floor tiles clean – too clean, glaringly spotless, as if she’d scrubbed away the evidence of a crime. The smile she sends my way is forced, running out of patience as my attention skips round everything but her question. How much longer can I make her wait? I’ve been in this seat before. It’s all too familiar. She’ll start wringing her hands, smile fading, and then lean back in her leather chair with a shake of her head.

Headmistress Baqil performs the moves as if I’ve given her stage directions. Here comes her sigh right now. “Amir, you’re some—”

“Someone we care deeply about. You were an ace student. I know you’ve gone through a tough time,

but this behaviour is not what we expect from you,” I finish for her, reciting the speech she’s given time and time again. It’s often followed by: *You used to get amazing grades. It’s still possible, Amir. Why don’t you just try?*

There’s no point.

Headmistress Baqil swallows, clearing her throat. She shifts her attention to the two boys on either side of me, one with a bruised lip and the other with a black eye. Unlike them, my own face is flawless, which makes me the centre of suspicion. It may look like I’ve given them the beating of a lifetime, but look at my knuckles – there’s not a single scratch on them.

“You two. You said Amir is the reason you fought. That Amir set you up to blame each other. How is that possible?”

The one to my left, whose name I don’t even remember, sputters forward. “All I wanted was to be Amir’s friend! But he told me I had to become the class representative. That’s why I tried to steal the job from Abdul.”

Abdul grunts, chair screeching as he leans in too. “That’s not all. Amir said I could be his friend if I won the next track race. But everyone knows Mustafa is the fastest runner. . . I stole his running shoes so he wouldn’t be able to participate.”

“So what I’m hearing,” I interject, “is that you two fought over me? How sweet.”

“*Amir*,” the headmistress scolds. I shrug. She rubs her temples and releases a long breath. “Why would you ask them to do that?”

The truth is, I never expected them to do it. I have boys coming up to me every day wanting to hold my books or tag along after class. Leeches, all of them. This may be a wealthy private school filled with the sons of aristocrats, businessmen and politicians, but I’m still quite high on the food chain. I’m Amir Rafiq, youngest of three potential heirs to one of Pakistan’s largest brick companies. I get driven everywhere I go, eat lobster with truffle oil for dinner, and there’s no inch of me that isn’t covered in designer brands. According to the hierarchy of life, I’m better than everyone else. Don’t mistake that as my opinion. It’s just facts.

These two are prime examples of why. Mustafa’s baba owns a distribution company, and I’m sure his family just wants a partnership with mine to ship our bricks around Pakistan. Abdul, on the other hand, has a sister approaching her mid-twenties, which means every second she’s not married is another stain on their family name. My cousin is her perfect match – or at

least that's what Abdul's mother thinks. I'm not sure they even know each other's names.

That's why it's useless making friends when you're me. When someone looks my way, they don't just see me, they see what's *around* me: wealth, a network of connections, and a future enjoying a top-paying job at my father's company with a lifestyle most people couldn't dream of. Every handshake is a business deal, and each friendly smile is an alliance pact. Anything important is passed down to me through my baba, and from his baba before him – connections, money, and a purpose in life.

I know exactly where I stand. And it's not at the start of a path that I have any role in choosing.

But the headmistress doesn't want the truth. The truth doesn't work in situations like this. What does is simple: a flash of power.

"Are you really blaming *me*, Headmistress Baqil?" I cross my legs. "My family has donated to this school for generations. We even started a scholarship for less fortunate students. I would never want to create a ruckus at this fine establishment. All I hoped was that Mustafa and Abdul would strive to be better in their academics and sports. Is that horrible of me to ask?"

The headmistress's cheeks flush like she's been slapped. She coughs out her next sentence. "Of course

not, Amir. It's rather nice of you to look out for your classmates like that."

My lips curl into a smile. "Thank you."

"This isn't fair, Headmistress – I didn't mean to hit Abdul. It must've been a jinn that possessed me!"

"Y–yeah, someone must've put nazar on me. I wouldn't ever do this normally."

Leave it to these two morons to blame jinn, curses, kala jadu, and not their own greed. Just last week I saw Abdul punch our resident nerd for the answers to Wednesday's test. But it *must* be nazar. Totally.

I thought only uneducated people believed that superstitious nonsense.

Nazar is the evil eye, when jealous people put curses on you to bring about your ruin. And kala jadu, or black magic, is that hodgepodge of destructive spells and jinxes. And don't get me started on jinn. Invisible beings of fire and smoke? Tricksters who take advantage of you when your guard's down? They're nothing more than bedtime tales my cousins and I share to get a fright out of one another. So many troubled people will blame kala jadu or jinn for their downfall. But how about looking in a mirror and realizing it's just you and your filthy luck? I know. It's hard. I've done it, and I haven't seen the world the same since.

