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ALL MY RAGE

SABAA TAHIR

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ALL MY RAGE

SABAA TAHIR

RAZORBILL

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Sabaa Tahir is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the Ember in the Ashes series, which has been translated into over thirty-five languages. She grew up in California's Mojave Desert at her family's eighteen-room motel. There, she spent her time devouring fantasy novels, raiding her brother's comic book stash, and playing guitar badly. She began writing books while working nights as a newspaper editor. She likes thunderous indie rock, garish socks, and all things nerd.

Visit Sabaa online at **SabaaTahir.com**
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LAHORE, PAKISTAN. *Then.*

Misbah is a dreamer and storyteller, newly married to Toufiq in an arranged match. After their young life is shaken by tragedy, they come to the United States and open the Cloud's Rest Inn Motel, hoping for a new start.

JUNIPER, CALIFORNIA. *Now.*

Salahudin and Noor are more than best friends; they are family. Growing up as outcasts in the small desert town of Juniper, California, they understand each other the way no one else does. Until The Fight, which destroys their bond with the swift fury of a star exploding.

Now Sal scrambles to run the family motel as his mother Misbah's health fails and his grieving father loses himself to alcoholism. Noor, meanwhile, walks a harrowing tightrope: working at her wrathful uncle's liquor store while hiding the fact that she's applying to college so she can escape him—and Juniper—forever.

When Sal's attempts to save the motel spiral out of control, he and Noor must ask themselves what friendship is worth—and what it takes to defeat the monsters in their pasts and the ones in their midst.

From one of today's most cherished and bestselling young adult authors comes a breathtaking novel of young love, old regrets, and forgiveness—one that's both tragic and poignant in its tender ferocity.

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For those who survive.
For those who do not.

Dear Reader,

Please be aware that *All My Rage* contains content that may be triggering. For a list of content, please see the bottom of the page.

All My Rage contains the following content: drug and alcohol addiction, physical abuse, Islamophobia, mentions of repressed sexual assault, tense exchange with law enforcement, death.

PART I

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

—*Elizabeth Bishop*,
"One Art"

CHAPTER 1

Misbah

June, then

LAHORE, PAKISTAN

The clouds over Lahore were purple as a gossip's tongue the day my mother told me I would wed.

After she delivered the news, I found my father on the veranda. He sipped a cup of tea and surveyed the storm looming above the kite-spattered skyline.

Change her mind! *I wanted to scream.* Tell her I'm not ready.

Instead, I stood at his side, a child again, waiting for him to take care of me. I did not have to speak. My father looked at me, and he knew.

"Come now, little butterfly." He turned his moth-brown eyes to mine and patted my shoulder. "You are strong like me. You will make the best of it. And at last, you'll be free of your mother." He smiled, only half joking.

The monsoon rain swept over Lahore a few minutes later, sending chickens and children squawking for cover, drenching the cement floor of our home. I bent my head to the ground in prayer regardless.

Let my future husband be gentle, *I thought, remembering the bruises on my cousin Amna, who married a light-haired English businessman against her parents' wishes. Let him be a good man.*

I was eighteen. Full of fear. I should have prayed instead for a man unbroken.

CHAPTER 2

Sal

February, now

JUNIPER, CALIFORNIA

It's 6:37 a.m. and my father doesn't want me to know how drunk he is.

"Sal? Are you listening?"

He calls me Sal instead of Salahudin so I don't hear the slur in his words. Hangs on to our Civic's steering wheel like it's going to steal his wallet and bolt.

In the ink-black morning, all I see of Abu's eyes are his glasses. The taillights of traffic going into school reflect off the thick square lenses. He's had them so long that they're hipster now. A Mojave Desert howler shakes the car—one of those three-day winds that rampages through your skin and colonizes your ventricles. I hunch deep in my fleece, breath clouding.

"I will be there," Abu says. "Don't worry. Okay, Sal?"

My nickname on his lips is all wrong. It's like by saying it, he's trying to make me feel like he's a friend, instead of a mess masquerading as my father.

If Ama were here, she would clear her throat and enunciate "Sa-lah-ud-din," the precise pronunciation a gentle reminder that she

named me for the famous Muslim general, and I better not forget it.

"You said you'd go to the last appointment, too," I tell Abu.

"Dr. Rothman called last night to remind me," Abu says. "You don't have to come, if you have the—the writing club, or soccer."

"Soccer season's over. And I quit the newspaper last semester. I'll be at the appointment. Ama's not taking care of herself and someone needs to tell Dr. Rothman—preferably in a coherent sentence." I watch the words hit him, sharp little stones.

Abu guides the car to the curb in front of Juniper High. A bleached-blonde head buried in a parka materializes from the shadows of C-hall. Ashlee. She saunters past the flagpole, through the crowds of students and toward the Civic. The pale stretch of her legs is courageous for the twenty-degree weather.

Also distracting.

Ashlee is close enough to the car that I can see her purple nail polish. Abu hasn't spotted her. He and Ama never said I can't have a girlfriend. But in the same way that giraffes are born knowing how to run, I was born with the innate understanding that having a girlfriend while still living with my parents is verboten.

Abu digs his fingers into his eyes. His glasses have carved a shiny red dent on his nose. He slept in them last night on the recliner. Ama was too tired to notice.

Or she didn't want to notice.

"Putar—" *Son.*

Ashlee knocks on the window. Her parka is unzipped enough to show the insubstantial *"welcome to tatooine"* shirt beneath. She must be freezing.

Two years ago Abu's eyebrows would have been in his hair. He'd have said *"Who is this, Putar?"* His silence feels more brutal, like glass shattering in my head.

"How will you get to the hospital?" Abu asks. "Should I pick you up?"

"Just get Ama there," I say. "I'll find a ride."

"Okay, but text me if—"

"My cell's not working." *Because you actually have to pay the phone company, Abu.* The one thing he's in charge of and still can't do. It's usually Ama hunched over stacks of bills, asking the electric company, the hospital, the cable company if we can pay in installments. Muttering "ullu de pathay"—*sons of owls*—when they said no.

