

Love,  
hate

& other  
filters



SAMIRA AHMED

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*For Lena & Noah,  
Meri aankhon ke taare ho tum.*

*And for Thomas, who always believed.*



Dear Reader,

I wrote this book out of hope.

A large picture window in my old apartment in the East Village in New York City once had a clear view of the World Trade Center. Every year on the anniversary of the 9/11 attack, I would stare out that window at the two bright shafts of light that beamed upward to the heavens. A beautiful and heartbreaking memorial for those we lost. A reminder to lead with love.

I wrote this book to shine a light.

My first experience with bigotry was when I was eight years old, in the midst of the Iran Hostage Crisis. It was the first time I saw fear behind my parents' eyes—not only the worry that all Americans shared for our hostages, but also a more personal distress for the safety of their children, growing up in a small Midwestern town—the only Muslims, the only South Asians. For what people might say to us, for what people might do.

Their fears were well founded. One day that summer, inching forward in a traffic jam, my parents chatting in the front seat, I rolled down my window as a car came even with ours—two adult men in the front seat. The man in the passenger seat made eye contact, rolled down his window and pointed his

finger at me—an eight-year-old child, too puzzled to look away, and yelled with a guttural ferocity, “Go home, you goddamned Iranian.” I was stunned. I kept staring at this man, who was so moved by hatred that he felt compelled to yell at a child, a stranger. Who wanted to hold me responsible for the actions of individuals thousands of miles away. I was also confused. Why did this man think we were Iranian? Couldn’t he tell we were Indian?

I learned a lot of things that day; one of them was that the visceral rage of bigots means they are immune to basic facts or civility. Though it was decades ago, that scene is perfectly etched in my memory—a moment of childhood innocence lost, shattered by ignorance and hatred. I knew then that I would forever be confronted by a choice: to cower or to speak.

I wrote this book out of love.

My experiences of Islamophobia and bigotry are mild compared to the violence many others have faced, will face. In this time of political uncertainty, we’ve seen hate speech emerge out of the dark corners to which it was once relegated. Worse, we’ve seen horrific violence. But all around us, we’ve seen people rise up to speak, not merely against the forces of hate, but for equality and justice. This is the world we are fighting for.

And for those who bear the brunt of hate because of the color of your skin or the sound of your name, for those who are spat upon, for those who are told to “go home,” when you *are* home: you are known. You are loved. You are enough. Let your light shine.

I wrote this book for you.

—Samira Ahmed



*His mind wanders back six months to a fetid basement.  
Windowless, lit by a solitary bulb; empty except for sweaty bodies.  
Meeting and sanctuary. There was arguing, then a loosely drawn  
plan, and a call for volunteers. They laughed when he raised his  
hand. Someone said, Can't send a boy to do a man's job.*



# Chapter 1

Destiny sucks.

Sure, it can be all heart bursting and undeniable and Bollywood dance numbers and *meet me at the Empire State Building*. Except when someone else wants to decide who I'm going to sleep with for the rest of my life. Then destiny is a bloodsucker, and not the swoony, sparkly vampire kind.

The night is beautiful, clear and bright with silvery stars. But I'm walking across a noxious parking lot with my parents toward a wedding where a well-meaning auntie will certainly pinch my cheeks like I'm two years old, and a kindly uncle will corner me about my college plans with the inevitable question: premed or prelaw? In other words, it's time for me to wear a beauty-pageant smile while keeping a very stiff upper lip. It would be helpful if I could grow a thicker skin, too—armor, perhaps—but we're almost at the door.

My purse vibrates. I dig around for my phone. A text from Violet:

**You should be here!**

Another buzz, and a picture of Violet appears, decorated in streamers, dancing in the gym. Jeans skinny, lips glossed. Everyone is at MORP without me. It's bad enough I can't go to the actual prom, but missing MORP, too, is death by paper cuts. MORP is the informal prom send-up where everyone goes stag and dances their faces off. And there are always new couples emerging from the dark corners of the gym.

I miss all the drama, as usual.

"Maya, what's wrong?" My mother eyes me with suspicion, as always. I only wish I could muster up the courage to actually warrant any of her distrust.

"Nothing," I sigh.

"Then why do you look like you're going to a funeral instead of your friend's wedding?"

I widen my toothy fake smile. "Better?" Maybe I should give my mom what she wants tonight, the dutiful daughter who is thrilled to wear gold jewelry and high heels and wants to be a doctor. But the high heels alone are so uncomfortable I can only imagine how painful the rest of the act would be.

