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sabina khan



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To my Jaanu, for being my
partner in crime, to
Sonya and Sanaa for inspiring
me every day, and to my beloved
Nikki for all the cuddles

chapter one

No parties, no shorts, no boys. These were my parents' three cardinal rules. But what they didn't know couldn't hurt them, right? I quickly changed out of my NASA pajamas and into my favorite black crop top and dark blue vintage jeans, liking the way they accentuated my curves. According to Mom no one needed to know that I had boobs, much less a belly button, except for me, Allah, and my future husband. Of course, the whole "no boys" rule was a moot point in my case, but fortunately my parents didn't know about Ariana.

"Rukhsana, Mom is never going to let you out of the house wearing that."

Startled, I spun around to see my brother, Aamir, leaning lazily against my door frame.

"Knock much?" I said, quickly pausing the music playing on my phone.

"I did. It's not my fault you couldn't hear me over that screeching you call music." Aamir smiled as he sauntered into the room and plopped down on my bed.

Of course, my brother was right. I would never be allowed to go out wearing this. Which was why I was planning to throw on

my oversized school hoodie to once again become the shapeless blob my parents preferred to think of me as.

“Aamir, you know this isn’t my first rodeo.” I ruffled his hair affectionately. “Plus, you always have my back, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t worry, I’ll cover for you,” Aamir said, pushing away my hand. He was very particular about his hair. “But it’s going to cost you,” he added with a grin.

“What do you want this time?” I pulled the bulky hoodie over my head.

“Something good. I haven’t thought about it yet.” He surveyed my outfit. “Ariana’s going to run away when she sees you, but at least Mom will be happy.”

I punched him playfully in the arm before going downstairs. The smell of chai led me into the kitchen, where I found the pot bubbling on the stovetop. I inhaled its spicy aroma deeply, allowing the cinnamon and cardamom to soothe my nerves. It was almost five o’clock, time to head over to Jen’s house to finish getting ready for the party. But first I had to convince Mom to let me go.

She walked out of the study having just finished with her Asr prayer, absentmindedly rolling up her prayer rug.

She wore a faded blue shalwar kameez, one of the few old ones she kept for when she cooked. Other than the few grey strands escaping the black bun at the nape of her neck, she looked much younger than she really was.

I took a long sip of my tea before placing the cup on the kitchen counter. “Mom, don’t forget, I’m going to Jen’s house soon.”

She removed her head scarf and draped it over the back of a chair.

“Again?” she asked, deepening the worry lines on her forehead. “Why, Rukhsana? You just went the other day.” She picked up the pot and poured herself a cup of chai, taking a careful sip before returning her gaze to me.

“Mom, I told you,” I said with a deep sigh. “We have a project due on Monday and tonight is the only night we’re both free to work on it.” I waited, a familiar knot forming in my stomach. I hated how I felt right now, like a child asking for just one more cookie. I could almost see the wheels turning in her head as she decided my fate for the evening.

“I need your help with dinner first. I’m making murgir jhol and your dad will be home soon. You can make the roti and then go.” That was that. She turned away to pick out jars of spices from the rack and lined them up neatly on the counter next to the stove.

Great. Now I was going to show up to the party smelling of fried onions and garlic. Just what I needed.

My phone pinged.

Rukhsana!! Get your butt over here!

It was Jen. I knew she’d freak out if I was late.

I darted a glance at Mom. She was busy chopping onions, her face stoic, as if not even the onions could make her cry. I don’t know how she did it.

I need another hour. Couldn’t get out of kitchen duty.

You suck!!!!

I pressed the mute button and shoved the phone back in my pocket with a groan.

“Mom, can’t you get Aamir to help out tonight? I really need to go. Jen’s waiting for me.”

Mom laughed as she ground some coriander in the mortar with a pestle. “Don’t be silly. Aamir has homework, and you know very

well that you need to learn how to prepare these dishes by yourself. When you're married, who will come and cook for you?"

As if on cue, Aamir strolled into the kitchen and Mom's face lit up. Typical. Mom could be such a cliché sometimes. Of course, she doted on my brother, but me? I had to learn how to cook so I could impress a potential mother-in-law. Deep breath. I had bigger problems at the moment. Like, how was I going to get out of here, go to Jen's house to put my makeup on for the party, and make it back home by curfew? All without making my parents suspicious.

Aamir sauntered to the dining table and plopped himself into a chair. "What's for dinner?"

"Murgir jhol, baba. Your favorite." Mom stirred the spices in the pot. Wisps of coriander, cumin, and cloves wafted around the copper pots that hung on a hook near the stove before settling into my hair and clothes. I recalculated in my head the time I would now need to get ready. Shampooing, drying, and straightening my absurdly curly, long hair added at least another hour to my departure time.