I lean toward him, take a shallow sniff, and almost gag. It's like he took a bath in Old Crow and then threw on some more as aftershave.

"I'll see you at three," I say. "Take a shower before she wakes up. She'll smell it on you."

Neither of us says that it doesn't matter. That even if Ama smells the liquor, she would never say anything about it. Before Abu responds, I'm out, grabbing my tattered journal from where it fell out of my back pocket. Slamming the car door, eyes watering from the cold.

Ashlee tucks herself under my arm. *Breathe. Five seconds in. Seven seconds out.* If she feels my body tense up, she doesn't let on.

"Warm me up." Ashlee pulls me down for a kiss, and the ash of her morning cigarette fills my nostrils. *Five seconds in. Seven seconds out.* Cars honk. A door thuds nearby and for a moment, I think it is Abu. I think I will feel the weight of his disapproval.

Have some tamiz, Putar. I see it in my head. I wish for it.

But when I break from Ashlee, the Civic's blinker is on and he's pulling into traffic.

If Noor was here instead of Ashlee, she'd have side-eyed me and handed me her phone. *Not everyone has a dad, jerk. Call him and eat crow. Awk, awk.*

She's not here, though. Noor and I haven't spoken for months.

Ashlee steers me toward campus, and launches into a story about her two-year-old daughter, Kaya. Her words swim into each other, and there's a glassiness to her eyes that reminds me of Abu at the end of a long day.

I pull away. I met Ashlee junior year, after Ama got sick and I dropped most of my honors classes for regular curriculum. Last fall, after the Fight between Noor and me, I spent a lot of time alone. I could have hung out with the guys on my soccer team, but I hated how many of them threw around words like *"raghead"* and *"bitch"* and *"Apu."*

Ashlee had just broken up with her girlfriend and started coming to my games, waiting for me in her old black Mustang with its primered hood. We'd shoot the shit. One day, to my surprise, she asked me out.

I knew it would be a disaster. But at least it would be a disaster I chose.

She calls me her boyfriend, even though we've only been together two months. It took me three weeks to even work up the nerve to kiss her. But when she's not high, we laugh and talk about *Star Wars* or *Saga* or this show *Crown of Fates* we both love. I don't think about Ama so much. Or the motel. Or Noor.

"MR. MALIK." Principal Ernst, a bowling pin of a man with a nose like a bruised eggplant, appears through the herds of students heading to class.

Behind Ernst is Security Officer Derek Higgins, aka Darth Derek, so-called because he's an oppressive mouth-breather who sweeps around Juniper High like it's his personal Star Destroyer.

Ashlee escapes with a glare from Ernst, but this is the second time I've pissed him off in a week, so I get a skeletal finger digging into my chest. "You've been missing class. Not anymore. Detention if you're late. First and only warning."

Don't touch me, I want to say. But that would invite Darth Derek's intervention, and I don't feel like a billy club in the face.

Ernst moves on, and Ashlee reaches for me again. I stuff my hands in the pockets of my hoodie, the stiffness in my chest easing at the feel of cotton instead of skin. Later, I'll write about this. I try to imagine the crack of my journal opening, the steady, predictable percussion of my pen hitting paper.

"Don't look like that," Ashlee says.

"Like what?"

"Like you wish you were anywhere else."

A direct response would be a lie, so I hedge. "Hey—um, I have to go to the bathroom," I tell her. "I'll see you later."

"I'll wait for you."

"Nah, go on." I'm already walking away. "Don't want you to get in trouble with Ernst."

Juniper High is massive, but not in a shiny-TV-high-school kind of way. It's a bunch of long cinder block buildings with doors on each end and nothing but dirt between them. The gym looks like

an airplane hangar. Everything is a dusty, sand-blasted white. The only green thing around here is our mascot—a hulking roadrunner painted near the front office—and the bathroom walls, which, according to Noor, are the precise color of goose shit.

The bathroom is empty, but I duck into a stall anyway. I wonder if every dude with a girlfriend finds himself hiding from her next to a toilet at some point.

If I'd been hanging out with Noor instead of Ashlee, I'd already be sitting in English class, because she insists on being on time to everything.

Boots scrape against the dirty tiles as someone else enters. Through the crack in the stall door, I make out Atticus, Jamie Jensen's boyfriend. He enjoys soccer, white rappers, and relaxed-fit racism.

"I need ten," Atticus says. "But I only have a hundred bucks."

A lanky figure comes into view: Art Britman, tall and pale like Atticus, but hollowed out by too much bad weed. He wears his typical red plaid and black work boots.

I've known Art since kindergarten. Even though he hangs out with the white-power kids, he gets along with everyone. Probably because he supplies most of Juniper High with narcotics.

"A hundred gets you five. Not ten." Art has a smile in his voice because he is truly the nicest drug dealer who's ever lived. "I give you what you can pay for, Atty!"

"Come on, Art—"

"I gotta eat too, bro!" Art digs in his pocket and holds a bag of small white pills just out of Atticus's reach. A hundred bucks? For that? No wonder Art's smiling all the time.

Atticus curses and hands over his cash. A few seconds later, he and the pills are gone.

Art looks over at my stall. "Who's in there? You got the shits or you spying?"

"It's me, Art. Sal."

For a guy who careens from one illegal activity to another, Art is uncannily oblivious. "Sal!" he shouts. "Hiding from Ashlee?" His laughter echoes and I wince. "She's gone, you can come out."

I consider silence. If a dude is dropping anchor in the bathroom, it's rude to have a conversation with him. Everyone knows that.

Apparently not Art. I grimace and step out to wash my hands.

"You doing okay, man?" Art adjusts his beanie in the mirror, blond hair poking out like the fingers of a wayward plant. "Ashlee told me your mom's up shit creek."

Ashlee and Art are cousins. And even though they're white—and I stupidly thought white people ignored their extended families—they're close. Closer than I am to my cousin, who lives in Los Angeles and insists all homeless people should "just get jobs." Usually while he drinks Pellegrino out of a ceramic tumbler he ordered because a Pixtagram ad told him it would save the dolphins.