"I guess a little happiness is too much to ask of my only daughter."

Dad's chuckling, head down. At least someone is amused by my mother's melodrama.

We step through an arc of red carnations and orange-yellow marigolds to a blur of jewel-toned silk saris and sparkly fairy lights strung in lazy zigzags across the walls. The Bollywood-ized suburban wedding hall feels pretty cinematic, yet the thought of the awkward social situations to come makes me turn back and look longingly at the doors.

But there is no escape.

The tinkling of her silver-belled anklets signal the not-to-be-missed approach of Yasmeen, who addresses my mother with the honorific “auntie,” the title accorded all mom-aged Indian women, relation or not. “*As-salaam-alaikum*, Sophia Auntie!”

Yasmeen is only two years older than me; in my mom’s eyes, we should be BFFs. Our parents have known each other since their old Hyderabad days, and my mom has been trying to make a friendship happen since Yasmeen’s family moved to the States several years ago. But in real life, we’re a dud of a match. Also, she’s an annoying kiss-ass.

But the girl’s got style. Yasmeen is dressed to snare the attention of a suitable young gentleman. Preferably more than one, because a girl needs options. Her peacock-colored *lehanga* that sweeps the floor, her arms full of sparkling bangles, her emerald-and-pearl choker, and the killer *kajal* that lines her eyelids make her the perfect candy-colored Bollywood poster girl.

“Asif Uncle! How are you? Mummy will be so excited to see you both. Maya Aziz, look at you. You’re adorable. That shade of pink really suits you. You should wear Indian clothes more often, you know?”

I don’t even try to hide it when I roll my eyes. “You’ve seen me wear Indian clothes a million times.”

“Come on, Ayesha is getting ready in the bridal room.”

My mom winks her blessing at Yasmeen. “Take her, *beta*, and show her how to be at least a little Indian.” So much for family solidarity.

Yasmeen wraps my wrist in a death grip and drags me through the lobby to the tune of “*Ek Ladki ko Dekha*,” a Bollywood love song that inspired millions of tears.

Everyone seems happy to be here, except me.

It’s not just that I hate weddings, which I do. But also because it’s Ayesha. I’ve known her most of my life. She’s five years older than me, and in middle school I was in awe of her. The arsenal of lipsticks in her purse and her ability to deploy them perfectly was the kind of social prowess I dreamed of. I never imagined her succumbing to an arranged marriage, especially not right out of college. Even if it was a modified arrangement that involved three months of clandestine dating.

Yasmeen leaves me at the door when she spots her mom summoning her to meet another auntie. And the auntie’s son. Sweet relief.

When I step into the bridal prep room, I stop short.

Ayesha is the living embodiment of an old-school Hollywood halo filter. It’s breathtaking. I take a moment to absorb the sight: my bejeweled friend in her intricate *ghagra choli*—a ball skirt and short blouse of cherry-colored silk embroidered with gold threads and encrusted with tiny beads and pearls.

“Ayesha, you’re stunning.”

“Thank you, love.”

I’ve seen Ayesha smile a million times, but I’ve never seen her smile like this, like she invented the concept of joy.

“I-I have a surprise,” I announce, stammering. I remove my camcorder from my bag and hold it up like a trophy. “I’m shooting a movie of your wedding . . .”

Before Ayesha can respond (or protest), the door swings

open. Her mother, Shahnaz Auntie, triumphantly arrives with the bridal party in tow. They are ready to take their positions. And only an hour behind schedule, which is basically on time for an Indian wedding.

“See you out there,” I murmur.

I blow Ayesha a kiss and walk backward, filming the preproceSSIONal scramble. I take a tracking shot into the wedding hall, aglow with thousands of candles, red-and-orange bouquets bursting from the center of tables. I follow the gold organza that drapes the ceiling and trails the flower-strewn aisle leading to the *mandap*—the traditional wedding canopy under which the vows will take place.

My mother sees me. Too late for me to hide, even with my camera in hand. She beckons me over to her table, not with a subtle head tilt or single finger hook, but with a full arm wave, drawing the entire room’s attention. She’s chatting with another middle-aged, sari-clad woman. And a boy—I’m guessing her teenage son.

But my aunt Hina is also at our table. Salvation.