Jen was going to kill me.

With a resigned sigh, I gathered my thick hair into a knot, securing it at the nape of my neck with an elastic band from my wrist. I measured out two parts flour to one part water into a large mixing bowl for the roti, casting angry glances at my mother as she kept one eye on the pot.

At least kneading the dough for the flatbread was cheaper than therapy.

"Mom, I don't really have that much homework to do. I can help out," Aamir said, unfolding his lanky frame from the chair.

"No, no, abbu, you go and relax," Mom said. "Rukhsana will help." I glared furiously at my mother. If I had a dollar for every time I'd been treated like Cinderella in this house, I'd be as rich as

Prince Charming by now. Thankfully, I only had to endure this for a few more months. Then I was out of here.

“Mom, this is ridiculous. He said he wants to help. I really need to go and work on my project with Jen.”

Mom waved a dismissive hand. “Aamir is a growing boy.” She returned her attention to the simmering murgir jhol on the stove. “He needs to rest so that he can study properly.”

Aamir picked up the rolling pin, holding it awkwardly, which was not surprising since he’d never used one before.

“Mom, I can—”

“I said, go upstairs, Aamir.” Mom’s tone did not invite argument and my brother slowly backed away from the kitchen counter, mouthing a “sorry” to me before he disappeared up the stairs.

I sighed deeply.

“I’m graduating this year, Mom. I think my grades are just as important as Aamir’s, even though you don’t seem to think so.” I pounded the ball of dough relentlessly into the counter. “I don’t understand why you always do this.”

“Rukhsana, I’ve told you before. Daughters and sons are not the same. You have the power to honor our family’s good reputation. But if you’re not careful you could also be the one to stain it. And it is my job to make sure that does not happen.” Mom reduced the heat on the stovetop and readied a pan for the roti.

I wondered what she would do if I let out the scream that was building inside me. I took several long, deep breaths and recited the mantra I’d been living by lately:

Just hold on for a little bit longer.

Having an outburst would be counterproductive at this point. If I antagonized her, I’d never be able to leave the house tonight. I swallowed the lump in my throat and began to roll out the flatbread, allowing the simple, repetitive act to erase my

frustration. Soon enough, a layer of perfectly round rotis covered the plate.

“You’re getting much better.” Mom grabbed the plate, nodding in approval before tossing one onto the pan to cook.

I held out another plate with the last batch. “Can I go now?”

“You have to eat first, no?” she said, expertly flipping the roti on the pan just as it puffed up.

“I’ll just grab something at Jen’s.”

Mom scooped some rice pudding into a bowl. “Here.” She handed me the bowl. “Take this up to Aamir. No need for him to come down when he’s working so hard. I’ll call him when Daddy gets home.”

I took the bowl from her with one last glare and trudged out of the kitchen. Upstairs, I set the food down on the desk in front of Aamir.

“Mom sent this up for you. She didn’t want to bother you when you’re working so hard.”

Aamir looked up from his book. “I’m sorry, Rukhsana. I did try to help,” he said. “Mom can be so ridiculous sometimes.” He stood and walked over to me.

“Here, you can have some of my rice pudding.” He held out a spoonful, just like he used to when we were little and I wouldn’t finish my food. Even though he was two years younger, most of the time he acted like a protective older brother. I couldn’t help smiling at him as I ate the pudding. He always knew how to make me feel better.



I washed my hair twice in an attempt to replace the smell of the spices with vanilla and jasmine. After straightening my hair, I pulled out a clean black top from my closet. I never understood why people were always telling me to wear lighter colors. Even though I knew they popped against my brown skin, I was way too comfortable in

my dark clothes. I did go all out in bright colors for Bengali functions, though, because even I wasn't immune to the glamor of desi fashion.

I loaded a backpack with my black strappy heels, makeup, and body spray, pulling on a different oversized hoodie and throwing my hair into a messy ponytail. Before heading downstairs, I shoved my cosmic spiral earrings into my jeans pocket.

"Bye, Mom, I'm leaving," I called out.

I didn't wait for her answer as I stepped into the cool Seattle evening. Jen lived just a couple of streets down, so I could walk there in less than five minutes. I felt a tiny pinch of guilt about lying to Mom. If it were up to her I'd never step out of the house. My mother had missed the memo that this was the twenty-first century and I was a senior in high school.



I heard the squeals as soon as I got to Jen's front door.

I had to knock loudly a few times before she opened it, her blue eyes sparkling. "Bout time," she teased.