"Yeah," I say to Art. "My mom's not feeling great."

"Cancer sucks, man."

She doesn't have cancer.

"When my nana Ethel was sick, it was miserable," Art says. "One day she was fine, the next she looked like a corpse. I thought she was a goner. She's fine now, though. And she got a painkiller prescription she never uses, so that's lucrative." Art's laugh echoes off the walls. "You good? Cuz I could give you an old friends' discount."

"I'm good." Not even tempted. One shit-faced person in the house is enough.

I hurry away just as the bell rings. The dirt quad empties out quicker than water down a drain. As I turn the corner to the English wing, Noor appears from the other side.

The sun hits the windows, painting her braided hair a dozen colors. I think of the pictures she has all over her room at her shithead uncle's house, taken by a massive space telescope she told me about once. That's what her hair is like, black and red and gold, the heart of space lit from within. Her head is down and she doesn't see me, instead intent on racing the bell.

We reach Mrs. Michaels's door at the same time. Noor's face looks different, and I realize after a second that she's wearing makeup. She pulls out her headphones, hidden in her hoodie, and a tinny song spills from them. I recognize it because Ama loves it. *"The Wanderer."* Johnny Cash and U2.

"Hey," I say.

She gives me a nod, the way you do when you've stopped seeing someone because you've got your own shit to worry about. Then she ducks into the classroom, a blur of beaded bracelets, dark jeans, and the cheap, astringent soap her uncle sells at his liquor shop.

For a second, the Fight hangs between us, specter versions of ourselves six months ago facing each other at a campground in Veil Meadows. Noor confessing that she was in love with me. Kissing me.

Me shoving her away, telling her I didn't feel the same. Spewing every hurtful thing I could think of, because her kiss was a blade tearing open something inside.

Noor staring at me like I'd transformed into an angry kraken.

She had a pine cone in her hands. I kept waiting for her to peg me with it.

The door slams behind her and I grab the handle to follow her. Then I stop. The bell rings. The hall clock behind me plods on, each tick a dumbbell slamming to the floor. A minute passes. I read and reread a sign on the door for a writing contest that Mrs. Michaels has been bugging me to enter.

But even though I've walked into AP English every day for five months, today I can't make myself do it. I can't sit across the room from Noor, knowing she'll never tease me about my llama socks again, or kick my ass in *Night Ops 4*, or come over on Saturday mornings and eat paratha with me and Ama.

I try to remember Ama's smile when she was well and would pick me up after class. The way she lit up and asked me about my life, like I had climbed Everest instead of merely survived another day at school.

"Mera putar, undar ja," she'd tell me now. *My son, go inside.* I sigh and as I reach for the door, a bony hand grabs my arm.

"Mr. Malik—" The handle slips from my grip. Ernst's pale green eyes bore into me, daring me to snap, or wanting me to. "What did I say earlier?" he asks.

"Don't," I jerk away from him. *Shut up, Salahudin.* "Don't touch me."

I wait for him to paw at me again. Suspend me. Call Darth Derek. Instead he lets me go and shakes his head, a man sternly disappointed in a rebellious dog, giving the leash a little yank.

"Incorrect," Ernst says. "I said 'first and only warning.' Detention. My office. Three o'clock."

CHAPTER 3

Noor

My uncle loves theorems. He loves explaining them to other people. But the audience for his genius is limited. It's either me; his wife, Brooke; or the drunks who come into the liquor shop. He likes the drunks best because they always think he's brilliant.

Under the cash register next to his bat, he keeps a stack of graph paper and a mechanical pencil. He refills both every Sunday.

The door jangles and Mr. Collins walks in. He's an engineer on the military base just outside town, and he likes a little Jack in his coffee. Cold air follows him in. The sky outside is dark. I can't even see the mountains that ring Juniper. There's still time to do Fajr—the dawn prayer.

But I don't. Chachu wouldn't like it. *"God,"* he likes to rant, *"is a construct for the weak-minded."*

My head aches as I restock the candy aisle. According to the Pakistani passport and the US green card I keep in my backpack at all times, it's my eighteenth birthday.

My phone dings. I look up at Chachu, but his skinny form is turned away. His brown hair falls in his face as he scribbles on the graph paper spread across the counter between lighters and lotto tickets. I peek at my screen.

The message is from Misbah Auntie. She's not actually my aunt.

But she is Pakistani, and calling her Misbah would, as Salahudin likes to say, "piss off the ancestors."

Misbah Auntie: Happy 18th birthday, my dear Noor. 🌹 ★ 🌹 You bring such light into my life. I hope you will come to see me. I made your favorite. 😊 😊

Above that message is a string of others. From January. December. November. September.

Misbah Auntie: Are you angry at me too? 😒

Misbah Auntie: I miss you, my Dhi. I'll make paratha on Saturday for you. Please visit.

Misbah Auntie: Noor, it is raining! I am thinking of how you love the rain. I miss you.

Misbah Auntie: Noor, talk to me.

Misbah Auntie: Noor, please. I know you are mad at Salahudin. But can't you talk to him?

I've read that last message a dozen times. It still makes me mad. Salahudin is Misbah Auntie's son.

He's also my former best friend. My first love. My first heartbreak. So cliché and so, so stupid.

Misbah Auntie came into the store a couple of Sundays ago. I wanted to hug her. Tell her Sal had broken my heart and that I was lost. Talk to her the way I used to before the Fight, even if I was afraid that she'd reject me.

But I froze up when she spoke to me. I haven't seen her since.

"Noor." Chachu's voice makes me jump. I shove my phone back in my pocket, but he's not looking at me. "Finish stocking."

"Sorry, Chachu."

My uncle frowns. He hates that I call him Chachu. It's the Urdu title for *father's brother.* After a second, he turns back to Mr. Collins, with whom he's discussing Fermat's Last Theorem.

Mr. Collins nods as Chachu wraps up. The strains of Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" fill my head as Mr. Collins's face lights up. A caveman discovering fire. I shouldn't be surprised. No matter how obscure the theorem, Chachu can explain it. It's his gift.

