I Am Thunder

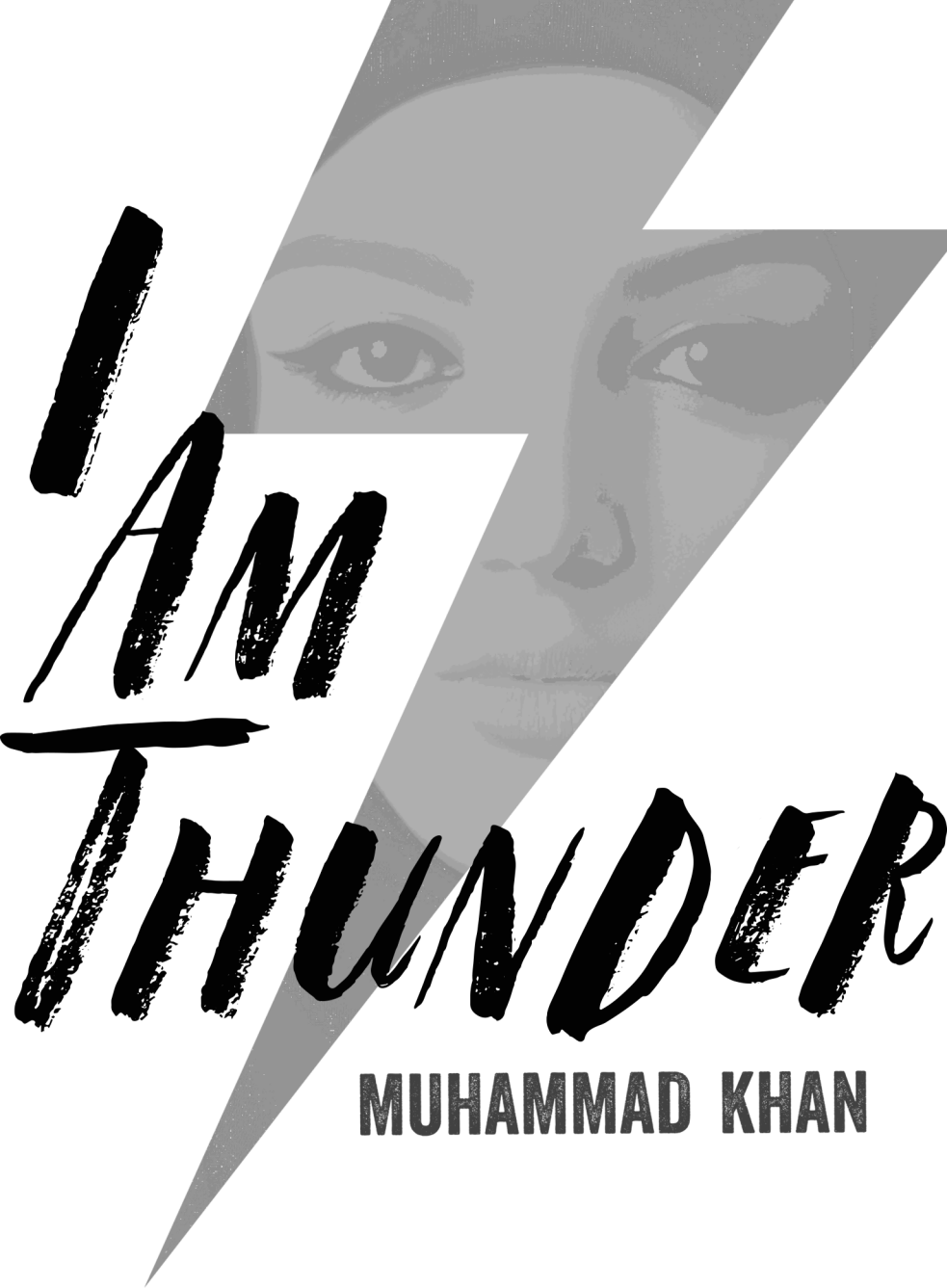
'Muzna's warmth and heart transform what could have been a gritty "issues" book into a powerful call for hope and standing up for your beliefs' *Bookseller*

'Buy it, read it, devour it . . . A powerful story with a voice that was needed. YA world, you don't know the thunder that is coming your way!' Samia Sharif, ssharifbooks.wordpress.com

'Funny, gripping, and brilliantly handles difficult topics with an amazing main character. A must-read!' Sophie Cameron, author of *Out of the Blue*

'We need more people like Muhammad Khan to craft stories like this to not only show that we are not alone, but also so people understand' Humaira Kauser, aged 19, a lovereading4kids.co.uk Reader Review Panel member

'This funny, gritty coming-of-age novel could not be more needed' Izzy Read, aged 16, a lovereading4kids.co.uk Reader Review Panel member



I Am Thunder

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For Suraiya, who told me to write this,
and for Mama, who made sure I did

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

In February 2015 news broke of three British schoolgirls who flew out to Syria to join the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State'. As a Muslim and a high-school teacher, I found this shocking on many levels. The girls, by all accounts, were academically gifted with caring families and friends. So what prompted their disastrous decision – one that would cost them their lives?

