

HOW
IT

ARVIN
AHMADI

ALL

BLEW
UP

A story based on true events



VIKING

VIKING

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, New York



First published in the United States of America by Viking,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2020

Copyright © 2020 by Arvin Ahmadi

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

Viking & colophon is a registered trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.
Visit us online at penguinrandomhouse.com

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA IS AVAILABLE
ISBN 9780593202876

Printed in the USA Set in Dante MT Std

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Dedication TK

Interrogation Room 37

Amir Azadi

FIRST, LET ME *get one thing straight: I'm not a terrorist. I'm gay. I can see from the look on your face that you're skeptical, and I get it. People like me aren't supposed to exist, let alone make an admission like that in a situation like this. But I assure you, I'm real. I'm here. I'm Iranian. And I'm gay. I just needed to get that off my chest before we started, since you asked why my family and I were fighting on that plane. It had nothing to do with terrorism and everything to do with me.*

Okay, I'll assume from the way you're clearing your throat that I should probably stick to the questions. Sorry, sir. I didn't mean to be disrespectful.

My name is Amir Azadi. I'm eighteen years old.

I was in Rome for about a month. Yes, like Italy. I don't know exactly how many days I was there.

I lived in multiple apartments in Rome. I can get you the addresses if you'd like. My family found me in the Italian countryside yesterday. I willingly went back with them. I can't really say why—it happened so fast—and then we fought on the plane, which is, I guess, why I'm in here.

It was such a huge whirlwind of emotions that I didn't even notice when the flight attendants started pulling the four of us apart. They put us in separate parts of the plane. One of them was actually really kind to me. "Family can take a while," he said as he buckled me into a pull-down seat in the aircraft kitchen. He had an earring in his nose. Slick blond hair. "Trust me, kid, we've all been there." He even let me have one of those snack packs with the hummus and pita chips, which was nice, considering I was being detained.

As soon as we landed, Customs and Border Protection took our passports and escorted us from the plane to a holding room in the airport. Soraya—my little sister—kept asking what was going on, and my mom kept telling her to be quiet.

They told us to sit and wait until our names were called. We were glued to those chairs. Soraya took out her phone and one of the officers barked at her to turn it off. My mom snatched it from her hand. After what felt like forever, one of the male officers entered the room and looked sternly at my dad. "Mr. Azadi. Please come with me." My dad didn't ask any questions. He just went. Then a minute later, I got pulled into this room.

Was I in touch with any "organizations" while I was in Rome? Oh God. You must think I ran away to join ISIS, don't you? You probably think they recruited me to their Italian satellite office. Sir, I don't mean to belittle the evils of the world, but those guys would never take a fruit like me.

I'm sorry we scared all those people on that plane, I really am. I wish I hadn't exploded at my parents like that, all spit and tears and hysteria, on

an airplane. Especially being, you know. Of a certain complexion. But at the end of the day, I'd much rather be in this airport interrogation room than back in the closet.

You asked me why we were fighting, sir, and to answer that question, I'll have to start at the very beginning.

Ten Months Ago

IT WAS THE first day of school, and I was already sweating in my seat. As if it wasn't torture enough to sit through transfer orientation, the classroom was as hot as an oven. Figures I move farther south of the Mason-Dixon line and the air conditioner decides to crap out.

The senior class president was fanning himself with a manila folder in the front of the classroom. He was about to introduce us to our "buddies"—student government leaders and athletes, clearly, who would be showing us around the school.

I scanned the lineup.

Not the cute one. Anyone but the cute one.

The one all the way at the end of the row. The one with the messy blond hair and nice arms and golden skin. The one I was too scared to call "cute," even in my head, even though I just did. Right, it should have been: *anyone but the one on the far right, who will make me feel even more sweaty and uncomfortable than I already am.*

The other three senior transfers were all girls, and judging

from how they were ogling this dude, they definitely wanted him as their buddy.

I just don't get all the hype around pretty people. I get why they exist—for meet-cute purposes, for magazine spreads—but they're just so stressful to be around. Who needs that kind of stress in their life? Not me.

Not him. Anyone but him.

I imagined the Sorting Hat whispering in my ear: *Not him, eh? Are you sure?* Yes, you pretentious hat, I'm sure. If you can save Harry from Slytherin, you can save me from having to spend the next hour with this annoyingly handsome jock.