"You could be doing my job," Mr. Collins says. "Hell, you don't even have an accent like some of the guys working at the base. Why are you here selling liquor and groceries?"

"The vagaries of fate," Chachu says. My spine tingles. His voice has that edge.

Mr. Collins looks to where I'm restocking.

"Noor, is it?" Sometimes, Mr. Collins comes in Sunday mornings when I open the store. "You as smart as your uncle?"

I shrug. *Please shut up.*

Mr. Collins does not shut up. "Well, don't waste it," he says. "If you're anything like him, you'll get into any college you want."

"Ah." Chachu bags Mr. Collins's bottle and catches my eye. "Has Noor been talking about college?"

I'm glad I didn't eat breakfast. I feel sick and breathless.

"No," Mr. Collins says. I breathe again. "But she should be. You're a senior, right?"

At my shrug, Mr. Collins shakes his head. "My son was like you. Now he's a human billboard for an apartment building in Palmview."

Mr. Collins looks at me like I'll be joining his son any second. I want to throw a Snickers bar at him. Hit him right between the eyes.

But that would be a waste of good candy.

When he's gone, Chachu crumples up the graph paper. *Turn on the radio.* Our love for nineties music is the only thing we have in common, other than blood. We don't even look alike—my hair and skin are darker, my features smaller. *Turn it on. Distract yourself.*

Instead, he nods to the other end of the shop.

"There's something for you out back," he says.

I'm so surprised I stare at him until he waves me away. A birthday present? Chachu hasn't remembered my birthday in five years. The last gift he gave me was the dented laptop he left in my room a year and a half ago without explanation.

I pick my way through the storage room. Outside, the wind rips the back door's handle from me and I struggle to close it. The desert beyond the alley is a flat blue shadow and it takes me a second to see my gift leaning against the store's stucco wall. A battered silver bike.

As I run my hands along the steel frame, I hear the snick of Chachu's lighter and jump.

"After you graduate," he says between drags on his cigarette, "you'll be able to take over the day shift here while I'm in class. It'll make all our lives easier."

People love talking about the greatness of the human heart.

No bigger than a fist, pumps two thousand gallons of blood a day. Et cetera.

But the human heart is also stupid. At least mine is. No matter how many times I tell it not to hope that Chachu cares about me, it hopes anyway.

Back inside, Chachu flips on the classic rock station and turns it up when Nirvana's "Heart-Shaped Box" comes on. My head is splitting, and as I grab my backpack, I think about asking for a mini bottle of aspirin.

Don't push your luck. The thought makes me angry. Why can't I ask my own uncle for some aspirin? Why when—

Stop, Noor. I can't be angry at Chachu. He is the only reason I'm standing here.

I was six when an earthquake hit my village in Pakistan. Chachu drove for two days from Karachi because the flights to northern Punjab were down. When he reached the village, he crawled over the rubble to my grandparents' house, where my parents lived, too. He tore at the rocks with his bare hands. The emergency workers told him it was useless.

His palms bled. His nails were ripped out. Everyone was dead. But Chachu kept digging. He heard me crying, trapped in a closet. He pulled me out. Got me to a hospital and didn't leave my side.

Chachu brought me to America, where he'd been in college. Left his engineering internship at the military base and put a down payment on a failing liquor store with the little cash he'd saved up. And that's where he's stayed for the past eleven years, just so we could afford to live.

He gave up everything for me. Now it's my turn.

Chachu clears his throat, his attention drifting to my braids, one over each shoulder, then to the green kerchief tied behind my bangs.

"You look like a FOB with those braids."

I don't respond. I had the braids in my passport picture, too. I like them. They remind me of who I was. Of the people who loved me.

"Your shift starts at three fifteen," Chachu says. "I have to be somewhere. Don't be late."

To Chachu, tardiness is illogical, and if there's one thing Chachu hates, it's the illogical.

Some days, I think of throwing Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem in his face. It's the idea that any logic system in existence is either inconsistent or incomplete.

Basically, Gödel is saying that most theorems are bullshit.

Which I hope is true. Because Chachu has a theorem about me, too. Chachu's Theorem of the Future, I call it. It's pretty simple:

Noor + College = Never going to happen.

My face is frozen by the time I lock my bike to the school rack and head to English. But I don't mind. The ride to school let me think. About Auntie Misbah and the hospital where I volunteer. About Salahudin and school. Right now, I'm thinking about numbers.

Seven applications sent.

One rejection.

Six schools left.

University of Virginia was my early-action school. I applied because they have a good bio program, and because I thought I'd get in. The rejection arrived yesterday.

My face gets hot with anger. I force it away. I'd have needed a scholarship to attend anyway. And it's one school. One out of seven is no big deal.

"Noor . . ." Mrs. Michaels clears her throat at the front of the class. I don't remember opening the door. I want to disappear, but I'm frozen at the threshold. Jamie Jensen turns to stare, ponytail swinging. Her blue eyes fix on me, so everyone else's do, too.

Sheep.

"The lights, Noor." Mrs. Michaels positions her wheelchair next to her laptop. I flip them off, and mouth *thank you* to her as everyone shifts their attention to the poem illuminated on the white board. I sink into my seat in the back row, next to Jamie. Who is still watching me.

The Police's creeptastic "Every Breath You Take" plays in my head. Ten bucks says that one day Jamie makes a band perform it at her wedding.

"What'd you get?" She leans over. Nods to the downturned paper on my desk. Last week's essay. Mrs. Michaels must have handed them out before I got in. She wanted us to talk about the themes of a Dylan Thomas poem called "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines." I gave it my best shot. But I know it was a crap essay.

Jamie stares. Waiting. When she realizes I'm not going to answer her, she settles back. Smiles her tight, fake smile.

"—work on your final papers, which will account for half your

grade this semester," Mrs. Michaels is saying. "You'll need to pick a work by an American poet—"

I glance at a seat across the classroom. It's next to the red fire alarm. And it's empty. But it shouldn't be. Salahudin was behind me. I thought he followed me in.

"*Mr. Malik,*" a voice says in the hall. Principal Ernst, nailing Salahudin for being tardy again. Ernst says "Malik" like "Mlk" because vowels are beyond him.

