

THIS is HOW you FALL in LOVE

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*For Dadu, whose stories guided me through
the darkness of the night*

‘Yo, does this chat-up line work, do you think?’ Adnan asks, tossing his phone on my bed and interrupting my blissful reading of a juicy new romance in which the main character and the love interest arrive at a remote cabin only to discover that the last room available has one bed.

Knowing he won’t give up, I put the book aside and look at the screen. I immediately shake my head at his message: *Have you been covered in bees lately? I just assumed, because you look sweeter than mishti.*

‘You know, I can’t stand you.’

‘And I you, Z,’ he responds with ease.

‘She’s not going to get it and you know that.’

‘Why do you say that?’

I tap onto her profile picture on Instagram, reminding myself of who the girl in question is. ‘Because she’s as white as sugar?’

‘Don’t judge, Z. She might have some knowledge about Desi culture.’

Somehow, I'm doubtful. But I'll let Adnan stay in dreamland for a little bit longer if it makes him happy. And nothing makes Adnan happier than flirting.

Being such a good friend, all I want is for him to find his happily ever after. Even if he is stupid and only meets girls by sliding into their DMs – I mean, *come on*, show a little imagination. Forbidden love or an enemies-to-lovers arc would be so much more fun. And don't even get me started on a second-chance romance!

'Anyway, I thought you were talking to that new girl at sixth form, Camilla. What happened to her?' I swipe out of his DMs and look up Camilla's profile, lazily scrolling through her latest pictures, when I notice that Adnan hasn't liked a single post. 'Playing hard to get, are we?'

'Don't like anything, Z,' Adnan warns, his Adam's apple bobbing in fear as he prepares to lunge at me if I even consider hovering my thumb over the heart icon.

Seeing how desperate he is, I put him out of his misery and toss him his phone back.

He grabs it mid-air, double-checking that I haven't accidentally liked any photos.

'So,' I press, curious as to why he's so tight-lipped, 'what happened with her?'

He shrugs. 'Nothing happened. That's the problem.'

'What do you mean, nothing happened?' I ask with a raised brow, because something *always* happens with Adnan and the girls he talks to. I don't know how he does it, but he's got some serious game, especially in comparison to me. I mean, you'd think that as someone who practically

lives and breathes romance in any available format I'd stand a chance in the love department, but that would be a big fat nope.

'I'm telling you: nothing's happened,' he says with a deep sigh. 'Cami is a reserved person – I knew that from when we first started talking, but I thought . . . I don't know, maybe I could get her to lower her walls or something.'

Even though I feel bad for him – I can see the disappointment clouding his eyes – I can't help but break out into a sly smile.

'What?' he asks, already rolling his eyes. 'Scratch that. I don't even want to know –'

'You called her *Cami*,' I say, ignoring him. 'You never give girls nicknames.'

'So?'

I poke him in the shoulder like an annoying child. 'You *liiike* her.'

'Shut up,' he groans, but the grin on his face confirms my suspicions.

To be fair, I always knew he liked her; that Camilla – or, sorry, *Cami* – was going to be different from all the other girls he's dated since she joined our sixth form. The first clue was the fact that Adnan *never* asks me to help him with girls. He really doesn't need it, despite his awful chat. Not with the cool-guy persona that he's perfected over the years, his lean yet muscular build and his fashion sense – a mix between preppy and street. It also helps that he's got eyelashes and hair that girls can't help but envy.

OK, *I* can't help but envy. It's seriously not fair. My lashes are never long enough to flutter wildly at people, and my hair, although straight and silky, has absolutely no life to it.

'You're thinking about my fabulous hair and eyelashes, aren't you?' Adnan asks. 'You're doing that thing again with your face.' He replicates my facial expression by furrowing his brows so hard he has to massage his temples – which is exactly what I did only ten seconds ago.

'Shut up,' I say and throw a worn paperback off the stack on my bedside table at him, which he expertly ducks and instead I nearly knock the framed photo of me, Baba and Ma off my desk. 'Oops.'

'Zara!' Ma suddenly calls from downstairs.

'Ma!' I call back.

'Dinner's ready!'

'OK, coming!'

'You guys really need walkie-talkies or something,' Adnan notes as I slide into my slippers.