The headmistress smacks the desk with a heavy hand. “Save it. Mustafa, Abdul, I’ll be calling your families tonight. We do not tolerate violence here at Lahore Boys Grammar School. If this happens again, suspension will be on the table.”

Abdul and Mustafa launch out of their seats to object, but one glance at my relaxed posture and they fold back into themselves, heads low as they nod.

“This won’t happen again,” they say in unison.

The bell rings just as this dry conversation finishes. I’m up, slinging my bag over my shoulder and waving without turning back. Down the halls, classes are noisy with the restlessness of the end of the day, and the end of school. It’s the last day before summer holidays. In ten minutes, my driver will be here, and I won’t have to see any of these whiny brats for another two months.

Usually, I’d stick around for an hour or two, flicking through the reading list for next term, but that was the old Amir. The new me knows it’s not going to make a difference. I’m a Rafiq. Born into a family that made the right decisions long ago so I wouldn’t have to make my own now. If I’m cruising along a river leading to success, there’s no reason I should try to swim against its current.

“Hey.” A meaty hand lands on my shoulder, spinning me around. I’m face-to-face with Abdul’s ugly mug, his black eye staring me down. “We’re getting in trouble because of *you*.”

“Me?” I ask, fake shock strumming through my voice. “Weren’t you the one who got caught stealing Mustafa’s shoes? And you, Mustafa, you couldn’t have been more obvious about hijacking the votes for class representative. You both sicken me.”

“Us?” Mustafa scoffs in disbelief. “You’re the one who cut off all your friendships last year. Ever since your mama ran away you’ve become such a—”

I stomp towards them, fists clenched.

*Relax, Amir.* Deep breath in. Deep breath out. *They’re not worth it.*

“Keep my name and everything to do with me out of your mouths,” I snap. “Or that suspension might come sooner than you think.”

My nails dig into the straps of my bag. Without sparing them another glance, I march through the door.

Within the manicured school gardens, the afternoon sun is harsh. My skin feels like it’s burning. Like I’m being boiled from the inside out. I’d gone without thinking of Mama the entire day. Why does the collar of



my uniform feel so much tighter now? I'm suffocating. I can't breathe—

*“Meow.”*

A ball of fur brushes against my leg. Red eyes and a coat of black fur – it's one of those devil spawns. A cat.

My servants spend at least a good hour cleaning my uniform and ironing it every day. Now this cat's just gone and mussed up my trousers with its fur. I nudge it away, but it meows again, nuzzling its head against my ankle.

Another five minutes and my driver should be here. In another five minutes this clingy cat won't be my problem. But until then, even my heart, despite its dark core, can spare a crumb or two. I reach into my pocket and pull out a pack of gachak. Crouching next to the cat, I notice its coat almost reflects a dark blue in the sunlight. I dump the gachak biscuits in front of the cat. It stares at me with glittering crimson orbs like it's asking whether I'm offering poison, but when I shrug, it moves forward, crunching down on the biscuits.

I'm not feeding it because I like cats. Nor am I feeding it because Mama used to do the same thing to the strays that weaselled their way into our garden. I'm doing it to get rid of those stale biscuits. It's not like I was planning to eat them in the first place.

The cat finishes them with a hunger I didn't realize it possessed. But the cat thinks I'm a good person, because next thing I know it's nuzzling against my leg again, purring. I guess I could offer a little pat. My fingers rest on its fuzzy head, soft and silky. The cat meows, scrunching its eyes as if smiling at me.

"Amir!"

A hand waves to me from the car park. My driver is here, standing outside the sleek black Mercedes that's one of my baba's favourites. I take a step towards it, but my leg stops before I can swing it forward. That pesky cat – it's tugging on my trousers.

"Quit it." I try to shake it off. "I already gave you food."

But here's the thing about those devil spawns: they know the art of enchantment. Red orbs growing bigger by the second, head bowed, and tail tucked politely, it's hypnotizing me without even uttering a meow.

"Greedy leech." I surrender. Shuffling things around in my bag, I make enough room for the cat and plop it inside. It purrs as it makes itself comfy. I throw the flap over just so my driver doesn't start asking questions. As long as this cat keeps quiet, I guess I could snatch it up something heartier for dinner. It does look rather skinny.

"Sit tight," I demand.