I pull out my notebook. Salahudin is not my problem. I have bigger ones. Like the rejection from UVA. Like making sure I pass this class even though I suck at English without Salahudin to give me notes on my essays. Like Chachu's Theorem of the Future and what it means to defy it.

Jamie corners me in PE. She waits for Grace and Sophie, her eerily identical posse, to leave the little dirt patch outside the locker room before approaching.

"Hey—Noor!"

My name rhymes with "lure." Not too difficult. I don't even expect people to roll the "*r*" at the end, like Auntie Misbah does. But Jamie's always pronounced it "Nore" like "bore." I've known her since I moved to Juniper in first grade, and in all that time, she's refused to say my name right, even though I've asked.

For the first five or six years of my life here, Jamie mostly ignored my existence.

Then, in seventh grade I got Student of the Month. I won a

speech contest. I took advanced classes. She didn't befriend me. Never that. But she did start keeping an eye on me.

"You look tired." Her eyes linger on my face. "The Calc problem set last night was brutal, huh?"

Jamie is innocent enough on the surface. Class president. Straight A's. Big smile. A pleasantness that got her on homecoming court even if it didn't get her the crown.

And yet.

"Have you heard from any colleges?" She doesn't want to ask, but her competitive streak gnaws at her "I know it's only February, but you did early action, right? My sister said I should have heard from Princeton by now—"

I don't remember telling Jamie I did early action. I haven't told anyone at school about applying to college. There's no one to tell. Until six months ago, Salahudin was the only friend I ever needed.

There's an awkward pause. After Jamie realizes I'm not going to say anything, she steps back. Her face goes hard. Like that time I scored in the top ten at the Golden State Engineering and Science Fair and she didn't place.

"Fine. Yeah. Fine. I get it. Okay. Sure." She sounds a little like a seal barking. Once the image is in my head, I can't get it out. Which means I smile. Which makes her madder, because she thinks I'm laughing at her.

A crowd of seniors passes, Grace and Sophie among them. They look at us curiously—they know we're not friends. Jamie jogs to them, her thousand-kilowatt smile pasted on. She'd make a great politician. Or serial killer.

As she disappears to the field, Salahudin comes out of the locker

room, still pulling on his shirt. I catch a flash of rigid brown stomach muscle.

"What did that psycho want?"

The casual way he talks. Like we haven't be avoiding each other for the last six months, two weeks, and five days.

My brain refuses to formulate a response. After the Fight, I'd lay awake thinking of all the things I should have shot back at him when he told me he could never fall in love with me. When he said I'd ruined our friendship.

Now I can't remember a single one. I should ignore him. But the way he looks at me—careful and hopeful—it's a punch. And I fold.

"Re—remember when she told you to dress up as a terrorist for Halloween?"

"Sixth grade. Never trusted her again."

We glare at Jamie's retreating back. For a moment we're kids again. Unified against an invisible evil.

He lifts his arm, rubbing the back of his head, and I catch a flash of bicep. *Look away, Noor.*

"God, I wish she had a weakness." I glance accusingly at the sky, though God probably doesn't live there. "Insecurity. Jerk parents. Bad hair. Bad gas. *Something.*"

"She's got heinous taste in shoes. Look at those—" He nods to Jamie's neon Nikes. "Like her feet got eaten by traffic cones."

Salahudin usually has dad humor, but that wasn't bad. I almost say so. He glances at my face. I want to hide. Or run away. He steps closer.

"Noor." He sees too much. I wish he didn't see so much.

"You should go." Ashlee watches us from the field. "Your girlfriend's waiting."

That word still makes me want to kick him in the teeth. *Girlfriend*. I'd glare at him, but I'd have to crane my neck. Last time I was this close to him, he was two inches shorter. With worse skin.

If the universe were just, he'd have shrunk. Grown questionable facial hair. A wart would be good. Maybe a personality transplant, too. A potbelly instead of a six-pack.

But the universe is not just.

"Right," Salahudin says. "Yeah—I wanted to ask you a favor."

I cross my arms. A short conversation is one thing. But we both know he shouldn't be asking for favors.

"Could you text my mom?" he says. "Tell her to push her doctor's appointment? Ernst gave me detention for being late and—" He lifts up his phone. "It's—not working."

"I have a charger."

"No, it's—" He fidgets, which is weird because Salahudin isn't a fidgeter. "There's a problem with our account. Some . . . billing thing. Ama's on a separate plan, though, so her phone's fine. Never mind. Forget I asked."

He turns away. The bunched cords of his neck tell me he's upset. As soon as I think it, I'm angry. I know him so well. I wish I didn't.

"Hey—" I reach for his arm, then quickly let him go when he jumps. I shouldn't have grabbed him. He hates being touched.

Though as soon as I do touch him I want to do it again. Because touching him makes him real. And that makes me remember how I used to feel about him.

How I still feel.

"I'll text Auntie," I say, thinking about her message to me this morning. About the food she made me. She loves me. I know that in my bones. Salahudin being an idiot isn't her fault. "And I'll stop by after I'm done at the hospital. How is she doing?"

A long pause. He could say a hundred things. But his shoulders harden. His brown eyes drift away.

"Not great."

"What do you mean?" I ask. "What happened?"

Salahudin gives me a sad half smile. I don't recognize it. "*In Him we put our trust*," he says.

One of Auntie's religious sayings. Salahudin would argue with her about it. "*What about our will?*" he'd say. "*What about what we want?*"

She'd answer in her don't-make-me-smack-you-with-my-chappal voice. "*What you want is what you want. What you do is what God wishes for you to do. Now ask for forgiveness, Putar. I don't want the gates of heaven closed to me because my son was disrespectful.*"

Salahudin would grumble. Then he'd ask for forgiveness. Always. Auntie knew how to answer his questions. She knew what to say to him.

But I don't. He pulls away. I let him go.

CHAPTER 4

Misbah

November, then

Amid the brilliant silks of Anarkali Bazaar, the fortune teller was a sparrow. Her small feet tapped impatiently in cracked rubber sandals. She's younger than you, Misbah, *my cousin Fozia told me,* but she will ease your mind.