When we get downstairs, the table is set for a feast rather than a quiet dinner for six. Somaiya Auntie, Adnan's mum, and Ma finish up with making the salad as Adnan and I take our seats, practically banging our cutlery on the table in anticipation of food. Sumon Uncle, Adnan's dad, pours himself a glass of ayran and winks at me as he does so, and I can't help but shake my head at him.

'What have you kids been up to, then?' Uncle asks as he takes his first sip of the yogurt drink, his expression gleeful.

'Adnan's been trying to come up with pick-up lines for

the past hour, but they've all been crap,' I reply for us. 'It's no wonder he's single.'

'I thought the mishti one was pretty good, you know.'

'It really wasn't.'

Adnan flicks me in the temple, and I retaliate by twisting his nipple.

Uncle looks at us with a glint in his eye – one I know far too well after having Sunday dinner with him for as long as I can remember. 'I don't think my son's relationship status is the way it is because of his chat-up lines, Zara. You know, it would be so much easier if you two would just get together already. Everyone can see you're meant to be.'

'I agree!' both our mums shout as they bring out two different types of salad to the table: one with Naga Morich and one without for Adnan, who can barely even inhale the scent of chilli without having a coughing fit. Even now, as Ma places the bowl meant for everyone but Adnan at the other end of the table, I can see Adnan eyeing it up like it's his mortal enemy.

'Would it really be so difficult for you two to at least *try* to date?' Ma asks as she takes her seat next to me.

Adnan and I share a glance, already thinking the exact same thing: why can't our parents be like other Desi parents? Because our parents are absolutely *not* like your typical Desi parents. They're never uber-strict and never forbid me from dating before marriage like you hear some South Asian parents doing. But perhaps that's because of the distance from their own parents and how hard they

fought against the stereotypes society placed on them as soon as they set foot on British soil.

Which, I can admit, is incredibly admirable, but also incredibly frustrating considering it means they are sometimes *overly* involved in my love life. In particular, the one that doesn't exist – nor will *ever* exist – between me and Adnan.

'Sumon!' Like a blessing in disguise, Somaiya Auntie disrupts my train of thought and steers the conversation elsewhere. She has the palm of her hand to her forehead and is trying to grab the glass of ayran from Uncle. 'You can't drink that!'

Uncle only recently found out he's lactose intolerant and you'd think, from the way he's been crying about it for the past two weeks, that he was grieving a person instead of a type of sugar.

'I need it!' He dodges her attempts at grabbing the glass by chugging it all down in one go, much to Auntie's dismay.

'Don't you come crying to me when your stomach hurts, you hear me?' Auntie is wagging her finger in the air like a typical Desi mum and, in solidarity, so do Adnan and I.

'Farah?' Baba shouts Ma's name as he comes through the front door.

'Arman?' she shouts back, her voice echoing off the walls and practically shaking the wooden ornaments hanging off them.

'Walkie-talkies,' Adnan whispers in my ear. 'Seriously. I fear for your family's vocal health.'

'Sorry I'm late.' Baba kisses my head and Ma's cheek

before sitting down next to her. For a second, Baba frowns as he takes in the abundance of food in front of us, but then he dives into a story about a young woman who was picking up her prescription at the pharmacy where he works.

‘... And then I noticed this thing on her wrist. It was a birth control ring,’ he says, shaking his head. ‘She thought that was how it was meant to be worn! But you know the best part?’

‘What?’ we ask in unison, wondering how the heck it can get better than this.

‘She came back a few minutes later with a pregnancy test and said, “I think I might be needing this.”’

A deep, rumbling laughter fills the room. By the time my stomach stops hurting, Baba repeats, ‘Pregnancy test!’ and gets me going all over again.

‘We shouldn’t laugh,’ Ma says, trying to be serious but unable to stop another giggle escaping. ‘Poor girl, her parents mustn’t have been very open with her if she doesn’t know how to use contraceptives.’

She clears her throat in an attempt to change the subject before we all start laughing again. ‘Does anybody want cha and mishti?’

We all nod our heads except for Baba, who looks like he’s got a stick up his bum.

‘Arman?’ Ma prods as she fills up the pot and places it on the stove.

‘No mishti, but cha, please.’ He smiles but it’s stiff and unlike him. It’s only a few seconds later that we understand why. ‘But not doodh cha. And without sugar, please.’

Turns out I'm diabetic,' he says, his voice even, like he's not dropping a bomb on us.