Not him, not him, not him . . .

The Sorting Hat did not have my back.

His name was Jackson Preacher. He looked right through me when the president said our names together. When we met, his "hello" was like walking straight into a brick wall. While everyone else's "buddies" enthusiastically asked them questions, Jackson and I just stood there with our hands in our pockets.

He was just as stoic as he took me to my locker, walked me through the main hall and past all the classrooms.

"This is the library," Jackson mumbled when we passed the library, which was marked in big bold letters: LIBRARY. He didn't really have much to say, and I didn't really have much to ask.

What did it matter, anyway? One year at this new high school and I'd be out. That was half the reason why I didn't hate the idea of moving; my dad's new job came with a higher salary, which meant we could afford out-of-state tuition for college. In a year, I'd

be somewhere far away. In a year, I could start being myself. That had always been my dream. It was the only reason I didn't fight as hard as my sister about the move.

At the end of the tour, when I assumed Jackson would resume his God-given right as a jock to ignore me for the rest of the school year, he said, "Well, that's it. Let me know if you ever need a hand with anything around here."

I cocked my head back. "Seriously?" He didn't strike me as the hand-offering type. "Is that a real offer?"

Jackson looked off to the side. He shrugged.

"They make you say that, don't they?" I said.

He nodded. "It's part of the script."

"Gotta follow the script," I said, and out of nowhere, Jackson let out one of those snort-laughes. Then we kind of widened our eyes and looked away, because this conversation wasn't part of *our* script.

Jackson combed a hand through his wavy mop of hair. Some days his hair was dirty blond, some days it was brown. I remember that day it was blond.

I asked if he thought I would fit in at this new school. Jackson didn't really answer; he was staring at the parking lot behind me. I had my eyes glued to the school entrance behind him. Later, we would joke that that first day we met, we were actually competing in a very serious un-staring contest.

"It's fine," I said after a long silence. "I don't really fit in anywhere."

Jackson smiled—and I cheated at our contest. I snuck a glance

at him. Something in him knew. He had found himself another outsider. We fit like gloves, Jackson Preacher and me. We fit like pasta and wine, football and Bud Light.

I was the pasta and wine. He was the football and Bud Light.

That first semester, Jackson and I existed in completely different worlds. As much as we crossed paths, we never really talked. He flew in the stratosphere of athletes and popular kids; I flew under the radar. I just didn't see the point in going through the social acrobatics of making friends when I was only going to be at that school for eight months.

Still, we kept playing our un-staring contest in the halls whenever we passed each other. There was something lingering from that tour, and it was going to take a seismic shift to get it out.

That seismic shift happened right before Thanksgiving, when our football team lost the last game of the season. I was driving home after the game and stopped by 7-Eleven to pick up some salt-and-vinegar chips when I found Jackson sulking in the parking lot. I thought about just walking inside like I didn't see him. But he had dirt marks all over his face. A dried-up river of tears running down his cheeks. He was vulnerable. So I went, "Need a hand?"

He looked up and saw it was me, and he laughed. "I'm supposed to be giving you a hand," Jackson said, wiping a tear from his face.

"Screw the script," I said.

He looked at me differently after those words slid out of my mouth. I don't know what invisible hand gave me the push I needed that night to respond so smoothly, but it will forever go

down as the best and worst decision I made in high school.

I comforted Jackson that night, in the grassy corner of the parking lot. I remember his hair was dark and sweaty. I don't know how long we were talking, only that I got to see Jackson in all his multitudes. I saw him, blond and brown-haired, stoic and sensitive, a guy who plays football but who maybe, just maybe, plays for the other team, too.

When I walked him over to his car, he put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed tight. "Remember that thing you were telling me when we met," he said softly, "about not really fitting in anywhere?" My eyes grew wide. I stared right at him, his green eyes, and he was staring back at me. "I feel that way, too."

And right there, the world shifted.

I wish I could just slip back into that little crack in the universe, that guilt-free space where I wanted Jackson Preacher's touch and nothing else. A week later, I was sitting in the passenger seat of his car, fumbling with my sweaty fingers. I was quiet. Jackson was quiet. The radio was humming softly, something poppy. He later told me he kept expecting me to make a move, since, in a way, I had made the first one, but I didn't have any more moves left in me. When he finally put a hand on my shaking leg and leaned in to kiss me, I pulled back. That really scared the shit out of Jackson. He looked like he wanted to die right there. But I needed that second, that frozen moment in time, to say goodbye to my old life. The way you might take one last look at your house after the moving boxes are all packed up. That's all I needed. A second. When I finally pressed my lips against his, I swear, I could feel us both exhaling.