"Tell me about it," I said as I entered. "Is that Rachel screaming?"

Jen nodded. "Cody's on the phone. He says he's coming to the party."

"Is Ariana here already?" I slipped off my sneakers and placed them against the wall.

"She just got here. Everyone's upstairs."

Jen's room looked like the aftermath of a tornado. Clothes strewn about on the bed, shoes scattered on the floor, and the top of her dresser was a veritable crime scene. When I took off my hoodie, Rachel whistled at me.

"Does your mom know what you're wearing, young lady?" she asked with mock sternness.

"Are you kidding?" I grinned back at her. "If it were up to her I'd be wearing a burqa whenever I go out."

“But then I wouldn’t be able to see your beautiful face,” Ariana said as she exited Jen’s bathroom.

She was breathtaking, wearing a short blue dress that matched the color of her eyes. We’d been together for six months now, but every time I saw her I still got butterflies. I walked over and kissed her softly on the lips.

“Gross. Get a room, you two,” Rachel said with a grin.

“Preferably not mine.” Jen rolled her eyes.

“You guys are just jealous because I have the hottest date for the party,” I said, making a face at both of them.

“No, Rukhsana,” Ariana said overdramatically, her hands on her heart. “I have the hottest date to the party.” And with that she spun me around into a complicated dip and I promptly fell out of her arms and onto a pile of Jen’s laundry on the floor, causing everyone to burst out laughing.

Rachel composed herself first. “Ariana, I think you’ve been watching too many Bollywood movies with Rukhsana.”

“Just practicing my moves for the dance, you know,” Ariana said, her eyes full of laughter. “Gotta keep up with this one, right?” she said, gesturing to me.

“Well, make sure you keep practicing,” Jen said. “And now that it’s *officially* settled that you guys are the cutest couple, can we go? We’re already late, thanks to Miss I-Couldn’t-Get-Out-Of-Kitchen-Duty here.” She grinned at me and Ariana affectionately as we filed out of her room.



“Have your parents said anything more about letting you drive?” Rachel asked as the car stopped at a red light. Rachel, Jen, and I had been friends since elementary school, so they knew all about my usual family arguments.

“I’m pretty sure my brother will have his license before I do,” I said bitterly. “According to my parents, I don’t really need to drive since they can take me everywhere I need to go.”

“Rukhsana, just remember, before long you and I will be out of here and living it up in sunny California,” Ariana said, just as Jen turned onto Caitlin’s street.

“Only if I tell my parents that I applied to Caltech. I’m not looking forward to that conversation.” Jen’s eyes met mine in the rearview mirror and I grimaced.

“Rukhsana, you’ve only been talking about being a physicist since forever,” Jen said, her eyes back on the road. “You have to tell them.”

Ariana put her arm around me and squeezed gently.

“Don’t worry,” she said with a grin. “We’ll make a Plan B just in case.”

The party was in full swing when we arrived, and Jen and Rachel immediately went off in search of Cody. The patterned bass of some dubstep remix reverberated in my chest as Ariana laced her fingers with mine. We were consumed by the music, and Ariana pulled me into her arms.

“Dance with me,” she said.

As we swayed with the rhythm, the rest of the world fell away. She nuzzled my ear and kissed my neck, and my body tingled from head to toe. I had no idea how long we danced together like that or when one song ended and a new one began. All I knew was, this moment in time, this place right here? Pure heaven.

“Wanna get something to drink?” Ariana yelled over the din of the music.

I nodded and we began to make our way to the kitchen, weaving through the thrashing sea of bodies.

Rachel was there, her face slightly flushed and her usually perfect hair a little tousled.

“Umm, guys, you’re not going to believe what just happened,” she said, grabbing the cup Jen was holding out to her.

“I think we have a pretty good idea, Rachel,” I said, grinning at her as I reached over to smooth down her hair.

“Well?” Ariana said. “Are you going to tell us?”

While Rachel gushed about Cody and his make-out skills, I stole a glance at my watch.

Crap. How did it get so late?

If Mom or Dad decided to walk over to Jen’s and check up on me, like they did sometimes, I was dead.

“Jen,” I said, panic tightening my throat. “I have to get home. Could you drive me, please?”

“Already?” Jen’s voice had taken on a whiny tone.

I drew a deep breath. “C’mon, you know what my parents are like. If they find out I’m at a party, I can kiss Caltech goodbye.”

“Fine.” Jen grabbed her car keys out of her purse and handed them to me. “Just let me go tell Caitlin that I’ll be back after I drop you off.”

“Okay, I’m going to go change really quick before we head out.”