We settle into the back of the car, leather seats soothing. In the brief moment that I shut my eyes, everything disappears: the exhaustion of waking at the crack of dawn; trudging through classes that can't hold my attention; the mundane feeling of walking through a life already figured out for me. In this moment, with the window down and wind blowing in my face, I can pretend I'm not Amir Rafiq, the twelve-year-old youngest son of one of Pakistan's richest businessmen, sitting at the top of the world. I'm air. I'm weightless. I'm just a kid with a cat in his backpack.

I'm not the culmination of a century of decisions I can't afford to change.



## CHAPTER 2

# *An Endless Ladder*

The dinner table is a painting. Bright, colourful biryani marks the centre, while platters of kebabs, koftas and salads blossom outward. The raita adds a nice pop of white against blazing red tandoori chicken. Glistening naans and rotis frame the corners, and tall glasses of lassi shimmer under the chandelier, still cold enough to collect dew on the surface. After a long, tedious day, I could devour it all.

“Amir.” An old lady stretches out her arms, caging me in a hug. Her bristly, ironed hair pokes my forehead. “There’s my grandson.”

“Assalaamu alaikum,” I greet her, voice strained. If she squeezes any harder, my ribcage might collapse.

Tonight’s dinner is supposed to be an important one, or so Dadi said. She has an announcement to make. Good news or bad, when it comes from Dadi,

I just know it's going to be a thorn poking at my side.

We pull into our seats at the long dinner table. Servants are still bringing over dishes. One has a jug of lassi in his hand, waiting to top up any glasses if need be. Another makes sure each plate catches the light perfectly. The last one flits about the dining room, checking everything is in order: the Quranic wood calligraphy, the display of Multani pottery, some fancy crystal lamps my baba bought in Turkey, and the spotless mosaic flooring.

Just like the cat I hid inside my room, I've worked up an appetite. Which dish would it like best? Maybe I can scrape some flakes off the barramundi. Cats like fish, don't they?

"Your dada's on a business trip, so he'll be missing dinner with us." Dadi ruffles my hair. "Don't worry, I'm sure he'll bring you many gifts."

I suppress a groan. But I am no more miserable than usual. My grandfather's presence at the estate means everyone walks on eggshells, Baba included. Dada's got the temper of a sailor and keeps forgetting that he's brought me the same gift from his last four business trips: a gold-plated Quran. "*Better read up, beta. Every prayer you do is another good deed added to me. Aha-ha!*" I wonder why he can't just make his own prayers. Too busy, he'd probably explain.

Even with servants fluttering about and Dadi's arms wrapped around my core, the estate feels empty. Dry. Dead. Each servant is a robot computing their tasks, whizzing from one corner to the other with vacant, numb expressions.

It wasn't always like this.

When Mama was around, I awoke to the sound of sitar strums, her chiming voice drifting across the estate like a call to prayer. She began and ended each day the same – playing music. She could enchant anything: instruments or people. I'd often find her in the kitchen, fingers scooping up some of the chef's chutneys and humming in gratitude. Or in the courtyard, asking the gardener how the flowers grow so bright. Servants would chatter like a flock of morning birds in her presence. She had a way of welcoming people, of making them feel special, no matter if they were an important investor or lowly kitchen sweeper.

And whenever I came home from school, Mama would be waiting there for me in the study, ready to throw away my textbooks and show me a new novel she'd uncovered in our century-old library.

A heavy smack on my shoulder startles me out of my thoughts. It means that Ashar, my older brother, has graced us with his presence today.

“How was school?” Ashar asks me, gaze landing straight on the chaat.

“Boring.”

“What about the tutor? He said your grades have been dropping.”

“It’s nothing the next test can’t fix.” Truly, no one cares if I fail or plunge below the average. With the right connections and sneaky manoeuvres, my future maintains its brightness. I’m not the one in control anyway.

“What will I do with such a genius brother? What if you outshine me?” Ashar chuckles, but his voice lacks any warmth. When I don’t respond, he backtracks to keep me peaceful. “But that’s impossible. You don’t have my sunny smile.”

He smiles widely to show his point, and it’s true, I have to squint to prevent myself from burning at its intensity. It’s the smile he uses for everything – favours, extra cash and luring people to his side.

“Amir’s only got eyes for horse riding.” The chair next to me shuffles, and my fifteen-year-old sister, Alishba, takes a seat. “Didn’t you finish the hardest course yesterday? I heard you’re good enough to join the youth league.”

News travels faster than I thought. Or rather, my siblings know exactly what we’re all doing and when.

“The instructor is just flattering me. Plenty of us are good enough for the league.”

“But you’re also great at cards, playing the rabab, reading quickly – and remember that one time you tried your hand at chess? You learned it in ten minutes and beat the neighbour’s uncle.”