It’s hard to believe she is my mother’s sister. Hina is ten years younger than Mom, has short hair, a zillion funky pairs of eyeglasses, is this amazing graphic designer and cool in ways I can only aspire to. The weird thing is, you’d think my mom wouldn’t get along with Hina, but they have this unbreakable bond.

My mom is still waving madly at me. I steel myself, lower my camera, and walk over.

“*As-salaam-alaikum*, everyone,” I say and bend to kiss Hina on the cheek.

“Maya, this is Salma Auntie.” My mom takes me by the elbow to draw me nearer, then raises her voice. “And this is her son, Kareem.”

Did I mention that subtlety is not my mother’s strong suit?

I glance over at my dad, deeply involved in a conversation with Kareem’s dad—no doubt about the economy, lawn-mowing equipment, or the trend of teeth whitening at the dental practice he runs with my mom.

“Maya, Kareem is a sophomore at Princeton,” my mother says, “studying engineering.” I can practically see the cartoon light bulb over her head as she speaks.

“How’s it going?” Kareem asks. He scans the room, disinterested. Not that I can totally blame him; no doubt he gets my mother’s message loud and clear. He sports a goatee that I assume is meant to make his boyish face look older or tougher. It does neither. On the other hand, it succeeds at drawing my attention to his rather gorgeously full lips. He has a nice mouth in spite of whatever might come out of it.

My defenses are up. “It’s going fine.” I cross my arms. “Did you fly in for the wedding?”

“My mom asked me to come. I took a long weekend.” Kareem’s wandering eyes finally meet my own. His are brown, like mine, like most Indians’, but so dark that the pupil almost completely fades into the iris. They’re liquid and beckoning. And his lips. There is no denying that Violet would label them delish.

“Kareem, Maya will attend University of Chicago next year.”

This from his mother, whom I’ve never met. But I understand her attempt to draw out the conversation.



“I got in, but I haven’t decided yet,” I correct.

Inside, I’m squirming. Nobody here but Hina knows my secret. I’ve applied to NYU and been accepted. NYU is my dream school. I’m not going to the University of Chicago if I can help it. The mere fact that I’ve pulled off this feat—under the radar, in spite of the ever-present gaze of my parents—represents a tiny victory, one that fills me with both hope and guilt. My stomach churns every time I get close to telling them. Especially my mother.

But I have to tell them. And soon. This secret has an expiration date. How, though? How can I tell my mother that I don’t want to go to a great school—one that’s an easy commute from home, but also from endless family obligations and her constant hovering?

“Decide? What’s to decide?” my mom demands, as if reading my thoughts. “You’ve gotten into one of the best schools in the country. It’s decided.”

Sitar music fills the lapse in conversation.

“Maya, I saved you a chair next to me,” Hina offers.

“Thanks,” I whisper. I sit and squeeze her hand under the table.

“No problem.” She leans close, lowering her voice. “Cute guy, by the way—”

“Shh.” Now I’m full-on blushing, afraid Kareem, or worse, his mother, will overhear.

The sitar music fades into a remix of a forever classic, “*Chaiyya Chaiyya*.” It booms from the speakers. I raise my camera. One thing I’ve learned: people love a camera, and when I’m filming, they see *it*, not me, so whenever I need to, I can quietly disappear behind my trusty shield.

Ten guys, the groom's friends and family, led by a man playing the *dhol*, an Indian drum, begin to dance their way to the *mandap*. The music slows while the groom walks down the aisle with his parents. Rose and jasmine garlands encircle the groom's neck.

Ayesha's cousins and friends follow in an array of colorful saris. Each one cups a glass lotus-shaped votive—their faces radiant above the candlelight. I zoom in to catch the dramatic effect. Finally, Ayesha and her parents appear at the door. The music slows, and a bright Urdu love song takes over from the sonorous *dhol*. The guests rise. As Ayesha enters the room, a wave of *aaahs* and camera flashes precede her down the aisle. She floats toward her groom. Shahnaz Auntie, the bride's mother, looks grim, probably worried about her daughter's reaction to the wedding night.

Note to Shahnaz Auntie: Ayesha is not going to be shocked.

The cleric begins with a prayer in Urdu, translating everything into English for the many non-Urdu speakers. I catch my parents looking at each other affectionately. I can't turn away fast enough.

The vows are simple, the same kind of pledges I've heard at weddings of every faith. Except at the end, there is no kiss. I close in for the money shot, anyway, hoping for a moment of rebellion from Ayesha and Saleem. But no. No public kissing allowed. Full stop. The no kissing is anticlimactic, but some taboos cross oceans, packed tightly into the corners of immigrant baggage, tucked away with packets of masala and memories of home.