I went outside and grabbed my backpack from the back seat of Jen’s car before going back in to find the bathroom. I scrubbed my face until there was no trace of my fierce dark red lipstick and black eyeliner. I put on my hoodie and tied my hair back up in a ponytail, hoping Mom wouldn’t notice that it wasn’t in its usual state of uncontrollable frizz. I doused myself in jasmine body spray just in case. Hopefully she’d be half-asleep when I got back and wouldn’t pay attention. Ariana was waiting for me by the front door when I was done reverting back to my mother-approved self. She had that look she got every time I bailed on my friends to

make it home before curfew. I quickly kissed her, said my good-byes, and walked out before the guilt pulled me back in.

It was just after eleven, way past my ten thirty curfew, by the time Jen pulled into my driveway.

I entered as quietly as I could but wasn't surprised to see Mom waiting up for me in her favorite recliner in the family room.

"Good, you're back. I was about to wake up Daddy to go over to Jennifer's house and bring you home." She stood and stretched. "Are you hungry? There's still rice pudding left. I saved you some before Aamir finished it all."

I shook my head. "I ate at Jen's house. But don't let Aamir eat the pudding. I'll eat it tomorrow."

She smiled indulgently. "You look tired. Look at those dark circles." She kissed my forehead before tucking my hair behind my ears.

"I'm going to go to sleep now. Good night, Mom," I said as I walked up the stairs.

"Good night, ammu."

My heart hammered in my chest as I unpacked my backpack, stashing my heels in the back of the closet and returning my makeup to the bathroom. I hid the forbidden red lipstick in my junk drawer, making sure it was impossible to find in all the other clutter.

chapter two

At school on Monday, Rachel, Jen, and I waited for Ariana to come out of band practice.

“So were your parents mad that you came home late on Friday?” Rachel asked. She was wearing her basketball jersey, all ready to leave for a game after lunch.

“No, I don’t think my mom realized how late it was,” I said.

“I told you it would be fine,” Jen said. “You were just panicking for nothing.”

I opened my mouth to retort, but then I spotted Ariana coming out of the band room and waved her over. I would have to talk with Jen later. Lately she’d been a little dismissive about my concerns and it was bugging me.

“Hey, guys,” Ariana said, a little out of breath after fighting her way through the hallway crowd. “Ready for lunch?”



When I arrived home from school Dad’s dark blue Toyota sat in its usual spot in our driveway. My anxiety took over and I immediately started thinking the worst.

Why is he home so early? Did he and Mom find out about Friday night? I thought I was careful. Did they find out about Ariana?

My legs trembled, threatening to give out at any moment. I found Mom and Dad sitting at the kitchen table. Aamir was there too. How did he always manage to get home before I did? The light coming through the window reflected off the wood veneer on the dining table, casting a soft glow around them.

“Good. Madam is finally home,” Mom said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. It was never a good sign when Mom called me that. It meant she thought I was being too clever for my own good. My eyes fell to the pile of opened mail in front of them.

“Rukhsana, what is the meaning of this?” Dad waved a letter in front of my face. I took it from him, my brow furrowed in confusion. As I skimmed the letter, a smile shattered the anxiety that had been building inside me.

Mom threw her hands in the air and shook her head. “Look at your daughter, Ibrahim. Smiling as if she has won the lottery.”

“Actually, I kind of did,” I said. I couldn’t stop smiling. It was an acceptance letter from Caltech stating they’d awarded me a full academic scholarship.

“Why didn’t you tell us you were applying?” Dad asked.

“Forget about all that. What makes you think we will let you go?” Mom’s voice shook ever so slightly.

Mom had made it abundantly clear more than once that she wasn’t going to let me go out of state for college. The last time I’d brought it up hypothetically, she had asked me why I needed to go away from home to get an education. She’d brought up her friend’s daughter who attended the University of Washington. If it was good enough for her, then it should be good enough for me.

That was reason 34 of 62,372 I decided not to tell my parents that I'd applied to Caltech. I hadn't expected to get in, much less get a scholarship. At least now she couldn't use money as an excuse.

"I'm getting a full ride." Sheer joy and relief bubbled through every pore in my body. "You don't have to pay for anything."

"But it's in California," Mom said.

Yes, hence the name Caltech.

"California . . ." Dad's voice trailed off as he pondered this concept. "That is very far away." It finally dawned on him. "How will you get there?"

By plane, train, or automobile?

"Rukhsana, why are you talking about such strange things?" Mom said.

Umm, I don't know. Because I want to have a life?