'Ki?' Ma shrieks at the same time as I say, 'You're kidding?'

'I'm not kidding.'

'What do you mean, you're diabetic?' Ma abandons the pot, spurring Auntie to take the lead on our beverages instead.

'I'm absolutely fine, I promise.'

'What did the doctor say?'

'Farah?' Somaiya Auntie interrupts. 'I think there's something wrong with your stovetop. The gas isn't lighting.'

But Ma doesn't respond to Somaiya Auntie's concern. She's glaring at Baba. 'I didn't know you'd been to the doctor.'

'I didn't want to worry you.'

'You didn't want to *worry* me?' Ma asks the question like she can't believe the words that have left her husband's mouth. Adnan, Uncle and I watch the back and forth between my parents like it's a tennis match while Auntie keeps fiddling with the stove.

'It's making a hissing sound, Farah, and it's not even on yet.' The pitch in Auntie's voice increases and when I turn to look at her, I see that there are beads of sweat on her forehead.

'Let me help, Auntie,' I say, getting up from the table. As I'm about to turn the knob, Ma's and Baba's yelling becomes louder.

'How could you keep this from me?'

‘I wanted to protect you!’

‘Protect me? How was lying to me protecting me?’

‘I wasn’t lying!’

‘But you were withholding!’

I look over my shoulder at my parents. I’ve never seen them behave this way before. Adnan catches my eye, a tight-lipped look on his face.

‘Farah, please, you need to –’

‘I need to what? Keep listening to your lies?’ Ma shakes her head. ‘No, I’ve heard enou—’

‘Farah, I think the sto—’ Auntie interjects at the same time as Uncle says, ‘I need the toilet. I think the ayran is ready to make its appearance.’

But their voices are drowned out by my parents’ yelling, nothing able to get through to them.

And then the stove explodes.

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The fire in our kitchen wasn't too bad, mostly because I might have exaggerated the severity of it. The stove didn't blow up or anything, but a flame shot up and almost set our curtains on fire, which was enough for everyone to completely freak out.

While Baba called the fire services, Somaiya Auntie ran to check on Sumon Uncle in the bathroom and Adnan put out the fire and turned off the gas valve. As all this was happening, Ma simply sat at the abandoned table, a blank look in her eyes as she stared into the distance. I couldn't get her out of her catatonic state before the fire services arrived, so Baba and I had to take over Ma's usual hosting duties and explain to them what happened. The firefighters said there was a small gas leak that probably would have killed us in our sleep one day, and we were lucky that nobody was scathed by the combustion.

At least, not physically.

Emotionally? It seems to have left scar tissue yet to be seen.

After the fire brigade leaves, along with Adnan's family, I perch at the top of the staircase and eavesdrop as Baba tells Ma that he'd suspected something wasn't right with his health for months.

'Months?!' she shrieks, leaving a ringing sound in my ears. 'You're terrible at keeping secrets. How could you keep this one?'

'It was for your own good, Farah. I know what you're like,' Baba responds.

'This is serious. This isn't like when you scraped the car and we had to pay more than what the car was even worth to fix it.' Ma's pitch rises even higher. 'This doesn't just affect you; it affects me too. It affects Zara.'

Hearing my name takes me by surprise. With all the yelling and the stove exploding, I hadn't had the chance to think too much about how Baba's diabetes will affect me, but now that the seed has been planted, it's all I can think about. What *does* it mean that Baba has diabetes?

'All you would have done is worry.'

'Then let me worry! Don't take the choice away from me.'

As Baba weighs out his response, I lean my head against the banister and try to slow down the distress in my chest.

In the end, Baba doesn't reply. From here, I can't see how Ma responds to this, but her huffing makes me think she isn't taking his silence too well.

‘I have no doubt you’ll be *fine*,’ Ma continues, her voice breaking on the final word, ‘and your condition is beside the point –’

‘Then why are you so mad?’

‘I’m not mad! I’m . . . disappointed. I’m hurt that you kept this from me. That you took away my choice, that you . . .’ Ma doesn’t finish her sentence, she just sighs. ‘I’m going to bed.’

‘Farah –’ Baba calls out, but Ma stomps away from him and heads in my direction. When she sees me sitting on the stairs her mouth wilts like a flower, but she doesn’t say anything. She swallows and trudges past me, slamming the door to their bedroom shut behind her.