When the music comes back on, waiters appear with appetizers and plate after heaping plate of mouthwatering food—*biryani* and kebabs and *tandoori* chicken and *samosas*. The room fills with happy chatter. I spy Ayesha and Saleem sneaking out, maybe hoping to steal that kiss in private.

“Maya, put the video camera down and eat, for God’s sake,” my mother says.

She gives me the Indian bobblehead waggle that can literally mean anything: *yes, no, why, what’s up, maybe, carry on*. I want to keep filming the choreography of waiters moving seamlessly in and out the kitchen doors, hot plates in their hands and smiles on their faces, each doing a little half-turn as they walk through the door, pushing it open with their shoulders. In editing, I can slow down the waitstaff action and time it to “Pachelbel’s Canon.” It will be wedding-y, but irreverent, too. Resigned, I exchange my camera for a fork.

“Maya is the family documentarian,” my father explains to Kareem’s parents. As if my behavior necessitates explanation.

“She makes beautiful films. One day, she’ll take Hollywood by storm,” Hina says. My aunt always makes me believe I can fly.

Dad clears his throat. “Well, it’s a good hobby, anyway.” Translation: *don’t get any ideas*.

I narrow my eyes at him. After all, it’s his fault I fell in love with making movies in the first place.

A few years ago, in an uncharacteristic burst of after-school special inspiration, my father planned a daddy-daughter day for us that included mini-golf, McDonald’s, and a documentary about a racecar driver. He was so proud of his movie choice

because the director was Muslim. And Indian. Well, British. But Indian. I forced myself to smile throughout because I didn't want to crush him with my complaints. But I was rolling my eyes and harrumphing on the inside until the first scene when a tousle-haired, smiling young man filled the screen. *Senna* grabbed me by the throat and heart and didn't let go.

My dad loves the agony and ecstasy component of sports movies. But I saw a story about destiny and rivalry and tenacity. I saw a director, the Muslim Indian director, capture the smoking, tragic charisma of Ayrton Senna. I couldn't stop thinking about it or talking about it.

So later that summer, when I was making my annoyance about having to attend my cousin's wedding in India well known to anyone in range, my dad bought me an entry-level camcorder and suggested I put together a movie of the weeklong festivities. It was love at opening shot.

"There was a great Satyajit Ray retrospective at school last semester."

Kareem's voice catches me by surprise.

I smile and nod. "The Apu Trilogy is one of my favorites. I love his use of light, and did you know that François Truffaut stomped out of the first movie, *Pather Panchali*, at Cannes because he couldn't stand watching a movie about peasants eating with their hands? Total pretentious jerk."

Kareem doesn't answer. He seems to be studying me. You know how some people have smiling eyes? His eyes dance. I lose track of what I was saying. I bend down and pretend to fix my heel so he can't see the abject horror and embarrassment on my face. When I pop back up, I start shoveling food into my mouth.

“Slow down; there’s more in the kitchen,” Hina whispers. I chew and swallow hard. “Thanks for saying that, by the way,” I murmur to her. “About me making beautiful movies and all.”

“I meant it.” Hina bends close again, her mouth at my ear. “You need to tell them soon, you know.”

I nod, careful to keep my voice low. “NYU wants the deposit in a few weeks. There’s no way they’ll let me go. But I have to go. So many amazing directors have gone there. I mean, James Franco teaches there.”

Hina laughs. “You might not want to lead with that.”

I laugh, too, in spite of myself.

“Maya, you won’t know what your parents will say unless you ask,” she adds. “Lose your courage now and you’ll regret it. And frankly, how many more Indian lawyers do we need?”

“You done eating?” Kareem asks suddenly.

Before I know it, Hina is in the midst of a conversation with my mother and Kareem’s mom.

I look at my still half-full plate. “I’m waiting for dessert.”

Kareem grins. “I don’t think you’re in danger of missing it. Want to take a walk?”

“A walk?” I echo.

“Maybe get more shots for your movie? I could be your key grip.”

“Do you even know what a key grip does?”

The question flies from my mouth before I have a chance to regret it, but his eyes still dance.

“Well, not exactly. But obviously it’s important, or else why would it be called *key* grip instead of average grip or not-so-critical grip?”