"Mom, it's an amazing opportunity. Mr. Jacobs said a lot of people apply for a scholarship to Caltech. I'm lucky to get one." My voice had risen several octaves and yet Mom looked completely unimpressed.

"Who is this Mr. Jacobs? Is he Bengali? Does he know that we don't send our unmarried girls across the country?"

My counselor, Mr. Jacobs, was not Bengali. I was pretty sure he was from the Midwest. And no, he did not share my parents' views on unmarried girls.

"Mom, you met Mr. Jacobs last year, remember? He's the one who told you Aamir was failing math and science."

"Hey," Aamir protested, his mouth full of samosa. "I didn't fail. Mr. Jacobs just hates me."

"Yup, that's it. It's all Mr. Jacobs's fault," I said in mock agreement. Classic Aamir, always blaming everyone else.

"Aamir is a very intelligent boy," Mom said, raising her hands

in anticipation of my usual verbal onslaught. “It’s not his fault that his brain cannot wait for everyone else to catch up.”

“Zubaida,” Dad interjected. “You have to admit, our Rukhsana is also brilliant. Caltech is a very good school.”

Mom shook her head and put two more samosas on Aamir’s plate.

“Thanks, Dad,” I said. “At least someone in this house thinks I can do more than cook.” I snagged a couple of samosas before they were all gone.

“Rukhsana, your mother just wants you to be taken care of after you are married. You know how difficult it was for us when your mother and I first moved to this country,” Dad said, his eyes glazing over with that faraway look he always got when talking about the past.

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, Daddy, I know. I’ve heard this story a hundred times before.”

He ignored me.

“We arrived here with practically nothing except the clothes on our backs, a small suitcase, and some cash my brother had loaned us.” He turned to Mom. “Remember, Zubaida, that first table we bought?” He smiled as their eyes met, heavy with secrets from a time before I existed.

“Yes, how can I forget?” Mom said. “It was blue, a small card table really, but it was all we could afford at the time.” She turned to look at me.

“When you came along, Rukhsana, everything changed,” she said, her tone softening as she remembered.

Dad touched my cheek gently and I placed my hand over his.

“Suddenly nothing was good enough,” Mom said. “Your daddy worked two jobs just so he could buy you everything. But then we talked to your Uncle Maruf.”

“It was his idea to start a business of our own,” Dad said.

Mom got up to make some chai. I stood, intending to help, but she motioned for me to sit while she continued to reminisce.

“He told us the Bangladeshi community needed a local shop where they could buy hilsa fish and jackfruit and panch phoron,” Mom said.

“And he wasn’t wrong,” Dad chimed in. “The store did well right from the beginning.”

They fell quiet for a minute until the sound of water bubbling on the stove broke the silence.

“This is why I am very proud of you, Rukhsana,” Dad said. “I never managed to get a degree, but my daughter will.”

“That is all good,” Mom said. The kettle whistled and she turned off the stove. “But why does she have to go so far away? Let her be brilliant nearby. What is wrong with UW?”

Nothing at all, except it isn’t Caltech.

“UW doesn’t have a good physics and astronomy program, Mom.”

“Imagine”—Dad looked at Mom with a broad smile—“our daughter, a physicist. Or maybe even an astronaut.” His eyes glistened with pride.

Mom’s eyebrows almost disappeared into her hairline. “What will you do with a degree in astronomy, hanh? Will you climb into a spaceship and fly off to Jupiter?” She shook her head and looked at my dad. “Ibrahim, please talk some sense into your daughter.”

What I wouldn’t give to be on Jupiter right now.

“Okay, Rukhsana, we’ll talk about it,” Dad said. “There is still plenty of time.”

Mom poured chai into three cups and placed them in front of us.

Dad stood and stretched. “I have some work to finish before dinner,” he announced before taking his cup of tea into the study with him.

“Aamir, go upstairs and finish your homework,” Mom said, and I braced myself for more lecturing on how it was better for everyone if I didn’t go away for college.

“Rukhsana,” Mom began as soon as Aamir left the kitchen. “You know I am very proud of you, right?” She took a sip of her tea and looked at me, her eyes filled with concern.

She sighed deeply and her shoulders sagged. “I worry what people will say. If you move away, there is no telling what kind of nasty rumors will fly around.”

I sipped slowly at my tea to buy myself some time. “Mom, I can’t make important life decisions based on what people might say.”

“But that’s what your father and I are here for. It is our job to make all the important decisions. That way we can make sure there is nothing for anyone to gossip about.”

What would she do if she found out about my relationship with Ariana? I knew I had to come out to my parents at some point. But definitely not before I was eighteen and over a thousand miles away with Ariana in California.