The fortune teller beckoned me to sit across a rickety wooden table and took my hands. The cross at her neck marked her as a Christian.

"You are to marry," the fortune teller said.

"I am not paying you one hundred rupees to tell me cows make milk." I lifted the "Sahib's Bridals" bag in my hand. The girl's laughter creaked out of her. Perhaps she was older than she looked.

"Your fiancé is a restless soul." She stroked the lines on my hands and poked at the calluses. "You will travel across the sea."

"My fiancé is the only son. He will not desert his parents."

"Nonetheless you will leave Pakistan," she said. "You will have your children far from here. Three."

"Three!"

"A boy. A girl. And a third that is not she, nor he, nor of the third gender. You will fail them all."

"What do you mean I will fail them? How? Will—will they die? Will they be sick?"

The fortune teller met my eyes. Hers were small and long-lashed, the crisp brown of fallen leaves.

"You will fail them all."

I offered her one hundred rupees to change the fortune. Then two hundred. But no matter what I offered, she said no more.

CHAPTER 5

Noor

Chachu wants me at the store by 3:15, but Auntie didn't respond to my text, which worries me.

I spend the last two periods of every school day in a volunteer program at Juniper Regional Hospital. Chachu doesn't like it, but it's during school hours so he can't do much about it. When I finish my shift, I head to the motel. On my bike, it's only ten minutes away. I should have enough time to check on Auntie, and get to the store.

The motel's quiet when I roll across the cracked concrete in the carport by the main apartment, where Sal's family lives. Auntie never locks the door, and when I enter, the warm smell of sugar-toasted semolina fills my nose. I call out, but there's no one inside. I walk behind the carport to the fenced-off pool and toolshed, but they're empty, too. "Cold Moon" by the Zolas plays in my earbuds. I shut it off as the chorus winds down.

The east wing of the motel is quiet, the parking lot empty. Business hasn't been great, I guess. None of the rooms on the west wing are open, either. But the bright blue door of the laundry room creaks in the wind.

I push it open to find Auntie leaning against the wall inside. She has a towel clutched to her chest.

She looks awful. Her brown skin is gray and sickly. She's breath-

ing too fast. I see her pulse jumping. The knot of her pink hijab, which she usually wears pulled back and rolled into a bun at her nape, is coming undone.

"Auntie?" I get to her side in a second.

"Oh!" She jumps. "Asalaam O Alaikum. Kithay rehndhi, meri dhi?" *Peace be upon you. Where have you been, my daughter?*

"Auntie, you need to sit down. Take my arm. Did you get my message? About Salahudin having detention?"

"Yes, I canceled the appointment." I try to give her my arm, but she waves me off. "And don't think because I'm speaking to you I've forgiven you. After all those parathas, you couldn't come and visit your old Auntie?" She smiles. But I feel her sadness.

"Mafi dede, Auntie," I ask for mercy hastily. *Half of forgiveness is saying sorry*, she once told me. "I'm an idiot. Let's go in the apartment." She's so gray I'm surprised she's standing. I need to get her to a doctor. But she won't go unless I ease her into the idea—probably over tea.

"I didn't think you'd come." She squints in the bright winter sunshine. "But I made you halva and puri just in case."

My mouth waters just thinking about the deep-fried, puffed bread. "You didn't have to—"

"It's your birthday, na? Eighteen! Very—very important—" She stops to catch her breath and I finally get her to take my arm. I could pick her up, she's so light.

Once inside, a bit of color returns to her face and she lets go of me. She makes her way through the dim living room, patting the wall of the apartment like it's an old friend. She loves this place. Even if it's sucked all the life out of her.

The kitchen is off to the side and shaped like an L. A big window faces the east wing. Three Corning Ware dishes sit on the old butcher-block counter, next to a four-person dining table, where I've eaten hundreds of meals.

I'm half reaching for the cholay—Auntie's turmeric and cumin chickpeas—when she turns on the stove to warm up the puri. Her hands tremble.

I nudge her into a chair. "Let me make you some tea. Then I'm calling the doctor, Auntie. Birthday halva can wait."

"I rescheduled for tomorrow, so stop worrying. We have time for tea."

As I pull out two mismatched mugs and PG Tips tea bags, I relax. The UVA rejection doesn't seem like such a big deal. The failed English paper doesn't, either. Something about Auntie makes me feel like I can face those things.

I want to tell her all this. *This is home. You and Salahudin are home. I'm sorry I was gone for so long.* I crack a few cardamom pods between my teeth, planning and abandoning a dozen apologies. It's like when I try to write. Only worse.

"It's okay," Auntie says, and I glance over at her. Her eyes are hazel, much lighter than Salahudin's. Right now, they are fixed on me. She puts a hand to her heart. "I know."

The knot that's lived in my chest for months loosens. We let a companionable silence fall as the halva crackles and the puris puff up. After I join her at the table, Auntie doesn't touch her food, but I'm halfway through mine before she takes a sip of tea.

"Wow." I finally take a breath. "You outdid yourself, Auntie."

"You haven't been eating enough." The crease between her eyes

deepens. "I offered to teach Riaz to cook, you know." She's always called Chachu by his last name. "When he first brought you to Juniper."

I put my puri down. Chachu hates Pakistani food. He hates Pakistani everything. "He, um, he prefers sandwiches, I guess."

"Brooke wanted to learn," Auntie says. "Did you know?"

I shake my head. Technically, I should call Brooke "Chachee" since she's Chachu's wife. She thought it was cute when I first brought it up. Chachu shut that down quick. He only let me call him Chachu because at six, I couldn't say "Uncle" properly, and he hated mispronounced words more than Urdu ones.

"Anyway, your Chachu heard about it. So she didn't come back." She takes a deep sip of tea.

"Auntie, why haven't you been going—"

"You know, Noor, now that you're eighteen—"

We both stop and she gestures for me to go on.

"You've been missing dialysis appointments, Auntie."

