

ZARA HOSSAIN IS HERE!

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CHAPTER TWELVE

I'm thinking about Chloe the next day after school as I walk across the school parking lot toward my car. Things with her parents are stressful right now, and she's having a tough time. I want to do something to cheer her up. I'm trying to come up with something fun to do, when I see Tyler and two of his friends by a car a couple of rows over. My first instinct is to keep my head down and keep walking. I'm almost at my car, when I hear a voice that doesn't belong to any of the guys. I look over and realize there's a girl with them. It's Maria, a student who just recently emigrated from Colombia. She's a senior like us and quite shy from what I've seen. She's still not quite fluent in English, so she's pretty quiet in class. What're these guys doing with her? I hesitate for a second, but then my gut tells me I need to go over there. My stomach churns as I walk toward them, but I take a deep breath and straighten my spine.

"Are you okay, Maria?" I say as soon as I'm within earshot. Maria nods silently, but I'm not convinced. Tyler laughs derisively, then looks at his friends with his patented smirk.

"Look who's here," he says, projecting his voice like he's an

announcer or something. “If it isn’t Zara Hossain, defender of the downtrodden.”

Luke and Michael laugh like idiots; clearly they enjoy whatever show Tyler puts on for them.

“Some pretty big words you’re using there, Tyler,” I say with all the sarcasm I can inject into my voice. “Did you download a word-a-day app or something? And by big words, I’m referring of course to *if* and *it*, which are long for you.”

Tyler’s face registers surprise at my remark, but he regains his composure quickly.

“Why don’t you just get out of here, Zara?” he says, his eyes narrowed. He’s leaning against his car, chewing gum, and I realize that Luke and Michael are doing the same, like they all share a brain or something.

“Yeah, mind your own business,” Michael says.

I ignore them and turn to Maria.

“Let’s go, Maria,” I say to her. “I’ll walk with you.”

“Not before I get what I was promised,” Tyler drawls.

A couple of things happen in unison. Maria clutches her books closer to her chest, and Tyler moves toward her. I don’t even realize that I’m moving, but I step in front of Tyler and shove him as hard as I can. He falls against his car door.

“Stay away from her or I swear I’ll call 911,” I say, my eyes boring into his, daring him to push back. I can hear my heart pumping loudly and I feel like I’ve lost all peripheral vision, but all I know is that I have to get Maria away from here. I turn around, take her hand, and pull her away as fast as I can. I can hear his friends giving him a hard time, taunting him, but I can’t look back. If I do, I don’t think I’ll be able to walk away. It takes every ounce of courage to keep walking, wondering if they’re following us.

It's only when we're in my car and have pulled out of the parking lot that I feel safe. I ask Maria if she's okay, and she tells me she is even though it's clear she isn't.

"We could turn around and go straight to the office," I say gently.

She shakes her head. "No," she says. "I want to go home. Please just take me home."

I hold it together long enough to drop her off and make it back to my place. Thankfully no one else is home, and I run to my bathroom to throw up. Afterward I sit on the cool tile floor until my legs have stopped shaking. Even though this is hardly the first time I've had an ugly interaction with Tyler, it's never actually gotten physical like this. And today someone else was involved. And I may have just made things a lot worse for her.

Back in my room, I lie down on my bed, the hum of the air conditioner soothing my nerves. I look around at all the stuff on my walls. There's a poster of Fawad Khan right next to a framed picture of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. On the other side of the room is the shrine Ammi has built to me. She says it's to inspire me when I open my eyes every morning. All the medals and trophies I won through elementary and middle school for spelling bees and science fairs are on display, but there are also a lot of pictures of me with Nick from when we got our tae kwon do belts. We haven't gone back to practice together in a long time, and I kind of miss it. I felt that laser-sharp focus today when I confronted Tyler that I used to feel when Nick and I would spar. I'm not even sure what would have happened if I hadn't been there, but I know it could have been bad. I wish I could talk to Nick right now, but then again, I know he won't react well to this. I decide I'm going to talk to Ms. Talbot and

see what she says I should do. No one should feel scared to go to school because of bullies like Tyler.



I try to focus on the essay I have due in English the next day. But I'm finding it really hard to concentrate. The image of Tyler and his friends surrounding Maria like she was some sort of prey keeps flashing through my mind. The way his mouth turns down at the corners when I walk past, like he's disgusted by me. I try to think back and remember when things got so bad with him. He's never really been on my radar. We went to the same elementary school, and I can honestly say I don't really remember any interaction with him.

Zorro comes bounding into my room with his favorite stuffed dinosaur. He jumps up on my bed and walks right over my notebook, steering clear of my laptop. I ruffle his ears as he looks up at me, his bright eyes shiny with pure love. My heart melts, as it has every day since Abbu rescued him from a shelter five years ago. I stick my face in his soft fur and take a deep breath. I instantly feel better.

My phone vibrates, and I grab it off my desk. It's Chloe, saying she wants to meet up, but I tell her I have to finish my essay. We make plans for Friday evening, and that's when I'll share everything that happened with Tyler. I'm glad I can confide in her. I hate telling Nick or my parents anything about Tyler because they get so worked up about it. But Chloe just listens, which is what I really need today.

I feel better when I hang up with her, but not all the way better. I can't shake the feeling that Tyler isn't going to take this lying down.