I’ve never seen my parents fight like this. Sure, they bicker – all parents do – and I know my parents aren’t perfect, but I’ve never felt this tension between them before. In my mind, my parents’ relationship has always been rock solid. Something nothing or nobody can come between. Over the years, even with all the romances I’ve read and romcoms I’ve seen, it’s always the small ways Ma and Baba communicate their love to each other that have filled my heart most: Baba rubbing Ma’s feet after a long shift at the care home, even if her feet stink like tilapia fish, or seeing Ma out of the corner of my eye plug Baba’s phone into the charger before they go to bed because she knows he’s useless at remembering to do it himself.

Some people have faith in a higher power; I have faith in my parents and their relationship.

I abandon my post on the staircase and take a seat at the kitchen table where Baba is dipping a teabag in and out of his mug, the liquid going from a bright red colour to a dark leather I know he won't drink because of its bitter taste. Wordlessly, he pushes the mug towards me, and I place both my palms around it, the heat of the ceramic oblivious to its glacial environment.

'Why didn't you tell her?' I ask.

'I didn't want to upset her for no reason.'

On the one hand, I understand. It would have stressed Ma out if he'd said anything because Ma stresses about *everything*. But on the other hand, I completely get where she's coming from. It's her husband; of course she wants to know if something is wrong with him.

'Baba?'

'Yes, beta?'

'Will you and Ma be OK?'

Baba's eyes soften. 'We'll be OK. She just needs some time to digest the news. By tomorrow morning, we'll be back to normal.'

I nod, but I note the bags under his eyes and the grey of his moustache.

'Will *you* be OK?'

Baba rubs his head and smiles thinly. 'Of course I will be, beta. Many people live with diabetes without any problem. OK? Now go on. It's getting late and you've got school in the morning.' Baba kisses me goodnight and heads upstairs, his steps soft and weak in comparison to Ma's angry stomps.

I stay seated at the table a little bit longer, not yet ready to head to bed. I pick up the mug, but upon the first taste I find myself recoiling and nearly spitting it out. It's bitter. Too bitter. Usually I wouldn't mind, but tonight I can't stomach it.

I pour the dark liquid into the sink.

When I came down for breakfast the next morning, my parents pretended like nothing was wrong, while at the same time refusing to speak to one another.

And it was the same the next day. And the day following that. And the one following that; their stony silence unwavering despite how much time had passed. I would have thought it would have blown over by now.

On Friday morning, I take a seat in front of Baba who's got his glasses perched at the end of his nose, doing that thing where he holds his phone at arm's length as he reads the tiny text on the screen. Ma, still nervous about using the hob, opens and closes the fridge multiple times like she's typing a message on Snapchat only to delete it all a second later and then restart the process all over again in the hopes that it will send Baba an IRL notification and make him begin a conversation with her.

I butter my toast and take a bite, but with the tension around us it tastes like cardboard.

‘Anything exciting today?’ Baba asks, taking off his glasses.

I close one eye in thought as I rattle off my timetable for the day. ‘Study period, Media Studies, Tutorial and then English Lit.’

‘Any after-school plans?’

‘I think I’m seeing a movie with Adnan, but other than that, not really,’ I say with a shrug.

‘You *think*?’ Ma drops a plastic bowl into the sink with more force than is necessary and then wipes her hands on a tea towel that reads BABY, I WAS BORN TO DRY. ‘You either are or you aren’t – which is it?’

‘We haven’t decided yet. We’re going to look up what’s on at the Odeon during lunch.’

‘Why didn’t you decide sooner? Or at least tell me sooner that you were thinking of going to the cinema today? So typical of you and your dad to keep things from me. Hmph.’

It’s not often that Ma acts like this, like a proper Desi parent who polices her kid. Especially when it’s anything to do with Adnan. But this week, she’s been more on edge than usual. She’s been snapping at me for things she normally wouldn’t, like not doing my dishes straight away or not picking my clothes up from the floor.

I want to turn to Baba for backup, but I don’t think anything he has to say would comfort her right now. Inwardly, I seethe. Their fight should be over by now. It’s been, like, what, almost five days? Why are they dragging it out for so long? But also, why are they dragging *me* into it?

‘I’ll text you as soon as I know, I promise.’ I try to be reassuring by shooting her a small smile, but it does nothing except infuriate her further.

