

CHAPTER 1

Nasveen

I knock on my brother's door. His rap music is so loud, I'm sure he can't hear me. I pound louder. "Jaffar! Open up!"

The volume goes down. He opens his door a crack and glares at me. "What?"

I clear my throat. He never lets me forget that he's older than me. That I'm just his little sister. "I need your help," I say.

He glances at the pamphlets I'm holding. "College brochures? You're only a junior."

"I know. I'm starting early."

He rolls his eyes. "Of course you are."

“I don't have a clue where to go or how to apply.”

“Okay.” He sighs. “Come in.” He takes the pamphlets from me. Shakes his head as he glances at the first cover. “Harvard? No way.”

“Why not?”

He fingers through the rest. “Cal Tech? MIT? Stanford? Nasreen, these are all top universities.”

“So?”

“So our parents aren't rich.”

“Mr. Clarke said I can apply for scholarships.”

“I applied for scholarships and where am I going?”

“But you want to be an accountant. State college is perfect for you.”

“Oh, that's right,” he says. “You're the brains in the family.” He shoves the brochures back at me.

“I just want your advice.”

“And who advised me? No one. Because I’m the oldest and did it myself. Go online and figure it out.” He turns his music up.

I leave, closing the door behind me.

Back in my bedroom, I set the brochures on my desk. I think about asking my parents. But they know nothing about American colleges. As I sink into my beanbag chair, I imagine all the kids at school whose parents will be helping them decide which colleges to apply to. Parents who aren’t from Pakistan and get confused by American rules and language.

Taking a deep breath, I pull my calculus book onto my lap. I enter a few numbers into my graphing calculator and try to ignore Jaffar’s loud music thumping through our shared wall.

By ten o’clock, my homework is

finished. I wish I had more. I start thinking about school tomorrow. The familiar knot ties in my stomach.

Mom pokes her head around my door. "It's time for bed, Nasreen," she says in Punjabi.

"I know," I mutter back in English.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

She stares at me a moment. Then she says, "Good night," closing my door.

My parents have a hard enough time just getting by in this country. I decided a long time ago I wouldn't be one of the things they had to worry about. Just a year and a half. A year and a half and I won't have to deal with the students at Arondale High School anymore.

It's a little too early when I get to the bus stop. I lean against a tree, away from the others, trying to make myself invisible.