Jackson taught me how to breathe. A special method of breathing that involved drowning, because, boy, was he a slobbery kisser.

I was so happy between Thanksgiving and the middle of March, when I had Jackson and not much else. I should have known Ben and Jake would smell my happiness like a shark smells blood.

Ben and Jake had singled me out from day one at my new school. Much like those “random” security checks at the airport, they picked on me without any probable cause. I was brown, and I was there.

One morning, they deviated from their routine cafeteria traffic stop and caught up with me at my locker. Ben flashed a phone in front of my face.

“We know what you’re up to, Jihadi,” Jake said, gesturing at the picture on the phone. I took a closer look, and when I made out what it was, I tried to steal the phone from his hand. Jake grabbed my wrist.

It was a picture of Jackson and me kissing in his car.

Ben leaned in closer and went, “You wouldn’t want us to smear your faggy little secret across town, would you, Amir Bin Laden? Wouldn’t look so great for your people.”

Their words stung so hard that I didn’t even register that they had followed Jackson and me into the empty parking lot where we hooked up when both our parents were home. I didn’t even get a good look at the photo. It’s hard looking at a photo like that, at the face of the first boy you’ve ever kissed, without imagining the creepy stare of the two boys who would blackmail you with the most intimate detail of your life.

“One thousand dollars of your Wiki fortune, and we won’t show this shit to your parents,” Jake said. He nudged Ben, who nodded. Looking at them, it hit me that they were dead serious: they really did believe I was a “Wiki millionaire.”

The thing is, I’m actually very legit in the Wikipedia world, to the point where I actually *do* receive offers to make and edit pages for money. It started in tenth grade, when a friend’s mom wanted to hire a Wikipedia editor to make a page for her lingerie start-up. My friend commented on the Facebook post, “Amir!!” and the rest was history. I didn’t take the offer, or any of the offers that followed. Paid articles are strictly forbidden in the Wikipedia terms of use. But when Ben and Jake once caught me editing the *Real Housewives of New Jersey* page in homeroom, I didn’t think it would hurt to *pretend* I got paid. It’s a lot cooler to say “I do this for money” than “I do this because I find the power of crowdsourcing and the democratization of information really sexy.”

I didn’t have the kind of money they wanted. I begged Ben and Jake to believe me, but they refused. Especially Jake. He was weirdly insistent about the whole thing. It was like he was desperately clinging to this fantasy notion that I was *actually* a Wikipedia millionaire.

It was less of an explosion, and more of a steady crumbling inside of me, when I realized what had just happened.

All the meticulous planning I had put into how I would come out to my parents, the years I spent closeted but knowing I had to come out the *right way*: poof. It was dust in the wind. Ben and

Jake were very clear: if I didn't get them the money in one month, I was fucked.

There was one more condition: "Don't go telling your gay lover about our deal," Ben added. "If anyone finds out about this, this shit's going straight to your parents."

Ben and Jake bulldozed right through the fortress I'd spent years building around my secret.

When you're gay, you grow up doing a lot of mental math. Your brain is basically a big rainbow scoreboard, logging every little thing your parents say—their offhand remarks, the way they react to two men holding hands at the mall or the latest Nike commercial with a queer couple in it. You assign each event a point value. Plus or minus. When the time comes, you tally up all the points—and believe me, you don't forget a single one—and based on the final score, you decide what your coming out is going to look like.

+1: Mom watches Ellen DeGeneres and doesn't bat an eyelash whenever Ellen talks about her wife, Portia.

-1: Mom teaches at the local Islamic school.

-5: When one of her students asks about gay marriage, Mom explains that marriage is between a man and a woman.

-20: The trailer for a gay rom-com comes on while we're at the movie theater, and Dad calls it propaganda.

-2: Mom scrunches up her face at that same trailer.

-1,000,000: We're Muslim.