‘We have the family calendar for a reason, you know.’ She points at said calendar on the fridge. ‘We need to know about any commitments you’re making beforehand. What if we had scheduled something for tonight, Zara? What then?’

I open my mouth to say that we hadn’t scheduled anything and, even if we had, I doubt it’d be going ahead given her horrendous mood, but I stop when I see how Baba rubs the indents on the bridge of his nose, his eyes begging me not to aggravate her any further.

‘Sorry, Ma. I’ll do better.’

She lets out a breath of impatience. ‘We just don’t need any more surprises, beta, is all.’

I swallow, ignoring her dig at Baba. ‘I’m going to miss the bus if I don’t get dressed. I’ll text you at lunch.’

I quickly get dressed into my sixth-form uniform – a grey pleated skirt with a navy-blue V-necked sweater thrown over a white blouse – and dash out the door twenty minutes earlier than usual, eager to escape the bad juju this house has been infected with ever since that damn stove exploded.

‘You were right,’ Adnan says, taking a seat next to me on the common room sofa.

‘I’m always right but do remind me what it is this time,’ I answer without looking at him, too focused on

finishing the last few chapters of the book I started last night about a girl who, after years of pining for her best friend's sister in secret, finally gets the courage to make a move on them.

'About the girl not getting it. You know, "Have you been covered in –"'

'Hearing it once was enough,' I interrupt. I put the paperback away in my backpack and face him, leaning my arm on the sofa cushion. 'You need better chat-up lines.'

'I thought that was a great one. Oh, I've got an even better one!' Adnan repositions himself on the sofa, his movements as quick as an excited puppy. 'I need to break my fast, can I have a date?'

A few seconds pass before I ask, 'Do you think it's possible to unhear something?'

'If it is, let me know how so I can unhear everything you say.'

I pounce on Adnan in an attempt to twist his nipple, but he manages to grab my wrists before I can do any harm.

'Whoa, get a room already!' a familiar voice yells across the room. I turn to see my best friend, Sadie, entering with our other friends Ceri and Liam, and their friend and long-time crush of Sadie's, Joe.

I roll my eyes at the same time Adnan does. Just like our parents hounding us about dating one another, people at school are no different. Everyone assumes we're together – because obviously Desis *must* date Desis – and even though we deny it, and the revolving doors of Adnan's girlfriends keep spinning like there's no tomorrow, they don't believe us.

‘I take it you guys are official now?’ Sadie plops down beside us, while Ceri, Liam and Joe go investigate what’s on offer at the vending machine. ‘What couple name are we using? Zadnan or Adra? Alphabet? Ooh, maybe we should mash your last na—’

‘Sadie,’ I groan.

‘What?’

‘For the millionth time, nothing is happening between me and Adnan. And nothing ever will.’

We’re endgame, sure. But we’re endgame in a completely platonic way, and even though Netflix always shows you otherwise, that the girl and guy best friend ultimately get together, that is not what’s going to happen here. I refuse to fall victim to the script people have written for us.

‘Incest is not wincest,’ Adnan adds with an arched brow.

‘You’re not even related.’

‘You don’t know that. You never know with Desis. We’re probably related through some distant uncle.’

Sadie’s lips are pressed in a firm line, her eyes on the verge of rolling into the back of her head. ‘I know you’re messing with me, but whatever.’

I don’t hold back the laugh that escapes me. Adnan and I are 1,000 per cent not related – we checked using one of those DNA kits you can order online – but it’s too good not to use as an argument whenever Sadie brings up our non-existent relationship. Mostly because messing with Sadie truly is one of my favourite hobbies and one of the main pillars of our friendship. Especially because she dishes it out just as much back.

The bell rings promptly at ten to nine, signalling for us to get off our bums and head to form time. As we walk down the corridor, Sadie jogs ahead to engage in whatever heated debate Joe, Liam and Ceri seem to be having while Adnan and I trail behind.

‘Hey,’ Adnan says, ‘are we still on for the cinema tonight?’

I bite my lip, hesitating. ‘I don’t know if I should. Ma’s still on edge after Baba’s diabetes bomb.’

‘She’s not on edge after your stove exploding?’ Adnan notes with a raised brow.

‘Well, she is, but that’s beside the point . . .’

