

WINNER OF THE WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION

KAMILA SHAMSIE

'A profound novel
about friendship.
I loved it to pieces'
MADELINE MILLER



BEST OF FRIENDS

BLOOMSBURY

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

In the City by the Sea
Salt and Saffron
Kartography
Broken Verses
Burnt Shadows
A God in Every Stone
Home Fire



BEST OF
FRIENDS



KAMILA
SHAMSIE



B L O O M S B U R Y C I R C U S
L O N D O N • O X F O R D • N E W Y O R K • N E W D E L H I • S Y D N E Y



KARACHI
1988

SUMMER

First day back at school. The sky heavy with monsoon clouds, the schoolyard clustered with students within striding distance of shelter: the kikar trees planted along the boundary wall or the neem tree partway up the path from gate to school building; the many bougainvillaea-framed doorways carved into the building's yellow-stone facade; the area of the playing field beneath the jutting balconies on the first and second floors. Only a few boys, with daring to prove, roamed the most exposed parts of the yard, shirtsleeves rolled up, hands in pockets. Zahra, standing beside the archway that housed the brass bell, was using her height to look over the heads of all the girls and most of the boys, searching.

The school day hadn't officially started yet, but students in grey and white uniforms were already resettling into their formations from the previous term. The cool kids. The thuggish boys. The couples. The judgemental girls. The invisible boys. Zahra had invented these categories after watching a string of teen-centred Hollywood movies on pirated videos, but it did little to make up for the inadequacy of Karachi school life. Without detention, how could there be *The Breakfast*

Club? Without a school prom, how could there be *Pretty in Pink*? Without the freedom required to make truancy possible, how could there be *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*? But the one area where the failure was that of the movies, not of Karachi, was when it came to friendship – it was almost always a subplot to romance, never the heart of a story. Except *The Outsiders*, but that was boys, which meant it was really about how girls caused trouble and led to fights and burning buildings and death.

From where she stood, Zahra had a clear view of the school gate. For most of the day, buses and rickshaws and vans and other ageing vehicles clogged up the streets of Saddar, perhaps heading to Empress Market or the electronics stores that populated the area, but twice a weekday, sleek air-conditioned cars joined in the melee to ferry students to and from the most prestigious of Karachi's schools.

There she was. The Mercedes, sleekest of sleeks, drove right up to the gate and Maryam stepped out and walked into the school grounds. A different Maryam, a different walk. The plumpness that had been on her face seemed to have descended elsewhere over the course of the summer, though it was hard to know exactly what was going on beneath the sack-like grey kameez she was wearing. Maryam stopped to say something to one of the older boys, and as they were talking tugged at her kameez with what was clearly meant to be an absent-minded air. The fabric pulled taut over new breasts, a new waist. The older boy kept on speaking to her as though nothing had happened but when she walked past him, heading to Zahra, he turned to observe her all the way down the length of the path.

Other things had changed too. The wavy shoulder-length hair was artfully tousled rather than wild, the

messy eyebrows reshaped into two curved lines. But the smile was the same old Maryam smile that greeted Zahra every time Maryam returned from her family's summer trips to London. And her outstretched hand held a cassette that was always her belated birthday present to her best friend – a mix tape that she had recorded off the radio, with the best of the London charts.

'Do you see what's happened to me?' she said.

'Is it your mother or your tailor who's having difficulty accepting it?' Zahra said, gesturing to the kameez.

'Hard to say. Master Sahib stitches what he thinks my mother wants. Mother says he's easily offended; we can't go back and say it's all wrong or he'll stop doing our clothes and he's the only one to get my sari blouses right.'

'Adulthood is so complicated.'

They smiled at each other, confident of the futures ahead of them in which they'd never face such petty dilemmas. They had barely moved on to swapping notes about the summer apart when Saba approached, with that smile of hers as if she was holding some forbidden delight in her mouth that she was willing neither to swallow nor to reveal. They knew all of each other's smiles, the three girls; at fourteen, they were ten years into what might loosely be called friendship, though Zahra had once looked up from a dictionary to inform Maryam that what the two of them had with each other was friendship, and what they had with the other six girls and twenty-two boys in class was merely 'propinquity' – a relationship based on physical proximity. 'If you moved to Alaska tomorrow, we'd still be best friends for the rest of our lives,' she had told Maryam, who was the only person in the world towards whom Zahra displayed extravagant feelings.