Despite the praise, Alishba’s voice is rigid, as if she’s pressing me to make some kind of confession. When she asks her next question, I understand the reason. “Why don’t you actually hone any of those skills? Who knows, you might prefer it to Baba’s boring old brick company.”

There it is. Those little sneaky manoeuvres. It’s like holding someone’s hand only to lead them into a burning forest. Alishba doesn’t want me in the running for heir of Baba’s company. As the middle child, she already has a much bigger threat – our older brother. But nothing misses her radar. No matter how indifferent I am, she still sees me as a rival.

“There’d be no point,” I counter. Think about it. Why would I bother with petty skills or competitive horse riding if I know where my future lies? I don’t need any of that to be an executive at Baba’s company. Whether I enjoy them or not doesn’t matter. Passion, purpose ... they’re just distractions against an end we all know I can’t escape.



“What is all this talk about rabab and chess and my boring old brick company?”

The table snaps into attention as Baba makes his way to the head seat, settling down on the plush cushion. His hands are folded, eyes creased, and a streak of grey hair shoots down his scalp. He looks at us expectantly.

“Assalaamu alaikum,” we all greet in unison. Now that he’s finally lifted his fork and taken the first bite of kebab, we’re free to dig in.

Ashar goes for the chaat, while Alishba scoops up biryani and I grab a samosa. I could fill my entire stomach with just these.

“Did the meeting go well?” Dadi pipes up, barely half a roti on her plate. She’s more interested in analysing Baba’s expression, hawk eyes determined.

“Never been better,” he replies not a beat later. “The reserves are still full. And production’s only been getting more efficient.”

Dadi hums and returns to her plate, satisfied for now.

Alishba eats one spoonful before breaking into her daily report. “I read that bricks are very energy efficient. They absorb sunlight throughout the day, and then release that energy at night.”

“Correct.” Baba nods.

“And...” Alishba trails off, her leg shaking under the table, “the minerals inside the bricks are what determine the colour of it!”

Some *boring* brick company now. Alishba’s practically buzzing with each new fact she lays on the table. I reserve myself for what this dinner *should* be for: eating. Not trying to win over Baba. At the sight of no vegetables on my plate, Dadi takes authority and scoops some steamed broccoli onto it. When Alishba’s not looking, I transfer them onto hers.

I reach for the fish, raking through it with my fork before scooping some into a napkin and shoving it into my pocket. That cat better be grateful. It’s not every day you get to eat gourmet.

Baba reaches over and pats Alishba’s head. “Good. Keep studying.” If Alishba smiled any wider, her lips would tear apart. Seeing my siblings in constant battle is an exhausting experience. When we were younger, we used to all play football in the park, pretend to be explorers at our farmhouse, and take pictures at carnivals. And you might need to suspend your disbelief here, but at one point, Alishba and Ashar actually liked each other. Like normal siblings.

“Baba, I got a call from Uncle Tahir in the UK this morning,” Ashar intercepts. “He’s got my room ready

now. It really is happening so quick, isn't it?"

Baba's eyes soften, a reaction that compels Alishba to clutch her trousers instead of jumping across the table and mauling Ashar for interrupting her moment. "Can't believe you're already eighteen and going to study abroad. Tomorrow, I might open my eyes and find you married."

"That's not possible." Ashar waves it off, a grin pinned to his face. "Dadi's for sure going to choose my wife, and you know how picky she is. It'll take her a hundred years to find my match."

Baba throws his head back, and they both erupt into laughter louder than Independence Day fireworks.

And that's when Dadi makes her big move, setting down her fork and clearing her throat. "Speaking of marriage, I think it's time we tell the children. Your baba plans to remarry."

The table falls silent like a butcher's chop.

"It's only been a year..." Ashar mumbles.

Alishba gapes. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"It's really *your* plan, Mama." Baba sighs, massaging his temples.

I'm frozen, gaze still piercing the fish bones on my plate, fork gripped so hard my knuckles pale.

"That's enough," Dadi says sharply. "That woman—"

She cuts herself off, breathing deeply. Her eyes flash as she turns to us. “Your mother is irresponsible, selfish and a stain on our family. The only way we can cleanse ourselves of her is for your baba to marry a woman who actually cares for our enterprise.”

A scoff sputters out of my throat.

Dadi’s head whips to me. “Amir?”

“A stain? Cleanse? Someone who cares for the *enterprise*? So Baba doesn’t love this new woman. You just want to forget Mama ever existed. Even though she went *missing*. She needs us to find her—”

“She abandoned you all!” Dadi’s fists slam against the table.

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