To be honest: I didn't see a world where my coming out wasn't going to be messy. Pluses and minuses aside, I had bought

into the same idea as everyone else, that Muslims and gay people are about as incompatible as Amish people and Apple products. I wish I could say I was better than that, that I ignored the stereotype. But when your safety hinges on a stereotype being true or not, you don't get to be brave. I wasn't going to bet my happiness on the fact that my mom watched a talk show hosted by a lesbian.

But none of that mattered anymore. My happiness hinged on a pair of greedy bastards and their blackmail scheme. I had five weeks and two options: either give in and pay them off, or come out to my parents.

Week one: I was freaking out inside my head. I holed myself up in my room. I stopped texting Jackson. He confronted me in the parking lot one afternoon: "Amir. What's wrong?" I remember staring at the outline of his wide shoulders, the edges of his blond hair, which he refused to cut. I couldn't look at his eyes—it was our un-staring contest all over again—because all I could see in those eyes was that stupid picture of us kissing, flashing before me like a neon sign.

"If something happened, you can tell me," Jackson said, shifting his eyes. It was clear he was nervous to be seen talking to me. Even with all the time we spent together in his car, we still barely talked at school.

"It's nothing, Jackson."

"Is it your parents?" He turned his face away toward the football field, puffing his chest. "If there's something going on, I want to—"

“No, you don’t,” I snapped. “You don’t want to help. I just need space.”

Week two: things only got worse. I started hearing back from the colleges I applied to. The rejection letters trickled into my inbox, one after another: NYU, Columbia, Northwestern, Georgetown, Boston College, George Washington. It was like one long, drawn-out funeral, especially around my parents. They got really silent and mostly reacted with sighs and tight-lipped nods. Pretty soon I realized I hadn’t just ruined my future; I had ruined their American Dream.

I was angry, too. College was supposed to be my light at the end of the tunnel—when I would be able to come out to my parents safely, with some distance between us. I was counting on one of those schools to be my escape. With the exception of my two safety schools, they all turned me away.

I retreated into my shell. Turned quiet at home. Quiet at school.

By week three, the blackmail was back to being constantly on my mind. I had less than fourteen days left, and I still had the same two options: come up with the money, or come out. Since I was in no position to disappoint my parents even more, I decided to give into Ben and Jake’s demands. But after I did the dirty deed on Wikipedia and sent them the money, I got a separate text from Jake: he wanted another three thousand dollars, this time by graduation day. That fucker.

I thought about coming out to my parents. I kept pulling up that mental scoreboard, but I just couldn’t find a way to make the numbers work. Every time I opened my mouth and tried, I failed.

Every time I thought about pushing it just an inch—testing the waters with a *what if I liked boys?*-type comment—I chickened out. It's hard enough tiptoeing around your entire life with a secret like that. It's draining, constantly feeling that you might not be safe around your own family. My parents were already looking at me differently after I got rejected from all those colleges; if I told them I was gay, I would cease to be their son. I'd become a stranger they had wasted their time raising.

A week before graduation, my family was sitting down for dinner when the phone rang. My mom answered, then handed me the phone. "Amir, it's for you."

"*Ameeeeer.*" It was Jake. My heart started racing when I heard his wormy voice through the speaker. "I like your mom's accent," he sneered. "So exotic."

I ran up the stairs to my room. Shut the door. My mouth was so dry, I could barely speak. "Why are you calling me?"

"Somehow I don't think your mom would approve of your other life, *Ameer.*" The way Jake said my name, mimicking my mother's accent, it was like he had discovered a new weapon that he could torture me with.

Jake then got to the point, demanding to know when I was going to get him the money. I wanted to be brave and tell him to leave me the hell alone . . . but then I thought about my family downstairs, the peaceful dinner we were having. I collapsed onto my bed, shoving my face into my pillow. All I could think, over and over, was: *I can't do this.*

After that night, I accepted that there was no universe in which

I was capable of coming out. I tried to get the money. I really did. I busted my nerdy ass, reaching back out to every single start-up or D-list celebrity who'd ever slid into my inbox thirsty for a Wikipedia page, but at the end of it all, I was still a thousand bucks short. A couple nights before graduation, I came *this* close to texting Jake to ask if two thousand—two thousand dollars!—would work. But just before I pressed SEND, it came to me. A new idea, a third option I had never considered before.

Disappear. Just for a little while.

I knew the idea was ridiculous. So ridiculous, in fact, that the fantasy of skipping graduation and going somewhere else was actually comforting for about five seconds. It was the calmest I had felt in months.