I smirk. “Well played. The grips deal with lighting. So fiddle with the light bulbs and see what you can do with that disco ball and all those random reflections.” I point to the mirrored orb dangling in the center of the dance floor—if there were going to be dancing at this wedding.

Kareem pushes back his chair. “I’m up for the challenge.”

I like how he accepts the supporting role and doesn’t try to desi-mansplain things to me. He’s willing to try new things even if he might fail or look like a dork. It’s a different kind of confidence than I’ve seen in some of the guys at school, and it’s really appealing.

“We’re going to get more footage, Mom,” I say as I stand up and grab my camera.

My mom looks at Kareem’s mom, then raises an eyebrow at me. “Don’t get lost, you two.”

Kareem walks close to me. His arm grazes mine. Heat spreads through my body. Then he does it again. Clearly, it’s not an accident. He towers over me. Which isn’t hard considering I’m five-three. He looks ahead, but I sense him smiling.

“So I take it this isn’t your first feature film starring an Indian wedding,” he remarks dryly.

“I’m actually a highly sought after director on this circuit. I specialize in goat sacrifices and masterful film school angles of aunties with muffin tops.”

“And how did that come to be your film style?”

“It’s kind of a long story.”

“We’ve got time. It’s an Indian wedding. They do tend to drag on. Haven’t you heard?” Kareem gives me a little nudge.

I grin. Probably for a little too long.

“Like three years ago, my parents dragged me to a family wedding in India which I did not want to be at, and my camera gave me an escape. I mean, I still had to endure ludicrous cheek pinching and itchy clothes and too-late dinners and too many questions, but the camera gave me distance and something to hide behind, literally. I ended up making this twenty-minute documentary capturing all these weirdly lit, unglamorous aunties-yelling, caterer-butcher-the-goat moments and even included a brief montage of crying babies right before the final shots of the unsmiling and garlanded bride and groom exchanging their vows under the *mandap*.”

He nods gravely. “So we’re talking Oscar material here.”

“Shut up,” I say, swatting at his arm.

“Seriously. It sounds amazing. I’d love a private screening sometime.”

I come to an abrupt stop. I have to force myself to speak because suddenly my tongue is made of wood. “There’s the cake. Let’s get a shot before they cut it.”

I train my camera on the four-tiered fondant behemoth. The sides of the base layer are decorated with Indian elephants connected nose to tail. Each of the other layers is trimmed in red-and-gold paisley. And there are flowers, real ones. Red and orange roses surround a tiny Indian bride and groom on the top layer.

“Check it out. The tiny bride is wearing a sari. We’ve so arrived.” Kareem laughs. “I wonder what she’s made of.” He reaches toward the dolls.

“Stop,” I warn him, but continue to film.



Kareem yanks his hand away in mock dismay. "I wasn't really going to touch it. I'm not a total idiot." I swing the camera to his face. "I thought I'd add a little drama to your movie. You know, 'after one too many cups of tea, the handsome Kareem fled with the bride. Chaos ensued. The bride's father swore vengeance on the guest who had stolen the bride's heart before the nuptials.'"

My face feels warm, but if I'm blushing, he can't see it. Through the lens, I take in his broad shoulders and lean, muscular arms. I focus on his face as he continues his narration about the kidnapped plastic bride. The lens is drawn to his dark eyes, and so am I.

Kareem takes a step toward me. "So are you going to the after-party?"

I feel a flutter of nervousness as I lower the camera. "After-party?"

"At Empire, in the city. One of Saleem's friends put it together. So the young desis can throw down away from the prying eyes of our parents. It's a surprise for Ayesha."

"Not as if she didn't have other plans for her wedding night." The words spill out of my mouth before I can stop them, and I turn bright red.

Kareem laughs. "I'm sure they'll only put in a brief appearance. I can pretty much tell you there is only one thing on Saleem's mind right now, and it's not cutting that cake."

I sweep the back of my hand across my eyes, trying to wipe away my embarrassment.

"I've never met an Indian who blushes so much. Have you devised a method to defeat desi DNA?"



“You can’t expect me to give up all my secrets that easily.”  
Kareem takes another step forward. “So you in or out for the after-party?”

“I could crash at my aunt’s place in Chicago, but I don’t have a change of clothes. And I don’t have a car—”

“Come with me. I can drive you home tomorrow, too.”

“The thing is, I work in the morning.”

“I get it. You’re the responsible Indian girl. Give me your phone.”

