

# A New Life

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## Chapter 1

# A Dangerous Secret

“F**irash!** Where are you?”

It was his mother calling through the one window of their cramped little house. But the voice was only in Firash’s head – part of the usual guilt he felt whenever he was outside, while Mother and his sisters, Leila and Aisha, were forced to stay inside two dark rooms every day. Firash tried to ignore it.

“Hurry up. We don’t have all year,” Abdul grumbled, readying the bat.

It was Firash’s turn to bowl. He rubbed the ball against his pants to make it smoother, like the most famous bowlers did – and took a run up.

Abdul gripped a cricket bat fashioned from a piece of wood broken off a pallet. Firash bowled with a skilful spin, so that the ball sailed past on an angle. Abdul swung and missed as the ball smashed into the three uneven sticks set up as wickets.

“Yes!” Firash gave a cry of triumph as the ball rolled past and down, into a heaped mound of rubble where a building in the street had been bombed only weeks earlier.



Instantly there was a commotion as the boys all broke from their game to hunt for the ball. Firash wanted to join, but he imagined his mother calling again. She would be wanting to cook dinner, but it was too dangerous now for her or his sisters to go out onto the street to the market without being accompanied by his father. When Firash had returned from school, Mother had sent him to buy onions and a bag of rice.

The heavy sack of rice was still sitting where Firash, irresistibly drawn into the game of cricket, had propped it against the rock. But the onions had vanished.

“Has anyone seen my onions?” Firash called to the other boys, who shrugged or returned blank looks as he frantically searched, now even more worried about his mother’s disappointment than a dinner without onions. He should have known better. His family had been in this town for two months – leaving food lying about here was an irresistible invitation for someone hungry. And many people in this town were hungry, some even starving.

All over the country, and for the whole time of war, there had been food shortages. Everyone knew how the army swarmed upon farming villages and helped themselves to whatever they liked: chickens, rice, vegetables, spices, dried fruits and oil – leaving far less food for farmers to trade in the town markets.





“You must never complain about these things out loud,” Mother and Father had impressed on the three children. “It is too dangerous. A neighbour we drink tea and play chess with might seem to nod and express sympathy, only to report us to the authorities the next day.”

It was even more difficult for Firash’s sisters to hold their tongues. Being of high school age, Leila and Aisha were no longer permitted to go to school.

Almost overnight they had transformed from their usual loud and cheerful selves, full of ideas and opinions about how their country could become better, becoming sad and grim faced. They had changed from the day they tearfully returned home without their expensive schoolbooks – which had all been heaped in a pile and set on fire while the headmistress and teachers were led away by soldiers.



“It’s all right for you!” Leila had once hissed at Firash, when he was attempting to scrounge some money from Mother to buy sweet pastries from the street stalls after school. “You still have your freedom.” The girls were no longer able to go out into the streets to the stores or markets. If they did, they would have to be accompanied by Father and wear long flowing clothes that they weren’t used to.

Being a boy, Firash still attended school, but there were many things he could not say. The only thing that relieved the strain of worrying he would say the wrong thing, anything that could bring danger to his family, was playing cricket during breaks. With cricket, Firash could forget everything that was happening, like trucks with huge tyres crushing rubble into smaller pieces as soldiers shouted and hauled people from their families and homes to be questioned.

When playing cricket, he could temporarily forget his guilt about the boys at school who gnawed on a single wizened apple for their meal. If any of his classmates were curious as to why Firash always had a full meal for lunch, no one dared ask. Especially because he did his best to share his food around. Firash knew they assumed he must have uncles who were soldiers – like Abdul, whose brother was