Then I kept thinking. And the more I thought about it, just completely removing myself from this entire mess until things calmed down, the less ridiculous it seemed. You don't just stand aside when a bomb is about to detonate. You run.

The morning of graduation, I was hyperventilating in my car in the driveway, a packed duffel bag on the passenger seat next to me. *This is it*, I kept thinking. I couldn't believe I was following through on this insane idea. But in a few hours, Jake was going to spill my secret to my parents in the middle of graduation. He'd already told me as much the day before at school.

I, however, would be on a plane thousands of feet in the air. I would be safe. I would have space. And when I landed, I would have the most important answer of my life: I would know if my family still loved me or not. If they did, then I would come home.

And if they didn't—well, I would be far away, just as I'd always planned.

When I finally started driving, I felt the clash of my two identities stronger than ever. Iranian. Gay. There had always been a wall separating those two sides of me, so they would never touch. On one side, there was Jackson. On the other, my family. Soon, that wall would come crashing down.

I let out a deep sigh. And then I watched through the rearview mirror as my house shrank smaller and smaller, until it disappeared.

Interrogation Room 37

Amir Azadi

THAT WAS THE *original plan. I just wanted to go to New York. NYU and Columbia were two of my dream schools, and I thought I would get away while Jake hijacked my coming out. You have to understand that I was imagining the worst, and if my parents didn't want me back home, then I would create a new life for myself in New York.*

Rome was never part of the original plan.

Have I been in touch with Jackson since I left America? Yes and no. It's complicated. I can't believe I'm about to say this to you in here, but I keep wondering if I loved Jackson. I don't know. We tiptoed around that word a lot. We tiptoed around a lot of things. All I know is that neither of us ever believed we would end up together. We didn't believe in a future for "us" as much as we believed in a future where, someday, I could be Amir . . . and he could be himself, too.

You're looking at me like none of this is relevant to the outburst on the plane, but it is. It's the baggage. I thought you people were all about inspecting baggage.

Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I was just trying to emphasize, with

my long-winded story, that it really all comes back to Jackson. If I'd never met Jackson, I wouldn't be in here. I can draw a clear line connecting that first moment we kissed to right now, sitting in this chair, absolutely terrified to see the people on the other side of this wall. More terrified to talk to them than to you, if I'm being honest.

Interrogation Room 38

Soraya Azadi

MY NAME IS *Soraya Azadi. I'm thirteen years old.*

My brother, Amir, has been missing for a month. He disappeared the morning of his high school graduation.

Did I notice anything different or off about Amir before he disappeared? Was he talking to anyone suspicious? Well—

Mom, don't give me that look. Amir is in the room next door, and I'm sure he's telling the truth. He has nothing to be ashamed of. I'm sorry, Officer. I didn't mean to snap. I'm just a little annoyed, that's all. I don't think it's fair how my family got pulled into these rooms. I really don't think it's fair. I tried to record the whole thing back in the waiting room, but my mom made me put my phone away.

It has been a big misunderstanding. I'm so glad you can see that.

Sure. I can tell you everything. How long do you think this is going to take? I've already missed two rehearsals for the summer musical, and if I miss tonight's, I . . . My mom is giving me that look again. She thinks I'm saying too much. It's funny, I knew she would be like this when you asked to talk to me first. You see her face, right? I'll read it for you: Soraya, be

careful what you say. Soraya, we are Iranian. We deal with these matters privately, Soraya. *If she were answering your question, she'd say no, we didn't notice any signs that Amir was going to run away. And she'd be telling the truth. From her perspective, nothing was wrong. Nothing is ever wrong in her mind.*

No, Mom, let me talk! What her face should be saying is, Soraya, thank you. Soraya, you saved the day. Soraya, it's because of you we found your brother and brought him back.

Let me explain.

Interrogation Room 39

Afshin Azadi

BEFORE WE GO *any further, let me get this straight. You are questioning my son in one room, correct? And my daughter and wife are together in another room. And you have me alone here in this room—and I think I know why you have put me in this separate room. I know it in my bones. The way you are looking at me, I think you know, too. That this is not my first time alone in a small room, just like this one.*

Very well.

No, I don't have anything more to say.