I wince at Kareem’s presumption, but essentially he’s right. “Why do you need it?”

“Trust me.”

I self-consciously hand him my bedazzled phone.

Kareem dials a number. His phone rings. “Now I can live-text you from Empire and tell you how much fun you’re missing.”

“Let me guess, you give good text.”

“When it counts,” Kareem breathes into my ear and slips my phone into my palm.

As we step away from the cake, Kareem edges closer to me and puts his hand on the small of my back. The warmth of his handprint sinks into my skin through the thin silk of my clothes. There’s a tingle along my collarbone. Part of me wants to run outdoors into the cool evening to get a handle on myself. Instead, I breathe in deeply and let this new sensation consume me.

*The young man studies his face in the mirror. The scruff on his chin makes him look boyish, a kid dressing up as a grown-up for Halloween. Only the bruise-colored circles under his eyes betray his age. It's a step in the right direction.*

*His fingers vibrate with the soft buzz of the clippers. Waves of thick black hair fall into the rusty basin.*

*When finished, he moves his hand across the top of his stubbly head, pausing briefly at the scar halfway down the back of his scalp, a souvenir care of his father's belt buckle. The past, made visible.*

*His mother, who loves his hair, will be devastated. He scowls, curling back his lips to bare his teeth.*

*It doesn't matter.*

*She will never see him again.*

# Chapter 2

**Kareem: The party wasn't the same once you left.**

**Me: Awww, you say that to all the documentarians, don't you?**

**Kareem: Only the cute, irreverent ones.**

Rereading Kareem's flirty texts in bed, I still feel the touch of his hand on my skin. It's all a little cliché for my tastes—the words on the phone, the silly smile I can't get rid of—but so is being seventeen and unkissed.

**Kareem: So are you a doc film purist?**

**Me: I love old classics and foreign films, too. And I can always find something to mock in a blockbuster.**

**Kareem: In other words, you're open to temptation.**

**Me: Totally depends on the tempter.**

That dialogue! It's even unfolding like a screenplay. We had the meet-cute, so I allowed us the full rom-com text treatment this weekend. Now it's Monday morning and I'm second-guessing, right on schedule.

Staring up at Aishwarya Rai on the *Bride and Prejudice* poster above my bed—a typically well-meaning, completely misguided gift attempt from my mom—I hope I’m not getting ahead of myself. But maybe that’s the message my mother meant to send with the poster. *“It’s a desi Pride and Prejudice! You love that book. But it’s better because there is singing and dancing!”* She left out the part about obedient daughters and no kissing. The all-important subtext. She literally clapped when I agreed to hang it on my wall.

I sigh. “You probably always know what to say to the cute boy, don’t you, Aishwarya?” I whisper. “I mean you probably don’t even need to speak; you just bat your beguiling eyes—”

“Maya, come eat some breakfast before school,” my mom yells up.

I wonder if she heard me.

“Everyone at the party was telling me you’re so thin,” she adds.

There is no acceptable in-between for Hyderabad moms. You’re either too skinny or a little too chubby.

I scurry to get ready. I pull on a favorite blue V-neck sweater over a pair of skinny jeans. I search through my jewelry box and come up with an orange-and-blue beaded choker and a pair of silver crescent-moon earrings—from Hina. I dab a little mineral bronzer on my cheeks and run a reddish-brown gloss over my lips.

Before I walk out of my room, I wink at Aishwarya, perpetually cool and confident. “Maybe there’s a kiss in my future after all, Aishwarya. Maybe lots of kissing.”

I don’t want to eat, but my mom hovers in the kitchen. She always hovers. I wolf down a little cereal for her benefit.

“Let me make you an omelet,” she says. “You’re skin and bones. Skin and bones.”

“I’m not hungry, and Violet’s going to be driving up any second.”

She waves a wooden spoon in her hand. “Not hungry? How can you go to school on two bites of cereal? You need to take care of yourself, *beta*. I’m not going to be here forever, you know. Then what will you do with no one to look after you? You can’t cook a thing.”

“That’s why God invented takeout.”

My mother blinks, her face blank. She should be used to my snark by now. These days, honestly, she just seems bewildered by me. I’m an eternal stranger forced to reintroduce myself to her one bon mot at a time. Lucky for me, the silence is broken by three telltale honks from the driveway: Violet. My escape.

“I’ll take an apple with me, okay? Don’t forget I’m working after school. I’ll need your car. *Khudafis*.” I’m halfway out the door.