Her expression darkens. "Oh, those are rubbish anyway," she says. "They don't make me feel any better, but they cost an arm and a leg. I drink turmeric in milk—"

"Kidney disease is dangerous, Auntie," I say. "You can't cure it with turmeric. You have to get dialysis. What about insurance?"

"No insurance," she glances at her desk, littered with bills. "I have to get back to cleaning. Play me a song before I go, Noor Jehan."

She uses the nickname she gave me when I was little and she first realized I loved music. Noor Jehan, for the famous Pakistani playback singer.

"All right, you know how you love that Johnny Cash and U2 song?" I pull out the smartphone she gave me last year—one she said a tenant left behind but that I suspect she paid for herself. "Well, I have another Johnny Cash collaboration. It's called '"Bridge Over Troubled Water.'" This time with Fiona Apple. You like her, too."

I find the song, and the first strains of Johnny's guitar strum out. Auntie closes her eyes. When the chorus hits with both him and Fiona singing, she reaches for my hand.

"That is you, Noor," she says. "My bridge over troubled water. And Salahudin's. But . . ."

She leans forward to look at me. Really look at me. I drop my head, letting my bangs fall into my face.

"Noor," she says. "I need to—I need to tell you . . ."

But she stops talking. Like she's too tired. "I don't feel well, Dhi," she whispers. I manage to get in front of her as she slumps forward, body suddenly limp.

"Auntie—oh no—okay—" I try to grab my phone without letting go of her. But it slips from the table and bounces off the linoleum and is too far to reach. The front door opens.

"Salahudin?" I call out. "Something's wrong with Auntie!"

But it's not Salahudin. It's his dad, and I can smell the liquor on him before he appears in the kitchen doorway.

"Noor?" he mumbles. Then he sees his wife and his voice breaks. "Misbah?"

"Call 911, Uncle Toufiq," I say. Auntie is collapsed against me, her heartbeat thudding strange against my shoulder. "Now!"

Juniper is small enough that the ambulance doesn't take long to get to the motel. Uncle Toufiq stares while the paramedics load

Auntie into the back, the terror of his wife's illness briefly sobering him up.

He tries to shove his car keys into my hand, but I shake my head. "I don't know how," I say, relieved that he isn't trying to drive. "Ride in the ambulance. I'll leave a note for Salahudin and bike over."

I grab a sheet of paper.

Hey, ASSHOLE—I write, but immediately cross it out.

Your mom collapsed—No. That's just going to freak him out.

Come to the hospital ASAP. Emergency room. Your mom is OK. But she had to be admitted.

My phone dings as I hop on the bike. A quick glance tells me it's Chachu. 3:17. I'm two minutes late.

The liquor store is five minutes away. But once I get there, Chachu's going to walk out. He won't care that Auntie is sick. He never even wanted me hanging around here.

I shove the phone into my pocket, grab my backpack, and follow the ambulance.

CHAPTER 6

Sal

By the time I reach the hospital, it's almost seven and I'm sweating so hard it looks like I ran through a car wash. I found Noor's note, but not the spare car key. When I called her from the motel phone, she didn't pick up. So I ran.

"Where the hell have you been?" Noor paces at the entrance to the ER. "She's in the ICU—come on.—"

As we hurry through Juniper Hospital, Noor catches me up. I flinch at her voice, a Gatling gun firing off fact after fact. *Your ama is weak. Hallucinating. The lack of dialysis took a huge toll. High levels of potassium in her blood—she's at risk of heart arrhythmia—*

A few nurses greet Noor as she passes, but she hardly notices. As she speaks, she brings her hands together and apart, twisting them like she's rubbing on soap. She's terrified.

Part of me wants to tell her: "Stop. Look at me. Everything will be fine." That's what Ama would say.

But I hate lying. I especially hate lying to Noor. Her fear catches, infecting me. By the time she stops at the door to the ICU, I'm sweating again, and not from the run.

"Give them your name when you go in. They'll only let in one visitor at a time, and they already kicked your dad out." Noor's

voice softens at my expression. "He—got a little sick. I'll go check on him."

Ama is hooked up to a million machines. She's only forty-three. But she looks like she's aged twenty years. I tuck her hair under her hijab and straighten the gown they've put her in, pulling the blanket over her bare legs. Ama keeps her legs covered in public. The docs here know her. They know she prefers modest dress. They didn't even have the decency to cover her up properly? Assholes.

"Why didn't you get your dialysis?" I whisper to her. "Why didn't you listen to the doctors?"

"Putar." *Son.*

I grasp Ama's hand—the only person whose hands have always felt safe. She settles her gaze on me.

"How are you feeling, Ama?"

"Where's your abu?"

Embarrassing the hell out of himself by throwing up in the hallway.

"He's outside." I don't give her more than that, but she recoils at the venom in my voice.

"He's sick, Putar," she says softly. "He—"

He's not sick. He's never been sick. Weak, maybe. Pathetic. "He's drunk, Ama. Just like always." The hurt on her face makes me hate myself. But I don't apologize. This anger must have lurked within me for a long time, coiled like a hungry snake.

Ama squeezes my hand. "Your father . . . he—"

"Don't make excuses for him. He's outside decorating the ER with lunch while you're in here—" I shake my head. "But don't worry. Everything's under control—"

"Where is Noor?"

"She had to call Riaz." I can't talk about Noor with Ama. Not again.

"Putar, you must make up with her. She needs you. More than you know. And you need her."

"Ama—don't worry about me and Noor, okay?" I wish I could lose this edge in my voice. I'm trying. I'm trying to be calm but my body feels not like a body at all and instead like a dark cave of stress and uncertainty and fear, ejecting words that aren't words but hawks, with razors for wings and knives for beaks.

"Noor is fine," I say. "She's been fine without us for six months. You always—"

"You'll need to call my cousins in Pakistan," she whispers.

"Why—" My voice cracks and I imagine it as words on a page, nudged, molded, bent to my will. When I speak again, I sound normal. "You'll call them yourself, Ama."