Thirty-One Days Ago

WHEN I LANDED at JFK Airport, the morning of my graduation, I felt safe. I was a world away from the nightmare of my senior spring. Most of all, I was away from Jake and the trouble he was about to cause for my family.

I made myself check my phone. Graduation would be over by now. I imagined this whole scenario like I had thrown a grenade, sprinted away, and now I was looking back to see if it had actually exploded, or if it was a dud.

I sat there in my cramped airplane seat. I wasn't even connected to the cell network yet. I shook my phone. Held it up in the air.

Finally, the bars popped up in the corner of my phone screen. I had service. And there they were: fifteen texts, all from my mother, father, and sister. I checked my call log. Five new voice-mails. I went back to the texts and started reading. *Amir, where are you? Amir, is everything all right? Amir, why aren't you answering your phone? Amir why aren't you home? Where have you gone? Please answer and tell us you're all right.*

I texted back immediately. *I'm fine. I can explain.* And then I held my breath. Because at this point, my family knew. They had to know. Last week, Jake had made it very clear that if I didn't get him the money, he would out me during the ceremony. He had even suggested texting the picture to my parents before they started reading out names. The thought of walking across that stage, hearing silence from where my mom, dad, and sister were sitting—it had made me want to throw up.

My phone buzzed. It was Mom: *Good. We love you.*

I must have stared at the text for a solid minute before looking back up and around the plane. All the other passengers had deplaned.

My heart rate slowed down as I took in the words.

My family still loved me.

I took my duffel bag from the overhead compartment and held it close to my chest. All spring, I had wondered how they would react to Jake's news. Would they think he was lying? Would they tell themselves that it was photoshopped?

Whatever they believed—they loved me.

I felt giddy as I shuffled off the plane. I thought about the rainbow scoreboard, all the positives that I had clearly discounted. I thought about how my parents had in fact raised me to treat people equally, how they didn't subscribe to every single little piece of our religion and culture. They were complicated. They could surprise me. I should have expected better of them.

When I was finally off the plane, I called them back.

“Amir?” my mom said frantically. “Oh, Amir. We were worried sick!”

“What were you thinking?” my dad chimed in. “Where were you?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I can explain.” I was walking down the long hall of the airport, past Cinnabon and Hudson News. “I was just scared . . .”

“Scared of what?” my dad asked.

My heart skipped a beat. I stood outside the smelly airport bathroom, between the men’s and women’s bathrooms. I was confused. “Are you still at graduation?” I asked.

“No. We looked for you after the ceremony, but you weren’t there.”

I considered my next words carefully. “Did you talk to any of my classmates . . .”

“We asked some of them if they knew where you were,” my dad said. “*Joonam, azizam*, what’s wrong?”

My life, my dear. Whenever I got upset, my dad went overkill with Persian terms of endearment.

“What happened?” I heard my sister pipe up in the background.

“Where are you, Amir?” my mom asked.

I was freaking out. My mom and dad sounded so genuinely concerned over the phone. They sounded like they loved me. It made me feel like even more of a fraud.

An announcement blared overhead: “Welcome to New York-Kennedy International Airport . . .”

My mom and dad started talking all at once, interrupting each other. “Amir, are you at an airport?” “Amir, are you in New York?” “Amir, what’s wrong?” Amir, Amir, Amir . . .

I hung up the phone.

I stood there, motionless, in the middle of the bustling airport. Jake hadn’t told them. He’d backed out.

Someone’s suitcase bumped into my leg then, so I moved. I wandered aimlessly around the airport. I had no idea what to do. I felt lost, with my duffel and all the sounds. The people around me. I realized I still had my earbuds in.

My plan had backfired.

I couldn’t go back home. If I did, I’d have to explain to my parents why I had run away and deal with the ensuing explosion in person. And even if I did manage to come up with an excuse for why I’d skipped my own graduation, Jake would still be holding my secret over me. Maybe he hadn’t backed out, after all. Maybe he had instead figured out a way to level up his blackmail.

I found a bathroom and went into a stall. (I’ve watched enough teen movies to know that this is the best place to deal with life crises.) I checked my phone again and saw that Jackson had texted me. So had my friends from Maryland. My mom must have gotten in touch with them.

Today’s choose-your-own-fucked-up-adventure was supposed to go down one of two ways. If my parents told me they accepted me as gay, I’d come right back home. If they didn’t, I would start a new life. But what was I supposed to do *now*?

