

MUST LOVE PETS

Dog's Best Friend

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CHAPTER 1

My best friend London Harrison is ah-mazing. She's supersmart and always calm and collected. That's why when she rushes into my house one afternoon like her hair's on fire, I get worried.

“Guess what, Imaan!” she says, panting.

I'm sitting on my bed, surrounded by books I'm supposed to be reading. Our fifth-grade English teacher, Mrs. Levite, said it's especially important to read during summer break. Something about our brains turning to mush if we let the entire summer go by without books.

Only it's hard to find something that's not totally

boring. Maybe I'll ask Dada Jee to take me to the library soon.

London flops down on my bed right on top of the books. "C'mon, guess!" she moans, like she just can't hold in her news.

"You won the lottery?"

She gives me a wry look. "Um, no. Try again."

I poke her with my foot. "My brain is turning to mush. I can't think."

She sits up quickly. "Okay, remember my uncle Tommy?"

I nod, even though London has a hundred relatives. I've only a vague idea who this Uncle Tommy is. Someone youngish who wears glasses, I think. "Did *he* win the lottery?" I ask.

"What? No! He's got a new dog!" She pauses. "Maybe that's kind of like winning the lottery, but that's not the story here."

“Okay . . . ?” I’m not sure why London is telling me this unless it’s to rub in the fact that I, Imaan Bashir, extreme dog lover, still don’t have one of my own. It’s my lifelong dream to be a dog owner, but Mama refuses to discuss it. She’s so against it that she’s given me forty-three nos already.

London is looking at me with a wide grin but also a little eye roll like she thinks I’m clueless. “He’s also got a new job . . .”

I smack her on the arm. “Brain turning to mush, remember? Hurry up with the story before I fall asleep.”

She smacks my arm back. “His new job is sending him to Las Vegas for training, and he’s asked me to take care of Candy.”

“Candy?” I repeat.

“The dog. She’s named Candy.”

I think about this. Uncle Tommy has a new dog. And a new job. And he’s asked London to take care of

the dog while he takes care of the job. “But you’ve got Boots,” I finally say. “Your evil cat.”

I’m not even kidding. Boots is an old, cranky tabby that scratches anyone who gets close. And she absolutely hates dogs. Like, hissing, glaring, and even spitting at any dog that comes near her.

“That’s why I think Candy should be our client instead,” London says, grinning some more.

My heart starts pounding. It’s been a few weeks since we last took in a client for our pet-sitting business Must Love Pets. We’ve taken care of dogs, goats, kittens, rabbits, and even a talking parakeet. It was the best kind of fun and chaos. But after our last client, things slowed down for a bit, and I was thankful. We all needed the rest. Searching for escaped animals and cleaning up destroyed property makes for a highly stressful business.

Plus, Mama was about to have a panic attack due to

all the animals running around the Bashir house like they owned the place.

“Tell me more about this . . . Candy,” I say. She sounds like the perfect way to get back to pet sitting. Also, the whole point of Must Love Pets is to prove to Mama how responsible I can be. How ready I am to have a dog of my own.

“Let’s call a team meeting,” London replies. “If we’re taking on a new client, all of us should be here.”

She means our other best friend, Olivia, who recently moved to California. We met on her first day in the neighborhood and instantly became friends. She knows a lot about animals already, and she’s a big help with figuring things out when it all starts going nuts at Must Love Pets. “Good idea,” I say. “I’ll call her.”

Then I stop because I’m not sure how to do that. None of us have our own phones, so we have to rely on

landlines like it's the 1900s. Only I have no idea what Olivia's home number is. "Drat."

London scrambles up from the bed. "Let's go," she says. "We can chat at her place."

We head downstairs quickly. I'm hoping we can sneak out the door without alerting anyone, but it's no use. Mama is in the living room, hurling Legos into their box like she's mad at them or something.

"Wow, that's a lot of Legos," London mutters to me.

It's true. They're scattered all over the floor, and a few piles are on the couch too. It looks like a Lego monster vomited all over our living room. Mama's literally scowling . . . so basically her usual expression. I wonder if she looks like that when she's sleeping too.

"What was that?" Mama asks, looking up at me.

Oops. Did I say that out loud?

"What's going on, Mrs. Bashir?" London asks hurriedly.

Mama sighs and waves her arms around. “What do you think? There’s a mess that needs to be cleaned up.”

London joins her on the floor and starts helping. I look around for the culprit. Sure enough, my six-year-old brother, Amir, is sitting on the couch, his arms folded on his chest. He’s scowling too, but he looks adorable. “I want to play with them,” he insists, sniffing a little.

I gulp. Every time Amir sniffs or sneezes, I worry that his allergies are back. He first got them when our neighbor’s dog, Sir Teddy, came to stay with us. He also sneezed a lot when we took him to the farmers’ market and met the cutest goat, Marmalade. But we’ve had other clients that never made Amir sneeze. It’s a mystery London is determined to solve.

“You’ve played enough,” Mama says grimly. “They’ve been lying around since last night, and I keep stepping on them.”

“But . . .”

“Come on, buddy!” I grab Amir’s hand and pull him up. “Let’s help clean this up quickly.”

He kicks a Lego. “No!”

“It’ll be fun!” I cajole. “If you hurry, I’ll take you to the park.”

He stops scowling. “Can I go on the swings?”

“Sure!”

“You don’t have to do that,” Mama says quickly. “Your dada will be home from the grocery store in a little while.”

Dada Jee is Baba’s dad, and it’s his main job to look after Amir while Mama works. But he’s old and grumpy, so sometimes Amir gets to be too much for him. “That’s okay,” I say cheerfully. “We’ll have fun in the park.”

London’s mouth falls open. “Really?”

I get it. I’m always complaining about Amir tagging along and ruining our girl time. But I don’t like Mama’s

stressed-looking face at all. Hanging out with Amir is a good trade for relaxing her a little bit. After all, we have to convince her to let us keep Candy. Even though Must Love Pets is ours, Mama has final say on clients staying here.

“Yeah, really,” I reply. “Let’s have our team meeting at the park instead.”

Mama looks up. “Another client?” she asks, eyebrows raised.

Oops. Pet-sitting clients are another thing that stresses her out. I offer her a little smile. “Maybe?”

London nods her head. “Definitely.”

“Another animal?” Amir breathes. “Which one? I want kittens again; they were the best!”

“Clean up first, then you can get the details,” I say sternly. He kneels on the carpet and quickly gets to work. His hands are a blur as he grabs Lego pieces and throws them into the box.

Mama takes a deep breath and stands up. “Okay, thanks, girls. Make sure this room is clean before you head out.”

“Sure, Mrs. Bashir,” says London.

Amir throws the last Lego into the box, then stands up straight and salutes. “Aye, aye, Captain!”

London and I roll our eyes at each other, but we’re smiling too. Even Mama can’t help but smile. “Be good and don’t bother your sister or her friends,” she tells him.

He’s already running to the hallway to put on his shoes. “I’m always good!” he shouts back. “I’m the goodest.”

Yeah, right.