"You'll have to pay the bills, Putar. Your father forgets," she says. "Water the flowers. Ask—ask your Uncle Faisal for help—"

"Ama, when he visited in the summer, he gave me a trash bag of his son's old Brooks Brothers so I'd look 'less like a daku.'" A criminal. "I'm not asking him for anything."

"I miss—him," Ama's voice is faint, but she looks past me so intently that I glance over my shoulder.

"You miss Uncle Faisal?"

"No," Ama whispers. "My father. 'Little butterfly,' he called me. He'd play carrom board with Toufiq and his father. He loved Toufiq's jokes."

I nod even though the last time I remember Abu telling a joke I was still in Hulk-themed underpants.

"Sir?"

A nurse enters, tall and dark-haired. "Your, ah—father. I think he might need you."

My father, I want to say, *is not the one who needs me right now.*

"I'm good." I turn back to Ama, but the nurse reaches out a hand as if to touch my shoulder. I pull away before she can make contact, and she raises her eyebrows.

"Honey, I'm sorry, but your dad can't be here. He's upsetting patients in the emergency room. Speaking some other language—"

"That's Punjabi," I say. "His native language. "

"You need to deal with him. Or we'll have to call the police."

Noor enters, catching the tail end of the conversation.

"I got the keys from your dad," she says as the nurse leaves. "Imam Shafiq brought your car."

The young Imam/engineer who leads Juniper's tiny mosque is Ama's friend. But I didn't call him. "How—"

"I called him earlier. He had to leave, but, um, your dad probably needs a way home," Noor shifts from foot to foot. I thought she didn't know how bad it's gotten between me and Abu. But I guess she's figured it out.

"I'd take him, but Auntie only gave me a couple of driving lessons before . . ."

Before I shouted horrible shit at Noor and she ran away like any sane person would.

"I'll take him," I say. Goddamn Abu. I need to be here with Ama. I need to make sure she's okay. But he's going to be mess tonight and I don't want Noor dealing with him—or him harming himself. "I'll be back, though. Just . . . stay with her. Please."

"I'll be fine," Ama speaks up. "Take your father. Give him water. Put him on his side. And don't be angry at him, Putar. Please, he—"

"Don't defend him, Ama." I walk out before I say something I'll regret.

Dr. Rothman is in the hallway, and I catch him. "Should I bring her anything?" I ask. "Medicine or—"

"She's not in pain," he says. "We'll be moving her to a room soon, so she can complete her dialysis comfortably. Pajamas, maybe. Toiletries. And—" He checks his clipboard. "I see we don't have an insurance card on file—"

Shouting drifts through the doors to the ICU. I recognize Abu's voice.

"I'm sorry." I'm unable to meet Dr. Rothman's eyes. "I—I should go."

The emergency room, down the hall from the ICU, is curiously silent. Other than my father, snarling at two cops watching him warily from the door.

"Sir—" One of them, a brown-haired woman, sounds tired. "Just step outside with us, okay? There's no need to—"

"Haramzada kutta!" *Dog of a bastard.* Abu's less of a wrathful drunk, and more of a sleepy one. I've never heard him curse in English, let alone Punjabi.

He sees me and stabs at the air like a sloshed Perry Mason. "That's my son. He'll tell you. My wife is inside. I need to go to her, but no one will let me—"

Even upset as he is, Abu's accent is the gentle swell of an ocean. I never noticed it until two years ago, when I put him on speakerphone at the grocery store. As he spoke, I stopped dead in the aisle,

because he sounded suddenly unfamiliar. His *r*'s rolled and he lingered on *l*'s and *d*'s, making every word more poetic.

But these cops don't care about that. To them, he's a shit-faced foreigner who reeks of despair.

Everyone in the waiting room stares. Ailments and misery aside, watching someone even worse off is a relief. Or entertainment, at least.

My skin goes prickly and hot at those stares, and though I want to muzzle Abu, I feel weirdly protective of him, too. Hunched like he is, with his hands fisted, he looks so small.

"Abu," I put myself between him and the cops. "We need to get home. Ama wants us to go home." I turn to the cops. "I'm sorry—he's upset because my mom is sick."

"I know him." The cop with short blond hair and a mustache looks Abu over. His name tag says marks. I wish I knew what he was thinking. But maybe it's better that I don't. "We've had him in the tank before."

For a moment, I imagine Abu in an army tank wearing camouflage. The image is so bizarre that I laugh, a weird, shrill sound I've never made before. Then I realize what the officer means—a drunk tank. My laughter dies.

Marks's face changes from neutral to irritated.

"I'll just—I'll get him home," I say. "Abu, come on." I don't want to, but I take his hand. He's skin and bones, and I remember when he wasn't. When he could throw me up onto his shoulder like I was a feather pillow.

"No—" He jerks away, arms windmilling. When his hand smacks my face, I think at first that Marks has hit me—that's how

unlikely it is that my father would ever lay a finger on me. Then I realize what's happened. It stings like hell and my eyes water—even as my panic rises. A cop seeing my dad hit me is not what we need right now.

It will be fine. I wipe my eyes. *In a few hours, you'll be writing about this in your journal because it will be the past instead of the now, and everything will be fine.*

"Oh—oh no. I am so sorry, Salahudin." My dad looks stricken, but it's not him I'm focused on right now.

Marks steps forward, his voice steel. "Sir, that's enough. Step back, son—"

"He didn't mean to," I say quickly, trying to keep this situation from spiraling. Something about how I'm talking reminds me of Ama and I cringe at the thought. "It was an accident. Please trust me—it's not who he is." Even Ama's whacked me with a spoon if she thinks I'm being disrespectful. But never Abu.

The other officer—Ortiz—puts a hand on her partner's arm. This time, when I grab Abu's hand, he doesn't fight me.

"We're going, okay?" I tug him out, and he follows, muttering.

"Sorry, sorry, Putar, I'm sorry."

Marks shakes his head. "Get him home," he says. He and Ortiz—and the rest of the emergency room—watch us as we walk out into the frigid desert night.

My ire rises again because I can taste their disgust. Their judgment. I want to turn around and scream at them. *This isn't who he is. This isn't who we are.*

We weren't always like this.