I stumbled out of the bathroom and nearly smacked headlong into one of those glowing departures boards. I stared up at the endless list of cities.

Why was I so afraid of going home? Why couldn't I be brave, march right up to my parents and tell them what had happened, the reason I wasn't at my own graduation? Why couldn't I come out to them? Why couldn't I just say the words?

My eyes flickered around the list of cities. Chicago. San Francisco. Atlanta. Each one was an invitation, an escape hatch, a safe haven.

My phone was buzzing. It had been buzzing the entire time, I realized, like I had a vibrator strapped onto my thigh. But I couldn't pick up. I just couldn't. But I also couldn't stay in New York; my parents knew that I was here. They could find me here.

I had to go somewhere else. Chicago. San Francisco. Atlanta.

I ran my hands over my jean pockets and felt the outline of my passport. Why had I brought my passport? I don't know. Maybe some part of me, when I imagined the possibility that I might not go back home, saw this as some kind of national emergency, one where I might even need to flee the country? Crazy, I know.

On the other hand, looking at the list of possible destinations, it didn't seem so crazy now. I had my Wiki money. I could go anywhere. And why not somewhere outside America? London. Paris. Barcelona.

That was when I looked to the right of the departures sign and saw a gelato shop. Bright, heavenly lighting, and an array

of the most colorful ice cream flavors I'd ever seen in my life. I stepped toward the light to better inspect the rainbow colors, the strawberry reds, the chocolates and vanillas.

Now that I think of it, it's wild how a gelato shop can change the literal course of your life.

Interrogation Room 38

Roya Azadi

BEFORE WE GO further, ma'am, please allow me to apologize for my son's startling behavior on that airplane today. I assure you it was completely out of the ordinary for him, and nothing to worry about—just a private family matter. And please allow me to apologize for my daughter. I understand why you want to speak with her, and I appreciate that you've allowed me to be in the room during your questioning. But she has been very emotional this past month, with her brother gone. Haven't you, Soraya? Look, she's rolling her eyes now because she doesn't like it when I put words in her mouth. What teenage girl does?

My purse? Yes, of course you may have a look. Here.

Those are all hand sanitizer bottles. I assure you, they are less than—oh, no, that one is, yes, that one is more than three ounces. I am so sorry. It was on sale at CVS, and I wasn't thinking . . .

That is my phone. You need my password? Of course. Soraya, please, calm down. It's fine.

That is a picture of me with my students. I posted it on Instagram at the end of the school year. I teach at a Farsi school, and when I teach, I

wear the hijab. You see, I am not wearing it now, but the class takes place at a mosque, so I wear it then.

That—that is my friend Maryam’s Instagram page. Those are Quran verses. She is quite devout. I do not see how this is relevant to—um, yes. I, I understand the verse. It is about finding your path when you are lost. It is quite peaceful, I assure you. Though it is in Arabic, not Farsi. Officer, Islam, like any religion, is very complex, and people practice it in many different ways, and I hope you don’t—

I understand you have to do your job and ask questions. Absolutely. I completely understand. And I appreciate your patience with us, with my husband—I understand your colleagues needed to question him separately, because of a past issue. We are more than happy to answer whatever questions you have. But please know that what happened on the plane, it is a sensitive matter, a delicate issue that we are still working through as a family. Soraya was correct earlier, when she assumed what I would have wanted to say. In our culture, these matters are usually dealt with privately.

That? It is a picture I took at Amir’s graduation ceremony, when we first discovered that he was missing. We got to the auditorium early, to get good seats—we had very good seats, in the third row on the right side of the stage.

I first noticed Amir was missing when I saw he wasn’t seated in the front row. He should have been in the front row—according to the program, seating was alphabetical. Amir Azadi. Soraya and my husband both said it had to be some kind of mistake, that he must have gotten seated somewhere in the sea of other kids, but I knew something was wrong. Blame it on my maternal instinct. I’d lost my son one time before,

at Disney World, and I felt the same stomach-churning I had felt then. He had wandered off back then, Amir, on some kind of necessary adventure. When we found him, he was in a minor brawl with Goofy. He had really angered the man in the Goofy costume; apparently, Amir had punched him in the nose. He was only five. It was a misunderstanding.

I looked for Amir in the crowd of students. I looked for his face in the ocean of red caps and gowns. Nothing.