‘Wait, what’s going on? Bombs? Exploding ovens?’ Sadie asks, re-joining us. ‘Anything I can relay to ThermaeSecrets? I’ve been waiting for my moment to shine, you know.’

Ugh, that *stupid* Insta account. You’d think we were in *Gossip Girl* with the way the wannabe Insta ThermaeSecrets – named after the famous posh spa in town because the people who run the account thought it would be *classy* – actively seeks out scandal where there is none, baiting students with the promise of short-lived fame by chronicling everything that goes on at sixth form. Adnan and I have been posted on that page so many times for things that just weren’t true, but which were twisted to look like it. Once, all he did was hug me as we separated for the bus and they made a whole post about our ‘undeclared love’.

Also, it’s creepy as hell that people I spend eight hours a day with are patiently waiting to snap a picture of me without my knowledge.

Allah, I can't stand that page.

'I don't think ThermaeSecrets would be interested in hearing about my dad's diabetes.'

'Baba Farooq has diabetes?!' Concern flashes in Sadie's eyes. 'Somebody fill me in ASAP!'

I was hoping I wouldn't have to tell Sadie the story, thinking it all would have blown over by now and been just a blip in the cosmos, but from my parents' behaviour this morning it doesn't seem like that's happening anytime soon.

'Parents freak out about the dumbest things,' Sadie says once I've explained about the eventful dinner and how Baba keeping his health concerns from Ma caused a fuse to blow both literally and figuratively. We pause at our lockers so we can leave our bags and not have to lug them around for the rest of the day. 'You'd think your mum would be more concerned about your dad having diabetes than him not telling her.'

'I know! It makes no sense, honestly.' I shake my head as I cram my bag inside my locker, still struggling to understand just *why* Ma is so cross with Baba. 'I mean, there are worse things he could have been hiding. Like –'

'He could have a whole other family like on *Ackley Bridge*,' Adnan interrupts.

I shoot him a pointed look. 'I was going to say like a secret stash of money.'

'Oh, that would be more plausible, wouldn't it?' he says.

'Only a little,' Sadie interjects. Turning to me, with a grave expression, she asks, 'But Baba Farooq is going to be OK, right?'

‘For sure. Diabetes is *totally* manageable’ – I know because I googled it, extensively – ‘and nothing to worry about if you look after yourself, which Ma should be *helping* Baba with rather than telling him off for.’

Sadie places a hand on my shoulder, her lips firmly pressed together in thought. After half a minute she says, ‘I was trying to come up with some comforting advice, but I have absolutely nothing and it’s making me feel awkward, so I’m just going to leave you now that I’ve got the intel I came for and let you take out your frustrations on your handsome lover instead. Ciao!’

Before I even have the chance to tell her off about referring to Adnan as my lover, Sadie is already halfway down the corridor in her quest to catch up with the others.

‘So, movies. Yes?’

I slam my locker shut and start down the corridor again. ‘Did you not hear anything I just said? I need to be in Ma’s good books until this all blows over.’ Under my breath, I mutter, ‘Whenever that is . . .’

Adnan begins to guilt trip me but suddenly stops midsentence, his eye caught by something behind me.

I follow his line of sight and see what, or rather who, has literally taken his breath away. Cami is effortlessly beautiful as she walks past us, even in our plain-as-all-hell uniforms, tucking a lock of her dark blonde hair behind her ear, drawing attention to a pair of dainty crescent-moon earrings. A flicker of a smile appears on her face as she locks eyes with Adnan before quickly looking down at her feet, her arms squeezing more tightly

across the book she's holding to her chest.

I nudge his shoulder.

'What?' he asks, his voice low and far away, like he's on a different planet.

'I take it you guys talked?'

He tries to suppress the grin spreading across his lips, his irises practically melting into the shape of hearts as if he's a cartoon character. 'We were up until four in the morning talking about the universe, about the beauty in the burning balls of fire in the night sky, about the phases of the moon and how, even though it's a different version of itself every night, it's always there watching over us.'

Ah, hence the earrings. And the stupid look on his face. 'Have you asked her out yet?'

'Not yet.'

'Why not?'

Adnan shifts his jaw a little. 'I just don't want to mess anything up. She's . . . different.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. I don't even want to use my stupid lines on her. I want her to know the real me, you know? I don't just want to be "Adnan, the funny guy" to her, I want to be . . .' Adnan holds his hands out in front of him, making a frame by connecting his thumbs and pointer fingers. ' . . . "Adnan, the boyfriend" who can be funny *and* something more.'