“We need to put cooking on your biodata,” my mom yells after me. “No suitable boy will marry you if you can’t cook.”

“Counting on it,” I whisper to myself.



Music pulses from Violet’s vintage Karmann Ghia, a gift from her dad shortly after they moved to Batavia, Illinois, from New York City. The orange paint and vanilla interior remind me of a Creamsicle. Sometimes I have the urge to dart out my tongue and lick the hood and see if it tastes like summer.

Violet tosses her blonde hair over her shoulder and bats her eyelashes. This is Violet. She will flirt with anyone. Even me.

“How was the dance?” I ask. It’s a courtesy. I don’t need to fish for juicy gossip; I know Violet’s been chomping at the bit to tell me in person. “Did Mike fawn all over you?”

Violet rolls her eyes and backs out of the driveway. Mike’s been crushing on Violet since she moved here freshman year. Clearly the guy’s an optimist.

“You know you love the attention,” I tell her.

“You’re right, I do.” With a laugh, she shifts into drive and heads toward school. “But it got a little wild.” She’s still smiling. “You missed the fight.”

“The fight?” I repeat. My cinematic imagination immediately takes over. “As in droplets of blood bouncing off the well-buffed wood floor of the gym?”

She groans. “You should listen to yourself talk sometimes, Maya.”

“I know how brilliant I sound,” I shoot back dryly. “So what happened?”

“No blood, but plenty of drama.” Violet glances at me. “It was Phil and Lisa.”

My heart thumps a bit. “Phil?” I repeat, before realizing I neglected to add Lisa to my question.

Violet nods. “Apparently something is rotten in the state of super couplehood. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but Lisa made a huge scene of stomping out of the gym during a slow dance.”

A flaw in the perfection of Phil and Lisa is like my parents allowing me to go to prom (even if I had a date)—impossible. I almost sit on my hands to prevent the ridiculous gesticulations I want to make. I am a whirling dervish of what-ifs.

“Maybe this means Phil will be available for prom.” Violet

raises her eyebrows at me. “For a certain hot, yet unassuming, and often exacting Indian chick.”

“Whatever.”

“Well, why not?” Violet prods. “I mean, you’ve had a thing for him forever. Like, literally, forever.”

I shake my head. “I have not had a ‘thing’ for him for any amount of time. I may have said I thought he was hot once—”

“Revisionist,” Violet interrupts. “Saying Phil is hot is not a confession; it’s a profound grasp of the obvious. You *like* him like him. Admit it.”

Phil and I have known each other since kindergarten, but we’ve never been really close or even truly friends. Then in health class last semester, the teacher assigned us to be partners for a project on “Aging in America.” We had to record oral histories from senior citizens in a retirement home. I braced myself to do all the work. But Phil showed up and charmed everyone. I remember looking over at him talking to one of the oldest residents at the home. He held her hand and listened to her so intently and smiled at her with this dimple in his cheek. He charmed me, too.

Since then, he occasionally sidles up to me for a lunch-line chat while he chomps on a basket of cafeteria fries. The conversations aren’t deep or anything and only last five or six fries, but still, they leave me a little breathless and focusing a little too keenly on that dimple. I know better than to read into it. Phil is taken. Extremely. Or is he? Regardless, we inhabit separate planets.

I take AP classes and blast Florence + the Machine in my earbuds.

Phil is the quarterback and homecoming king. (Seriously. That's what he is.)

And at Batavia High School, never the twain shall meet.

"I plead the Fifth," I say finally. I look out the window. If I don't change the subject, Violet's enthusiasm will feed my tiny hopes, and I will implode from possibilities. And Phil is impossible. Beautiful and impossible. Through middle school he was this gawky and goofy kid with a cute smile. But every year since, he's grown into himself. And grown on me. Especially since our health class project first semester.

"So who was this wedding guy you texted me about? Any actual details?"



By the time we reach school, I've shared all the flirty memories—about Kareem, not Phil—that I know will thrill Violet. Kareem's whispers and innuendo, his hand on my back, the PG-13 suggestive texts we exchanged after the wedding.

She jerks to an abrupt halt in the parking lot and turns to face me. "He's Indian, goes to Princeton, and took your number. And you're not jumping out of your seat why?"

"And he's Muslim," I add for full effect.