I texted Amir. Many times. Outside the auditorium, we were surrounded by caps and gowns, all the families snapping photos like paparazzi. It hadn't really hit me yet that we wouldn't get to take photos like that with our son.

During the ceremony, a tall, wiry boy kept looking our way. He would approach us and then back away, almost like he wanted to talk to us. He had very messy hair. I remember thinking, 'This boy's mother needs to get him to a barber. He had looked quite nervous.

Maybe you should talk to him, Officer?

Interrogation Room 38

Soraya

FU—FREAKING JAKE. *I'm sorry. I don't usually cuss. But if I'd known who he was that day, I would have kicked him right in the balls. Yes, Mom, that was Jake. And I hate him even more now, knowing that he almost talked to us on graduation day.*

Amir didn't have any friends at his new school, as far as we knew, so we called Lexa and Arun, his best friends from Maryland, to see if they'd heard from him. They told us Amir hadn't contacted them. In fact, they said he'd gone kind of radio silent on them after Thanksgiving, right when Amir started—well, I'll get to that. Apparently, they had tried reaching out to Amir a few weeks before graduation—they hadn't heard anything from him about college, and they remembered how much he always wanted to go to college in New York. They said it was an awkward FaceTime call. Amir was moody. They said he didn't really want to talk about his future at all.

That really worried my parents. We checked his room and there was nothing. No note. But then Mom went and checked his drawers, and she noticed a bunch of underwear and shirts and pants were missing. He'd

gone somewhere. We called his cell phone, but it kept going straight to voicemail. That really worried my parents. Where had he gone?

When he finally called us back, my parents were so freaking relieved. It was like someone told them they had won a million dollars. I'm not kidding: my mom actually jumped and clapped her hands when she heard the caller ID. But then they found out Amir was at the airport, and he just weirdly hung up on us. My dad got really quiet. I could tell he was thinking about the last time Amir had run away from home—two years ago. "Damn it," he said abruptly. "What did I say this time?" Then he looked at me and smiled. "Don't worry, joonam. Your brother will come home."

The house was so quiet that first night without Amir. It was dark, empty, dead. When I was little, I always imagined death like walking in the dark. I know, I was so dramatic back then. I was such a baby. You remember, Mom? When I would run into your bedroom and sleep between you and Dad because I was scared? For the record, I don't do that anymore, Officer.

The next morning, I asked my parents if they were going to call the police so they could look for Amir. We had all gotten up early, when it was barely light outside. My mom and dad were standing against the stovetop with their crystal tea glasses. They looked at me with these fake smiles and told me not to worry.

No, Mom, that's exactly what you said. In your fantasy world, Amir was going to come home on his own, just like the last time. And then, in your fantasy world, you would bury whatever issue he had under the Persian rug. Again.

But I know my brother. He hadn't been happy for a while. And this time was different.

The house felt dead at night and broken during the day. I would eat my Cheerios at the breakfast table, and Amir wasn't there to tell me to hurry up before they got soggy. My friend Madison would come over, and I couldn't laugh at her jokes. One time, I had to run into the bathroom just to breathe. It was the third or fourth day after Amir left. I just leaned my head against the medicine cabinet and—please don't be mad, Mom, but I thought maybe I would run away myself. Maybe I'd go somewhere, too. Home just didn't feel like home anymore. It wasn't home without Amir.

I thought about my favorite book, From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler. You've read it with your daughter, ma'am? That's so cool. It made me wonder: if Amir really did run away, why didn't he take me with him—like Claudia and Jamie? We had always been pretty close. I couldn't imagine the Amir I knew leaving his little sister without saying goodbye. Unless he had a really good reason to leave.

I needed to figure out that reason. That's when I put on my detective hat. Step one: I started talking to the people in his life.

Interrogation Room 37

Amir

ALL RIGHT: I'VE given you all the details you asked for—flight number, time, the address where I stayed in Rome. I've shown you the Expedia flight confirmation, the Airbnb receipt, the receipt for the euros I took out at currency exchange, even the picture of the New York City skyline I took from my plane seat. But I'm serious: this trip happened because of gelato. It came together at the last minute, at JFK, and the sole reason I decided on Rome is because I happened upon the sweetest form of ice cream. There were no terrorists. No friends. Just ice cream.