For someone who has lost a relative to religious extremism, the incident reopened old wounds. So in April 2015, over the two-week Easter break from teaching, I sat down and wrote the first draft of the book you now hold in your hands. Writing it was painful, but I needed to understand what might lead someone to make those choices.

Once I began writing, I realized it was going to be harder than I thought. Why? Because being a Muslim – even a British one – means different things to different people. Muzna's daily life is the very real experience of some, but not all of my Muslim students. But her teenage experience is something each and every one of us can relate to, whatever our background.

I wrote Muzna's story for you. Muslim or non-Muslim? It doesn't matter to me. It shouldn't matter to you.

You are thunder. Don't keep quiet.

Muhammad Khan

‘The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.’

Alice Walker, Pulitzer Prize-winning author

‘I tell my story not because it is unique, but because it is not. It is the story of many girls.’

Malala Yousafzai, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize

PART 1

YEAR 8: END OF SUMMER HOLIDAYS

CHAPTER 1

'Oh-em-gee! Are you playing with your Barbie?!'

My doll face-planted on to her dining-room table. Plates and cutlery went flying as the plastic roast dinner catapulted into the miniature sink. Salma had a knack for turning up at the worst possible moment. I still hadn't recovered from the time she'd caught me 'perving on the naked guy' in my science book. For the record: I was doing *homework*.

'As if!' I scoffed, scrambling to my feet. 'Just tidying up a few old things.'

Salma wasn't buying it. Of course she wasn't – you can't pull the wool over a bestie's eyes.

'Shame, Muzna!' she mocked. 'We start Year Nine in, like, *three weeks*. Think they'll have playtime on the curriculum?'

My cheeks prickled. Playing with dolls kept the peace at home; let my parents go on thinking I was 'innocent'. Plus I still thought it was actually kind of fun. But admitting this would be asking for a lifetime of teasing.

'Laugh all you want,' I said. 'This stuff will shift on eBay, *easy*.'

'Dream on. No one wants your curry-stinking dollies . . .' Salma trailed off, spotting my laptop lying open. I saw her lips curve into a mischievous grin.

'Salma, no! Don't!' I cried, trying not to step on Barbie's best china.

'Hmm, looks like somebody's been staring at naked people again!' Easily beating me to it, she sat down in front of my laptop. Puzzlement replaced glee. 'What the hell is *Dono Aanke Khuli*?'

'An info site,' I said, hobbling over. '*Both Eyes Open*. Like WikiLeaks, only . . . leakier.'

'Boring,' Salma said absently.

'I'm working on an edgy new story,' I explained.

'And what's "bride burning"?' she asked, reading the words off the screen.

'Not too sure, actually. Hence the research – but it's bound to be super-edgy!'

Salma didn't look impressed. 'Where'd you hear about it?' she asked.

I picked at a bobble on my sleeve. 'I kind of . . .' I licked my lips. 'I was just . . .'

'Spit it out, bruv!'

'So, I overheard Ami chatting to her friends about it last night. They were whispering so loudly, you couldn't *not* hear.'

'Listening in on your mum's private conversations?' Salma said, clucking her tongue. 'You're *so* Asian!'

In spite of her trademark put-downs, Salma Chaudhry was my sister-from-another-mister, born on the same day, in the exact same hospital. It wasn't until nursery that we bonded over a Beanie Boo with eyes like bin lids. Can't remember now who the rainbow-coloured unicorn belonged to, but that toy became our mascot. And by the time it got left behind on a bus somewhere, our friendship was solid as.

'That's it!' I slid into the chair vacated by Salma, excitedly slapping my cheeks. 'You fixed a major plot hole. *Eavesdropping*. Better add it in before I forget.'

'Do it later,' Salma said, shutting the laptop on my stumpy fingers. 'I made plans. We are going shopping, girlfriend!'

'It won't take long,' I promised, reopening the laptop.

'You and your stories!' Salma snarked. 'Ever heard of *Hare Krishna and the Prisoner of Afghanistan*?'

I blinked. 'No . . .'

'Exactly!' she said snapping her fingers. 'Who wants to read Asian fairy tales? Nobody, that's who.'

I shook my head. 'I don't write fairy tales, I write—'

'And that's your problem, right there. Think Beyoncé got rich off of writing stuff?'

'Well actually . . .'

'Bey stuck out her hand, and Jay-Z put a ring on it. That's how you make money!'

