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Annie's Choice

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To my dad, who loved
telling us ghost stories

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Chapter 1
Omen

It was a dark day when Karam started at his new school.

"I hope it's not an omen," his mother said as she dropped him off. Karam's mother believed in omens. But Karam was more like his dad, who fixed computer problems. Karam and his dad believed in the power of science and logic.

"It's winter," Karam told his mum. "The clouds are filled with rain. That's why they're so heavy and dark."

His mother smiled. He'd never talk her out of her beliefs. "Have a good day, Karam," she said. "I hope you like your new school."

Karam smiled too, but inside he was nervous. He should be used to new schools by now, since his dad's job meant the family had to travel all over the world. And Karam had been lucky so far. He always made friends, but every time he started at a new school there was a small fear inside him that perhaps this time things might be different.



But the playground of his new school was like playgrounds everywhere – children ran and played and chatted. No one even seemed to notice Karam as he stood alone, waiting for school to start. But then a sudden commotion made him jump. A fight had broken out close by. Two boys were locked together, and then one was thrown to the ground at Karam's feet. Karam reached down to help the boy up.

"Leave him be!" the other boy yelled.

When Karam looked up, he saw a boy with angry eyes rushing over.

"I told you to leave him be!" the boy shouted. He stopped inches from Karam's face. Karam stood his ground. He didn't answer, and that seemed to anger the boy even more.

At the same time, a teacher grabbed the boy by the arm and hauled him back. "You're in real trouble this time, Alex," the teacher said.

Even as the teacher dragged Alex away, his eyes never left Karam's. It was only when Alex disappeared inside the school that Karam felt he was able to breathe again.



"I hope you've not got on the wrong side of Alex," a voice said.

Karam turned and found a girl standing beside him. She had a nice smile, and dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. "You don't want Alex as your enemy," she said.

The boy Karam had helped was dusting himself off. "You don't want Alex as your friend either," he said. Then he smiled too. "Thanks for helping me."

Karam looked around the playground. It seemed as if everyone was smiling now. Now that Alex was gone.

"Who is Alex?" he asked them.

"Alex is bad news," the girl said. "I'm Rosa by the way. And this ..." She gave the boy a playful punch in the arm. "This is Paul."

Karam wanted to hear more about Alex, but then the bell rang and there was no more time for talk.

Later, when Alex came back into the classroom, everyone stopped talking. There wasn't a sound. Alex's eyes swept round the class, and rested on Karam. Karam swallowed and looked away. He would avoid this Alex. It was his first day at a new school and he had made two new friends, Rosa and Paul.

But, Karam wondered, had he made an enemy too?