"He sounds like your parents' wet dream," Violet says. Noting my disgust, she adds, "It's a metaphor. All I'm saying is, he sounds perfect on paper. And he's older, which is hot."

I allow myself a smile. "Well, he's definitely more available," I admit. "And, suitable."

"Suitable?" She laughs. "You sound like your mom."

"I know. But all my iconoclastic eggs are in the NYU basket. I can't fight my mom on every front."



Violet shrugs and takes the keys out of the ignition. “One battle at a time. I get it.”

After filing in with the other kids, we drop our bags at our lockers and grab our books for first period.

I pause to look in my locker mirror and run a comb through my long hair. I don’t need to, since my hair is generally tangle free, but combing my hair has this calming effect on me. It’s a morning ritual.

My locker is decorated with a postcard of Edward from *Twilight*, circa 2008, courtesy of Phil, actually. Last semester, he heard me tell a friend in health class that I refused to see *Twilight* even though she considered it a classic. Phil jumped into the conversation to give me a hard time about it—he claimed that *he* liked it, after all—and the next morning, I found this postcard taped to my locker. On the back he wrote, *Sparkly vampires rule*. He didn’t sign his name, but when I looked around, he was at his locker watching, grinning.

It’s embarrassing to keep a public display of affection for . . . Edward, but I can never bring myself to get rid of it. So my answer to this unwarranted Team Edward affiliation was to identify with Team Kubrick. Specifically, the famous, terrifying scene from *The Shining* where Jack Nicholson’s demonic smile and bulging eyes appear through a splintered door. I positioned it so it looks like he is leering at Edward. Plausible deniability.

Below that is a Wilco concert poster. Of course, I’ve never been to a concert because I’m not allowed, but when I dream about going to a show, Jeff Tweedy is crooning his song, “I Am Trying to Break Your Heart.”

“Hey, Maya.”

I spy Phil’s reflection in my mirror. Hair artfully disheveled, grin adorably rakish, dimple bared.

I try to embody Aishwarya, hoping her elegance and nonchalance will rub off. “Oh, hey, Phil.” It works. I utter three perfect syllables. Total grace under pressure.

“Listen, uh, I, want to ask you a favor,” Phil says while tapping a pencil against his left cheek. “I’m wondering if you might . . .”

I wonder if he’s looking for Lisa, worried she’ll see us talking.

“Lay on, Macduff,” I say. I’m a bit terse. And I’m quoting Macbeth. I’m in high school. I have to stop quoting Shakespeare. At this rate, what will I have to look forward to in college?

“Can you help me with my independent study paper for Ms. Jensen’s class? I have to read *The Namesake*, and I thought—”

“You thought I’d know everything about it because I’m Indian?” His request catches me by surprise. A good surprise. But also totally annoying.

“No. I mean, maybe? Sorry . . . I didn’t mean . . . I know you like to read,” Phil stammers. It’s actually a little endearing to catch him off guard.

“I do love that book. The movie, too. But it’s not only because I’m Indian, you know? Like, do you like every movie that’s about football?”

“Every single one,” he says, without missing a beat, back to form. “Including documentaries.”

I start to laugh. “Okay.”

Phil grins. The dimple appears. “As in, okay, you’ll help me?”

I nod, looking down. I don’t want to stare. On the other hand, he’s staring at *me*.

“Hiya, Phil.” Violet materializes at my elbow. Loudly.

“Hey, Violet.”

“I’m walking Maya to first period. Unless, of course, you want to abscond with her?”

My head jerks back up. My mortification is complete.

“Sure,” Phil says. But he stumbles to correct himself, “I mean, no. I gotta get to class, too.”

I shut my locker, ready to escape. I turn to Violet. “Let’s go. See ya, Phil.” We start to walk away.

“So maybe tonight?” Phil calls after me.

I turn my head to look back at him. “I’m working at the bookstore until seven—”

“I’ll swing by then.”

A meet-cute with the suitable Indian boy. The hot football player at my locker. I feel queasy. I was joking with myself earlier, but now I’m wondering how it’s possible that I’ve stepped into the most predictable teen rom-com ever. How is this my real life?

But I go with it. My mind plays a slow-motion close-up of Phil walking down the hall. An improbable gust of wind ruffles his just-long-enough, perfectly mussed chestnut hair. Low-key lighting casts intriguing shadows in the hall, and my filmic version of Phil turns to look at me, his twinkling green eyes catching mine.

Sure, it’s all my imagination.

Except the last part.

He really did turn to look.