'Then ask her out. Nothing's ever going to happen if you don't *make* it happen.'

'Cami's just . . . complicated.'

'Complicated how?'

‘She’s just got some things going on with her family.’ Adnan rubs the back of his neck, his furrowed brows indicating that he’s not willing to tell me the whole story just yet.

‘Well, unless her family is as complicated as mine, I still think you should ask her out.’ I pause, a brilliant idea coming to me. ‘In fact, why don’t you take her to the cinema tonight?’

‘Maybe,’ he says, but I know that he’s already asking her by the way his fingers are flying across his screen.

As we shuffle into registration, I’m a little jealous of Adnan and the smile on his face. I have yet to find my person. It’s not that I haven’t dated or am overly picky about who I date; it just hasn’t happened for me yet. I guess it doesn’t help that when you grow up with parents like mine, where even just looking at them feels like being tucked under the cosiest blanket in front of a roaring fire while heavy snow falls outside your window, it’s hard to feel that spark with just anyone.

And it doesn’t help that all my fictional boyfriends have raised my expectations even further.

‘You gonna be OK at home?’ Adnan asks once we’ve taken our seats in the back.

‘Yeah, I’ll just stay out of the way. My parents need to make up and fast, but there’s not really anything *I* can do.’

‘You could give them some good news?’ Adnan suggests.

‘Like what? It’s not like I do anything newsworthy.’

‘True. You are unremarkable in every way. Do you even *do* anything but sit on the sofa and daydream about

your knight in shining armour?’ Adnan teases with a self-satisfied smirk.

I respond by raising my hand as if I’m going to itch my face but instead I flip him off. Adnan simply shakes his head.

As Mr Wright does the register, I feel my phone vibrate. I sneakily glance at the message on the screen.

I know you're worrying but we'll figure something out.

We'll find a way to help them.

Your parents will be OK. I promise.

I shoot Adnan a strained smile, comforted by his reassurance even though I don’t believe him.

I mean, how do you help fix your parents’ relationship when you’ve never been in one yourself?

THE COOLEST PERSON YOU WILL EVER MEET (S♥)

Today 20:04

Sadie

right

review time of that new romcom on Netflix

you know the one about the couple
at the chalet?

Zara

Oh yeah

How was it?

Sadie

gross

the love interest was NOT likeable

he was misogynistic af

if i wanted to spend two hours watching
a man who refuses to evolve and
STILL gets the girl, I would have called
my deadbeat uncle

and it would have been for free

and also they tried to do the whole secret
billionaire trope and it just wasn't working

Zara

How many stars?

Sadie

2

1 for being entertaining

the other 1 for making me want
to turn my brain off

could have been a 3 if you were
to hate watch with me

Zara

Ugh, wish I could

But Ma is still on a rampage

Not sure she'd let me come over

Sadie

even if you tell her it's for educational purposes?*

*not that we'd study, obvs

Zara

Obvs

But no

Don't think so

Sadie

is she working this weekend?

cos Baba Farooq is fine with
you going out, right????

Zara

Yeah, Dad doesn't seem to mind

And the usual Sunday dinner has been
cancelled since Ma has a late shift
tomorrow she couldn't get out of, so,
maybe I could sneak out

Sadie

turn that maybe into a yes, missy

because tbh, in the nicest – and most
selfish – way possible, I think you need
some time away from the fam

also, I need help brainstorming for a
film comp coming up and you can't
leave me hanging when I'm in dire
need of your assistance

and you KNOW I've been dying to
make a film ever since we saw
that new JLO movie

Zara

That was a horrendous movie

Sadie

EXACTLY

so I need to make something better than that so people don't think all romcoms are like that, and to do that I NEED your help!!!

Zara

You do make a convincing argument

Sadie

would you be even more convinced if I said we just did a food shop and the pantry is filled to the brim with crisps and that the latest Rowan Blanchard film has just been released on Disney+?

Zara

One sec

OK

I just checked Ma's schedule

She's working until 9 on Sunday so I'll need to leave by 8:30

Sadie

YAS GURL

this feels very forbidden love-esque

Zara

You know I can't resist a good
ol' trope xxx