I narrowed my eyes. 'So you're basically telling me to marry a guy for his money?'

'Hell no!' she said, giving me stink eye. Four fingers hovered inches from my face, then dropped one by one, like dominoes. 'Looks. Bod. More looks. *Then* money.'

We both burst out laughing. Salma was a crazy genius; she knew exactly how to wind me up. And me being dumb, I fell for it. Every. Single. Time.

'Grab your purse and prepare to splash the cash!' she announced.

'Five minutes and we'll shop-till-you-drop,' I promised, turning back to my laptop.

I heard the sharp intake of breath, could sense the protest building up in her, but then something totally unexpected happened.

'Oh-em-gee!' she shrieked. 'You got messaged by a hunk.'

A chat box had popped open in the middle of the screen.

Salams, how are you today?

I closed it. Automated customer service pop-ups were s*o* annoying. But within seconds it had sprung open again.

Are you Muslim?

Salma giggled. 'Don't leave a brother hanging, Muzi.' The user ID showed us that someone called Kasim Iqbal was chatting.

Why? What's it to you, nosy? I typed. Sass came easy from behind a laptop screen.

I'm Muslim too, and looking for buddies. How old are you?

Taking this as an opportunity to show Salma exactly how unboring I could be, I replied. ***Thirteen. How old are you, mate?***

Seventeen. Wanna see a pic? he typed.

My laptop pinged as a file was received. I glanced over at Salma – Excited Puppy Face. Without another thought, I clicked it open: a selfie taken in a slightly smudgy locker-room mirror. The boy was shirtless, squinting at his phone from under a carefully sculpted quiff. A gemstone in his left ear had caught the flash, sending light rays scattering across smooth pecs and ridged abs.

'Sexy boi!' Salma squealed, pretending to lick the screen.

I gave her a severe poke. But honestly, it *was* kind of impressive how much Kasim looked just like one of Barbie's boyfriends. An Asian one.

You go school? he asked.

Obvs. Why – don't you?

Don't need to. Got my own house, swimming pool, and car to boot. No more money worries for Kasim.

I bit my lip. Poverty was like the fourth member of my family. It chose where we shopped, made us buy in bulk, and stopped us from ever going on holiday. Whenever Ami and Dad argued, you could be sure money was at the bottom of it.

What do you do? I asked.

This and that. Mostly I pray. Allah hooks me up with everything I need.

That was his secret formula for getting rich quick?

Praying doesn't work like that! I replied.

Or maybe it does, and you just been doing it wrong? he typed.

Salma pretended to gag. 'Tell him to shut up and send another shirtless pic.'

I ignored her.

Know those little flash games you can download on phones? Kasim wrote. **That's me.**

Seriously?

Yeah, make a lot of money from ad revenue and add-ons. You into games?

Kind of. Writing stories is my thing, I admitted, feeling kind of shy as I typed.

'Oh-em-gee! Is there no one you won't tell?' Salma said. 'Look, there's a dustman on the street. Go tell him before he gets away.'

No way! Kasim typed. **I'm working on a detective game at the minute, but I can't come up with a decent plot.**

I could totally help!!! I'd never met anyone who needed my input on a story before. I was practically slavering.

I knew you were special! Wallahi you give off good vibes.

Thanks! I wrote, getting the warm and fuzzies. ***So who are your main characters? What's the setting?***

Here's all I've got so far—

Suddenly the screen went blank. I gasped, wondering what cruel twist of fate had made my ancient laptop die at such a crucial moment.

Salma held the answer – literally. The plug dangled limply at the end of the cord, ripped from the socket that was the only thing keeping it running. 'You'll thank me later.'

'How could you?' I asked, welling up.

'Oh puh-leeze! You really think hot guys hang out on random websites that aren't even chat sites wanting story advice from thirteen-year-olds? Two words: stranger danger.'

Put like that, it sounded textbook dumb.

'As I was saying, before you so rudely started drooling over

six-packs – *I've made plans*. Your dad's picking us up from the shopping centre at three. Time's a wastin', girlfriend . . .'

She swept out of the room, dangling my purse behind her like bait. I sprang up, ready to chase her down for it, but something made me stop.

Salma said 'Jump!' and I said 'How high?' It had always been like that. Glancing over my shoulder at the disconnected laptop, a lump formed in my throat. For about thirty seconds, Kasim Iqbal had made me feel special.

CHAPTER 2

I examined a Hello Kitty pencil case with cute little charms. Little out of my price range, but I did need one for the new term . . .

'Step away from the tat!' Salma said, coming over all *fashion police*. 'Pencil cases are *so* primary school. Get a make-up bag instead.'

A boy, who seemed around our age, backed into me and started to apologize. The apology died on his lips, replaced by fits of laughter. 'Look, Dan!' he called to his mate, pointing at me like I was an animal at the zoo. 'Zayn Malik!'

A beard joke. I was dizzy with humiliation.

'Yeah!' His friend laughed, as two more gathered round to stare. 'She's got more tache than you have, mate!'

'You got a half-inch willy and zero pubes, bruh!' Salma shot back, slipping into Ghetto Gal mode. 'You get me?'

The first boy turned beetroot red as his friends howled with laughter. They reminded me of a pack of hyenas. 'Oooh, you got owned!' they mocked.

'*Shut up, you dirty Paki!*' the boy roared, spritzing us with spit.

An old man's hand shot out, catching the boy's arm in a death-grip. 'Apologize to these young ladies, right now!' he demanded. His eyes were chips of ice.

'What's it to you, gramps?' The boy was clearly fronting. He looked like he was going to wet himself.

'Don't they teach you nothing in school?' asked the old man. 'Look where racism got Hitler. Be a man and say you're sorry!'

Deciding not to chance it, the boy threw an apology Salma's

way. A second glare from the old man won me a mumbled one too. The hyenas clutched their bellies and laughed.

I stormed out of the shop and beelined for the toilets, too upset to think straight. Hot tears spilt over my cheeks as I flopped on to a toilet seat, slamming the cubicle door shut. Why did boys always have to pick on me?

Kasim liked you, drawled the voice that lived in my head.

Minutes later, I got a text from Salma.

whr r u???

toilets by mcdonalds

wait 4 me k?

It seemed like an hour before a rap on the cubicle signalled my mate's arrival. By now the humiliation had had a chance to work its way out of my system. All that remained was a soggy nose and hurt pride.

'*Happy birthday to you!*' Salma sang tunelessly, dropping a small green box on to my lap.

She knew it wasn't my birthday – what with us sharing the date. But a present was a present. Turning the box over in my hands, I looked at the label.

'*Lightens excess dark hair?*' I read aloud. 'I can't use this! Ami'll kill me. This stuff gives you cancer, you know!'

'And breathe!' Salma commanded, snapping her fingers inches from my face. 'First off, Mum's been using this stuff for years, and she ain't got no cancer. Secondly, it's the summer. If your eagle-eyed Ami notices, we can pretend it got sun-bleached.'

Salma's mum was cool – my mate's beautiful highlights being a case in point. I wished my own parents would let me add threads

of pure gold to my boring black hair. But it was never going to happen. Imagine what they'd say about moustache cream!

'So . . .' Salma prompted, popping open the lid and taking a whiff. 'Oh shit!' The ammonia made her eyes water. We giggled, and the dead feeling in my soul began to lift. 'Wanna give this stuff a try?'

I took a steeling breath. 'Girl, let's blitz this beard!' I said, giving her the z-snap.

Salma high-fived me twice. She liked me fierce, and it *was* kind of exhilarating to imagine I was Li'l Miss Sass from some American TV show, instead of boring Muzna Saleem from Haringey.

Two measly minutes was all it took for Salma to whip up the dream potion. The shadow of facial hair, which had been mildly embarrassing way back in Year 7, had gone on to become fluffy enough to notice. But now it lay trapped under a layer of crème bleach, and I was about to get even.

'What now?' I asked, feeling the bleach tingle against my skin.

She consulted the instruction leaflet. 'We wait. Budge up.'

'Loo for two!' I joked, shifting across the toilet seat.

'Oh grow up,' she said, then farted.

We both cracked up.

Fifteen minutes later, it was time for the big reveal, and I prayed I wasn't about to be disappointed. Salma returned to the cubicle with a wodge of wet tissues. I lifted my chin into the air, feeling self-conscious as she wiped away the crème.

'What?' I cried, watching her eyebrows slither up her forehead. Had I broken out in blisters?

But Salma wasn't saying. Instead she snapped a pic, then held her phone out for me to view. I prepared myself for the worst . . .

My first thought was the picture was of somebody else. My second, that she must've applied a filter. It was too good to be true – how could all my ugly facial fuzz just vanish?

Zooming in revealed it was still there, but *camouflaged*. My eyes filled with tears.

'I love you forever!' I squealed, hugging the life out of her. The warm mango scent of my friend's perfume filled my heart with joy. She was like a real-life fairy godmother.

I glanced back at the phone, and my smile was gone.

''Sup?' Salma asked.

'It's 3.45 p.m.!' I choked. 'Dad's gonna kill us!'

Before I knew it, I had broken into a frantic sprint, blasting out of the toilets like a cannonball, praying to God that Dad had been delayed in traffic. I didn't want to make him mad. He'd ground me and take my phone away.

Gripping on to the edge of the balcony, I scanned the car park below, mentally willing Dad's Vectra to be at least five miles away.

But there it stood, as stark as an exclamation mark.