

ALL-  
AMERICAN  
*Muslim*  
GIRL

NADINE JOLIE COURTNEY

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX  
New York

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# **PART ONE**



## CHAPTER ONE

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We've passed through security and we're boarding the plane when the breaking news alert hits my cell phone: There's been a shooting.

Alerts like this trigger the same thought process, every single time. First: horror for the victims of the crime. But second: anxiety. Was a Muslim involved? *Please, God, don't let there have been a Muslim involved.*

The TV monitors in the boarding area are tuned to a show my father hates: Jack Henderson's nightly *The Jack Attack*, a cable news juggernaut. My heart tightens as images of the shooting flash next to Jack's face. I can't hear what he's saying, but I'm sure it's his usual bombast: immigrants, Muslims, borders, walls.

Next to the TVs, the beige walls are decorated with white lights and Christmas wreaths, a feeble attempt to bring seasonal cheer to the T gates.

Once safely on the plane, I poke my mother; my father is across the aisle from me, with a white man wearing khakis and a blazer in the adjacent window seat.

“Mom. Look,” I say.

My mother puts down her iPad and takes the phone from me. “Oh no,” she whispers. “That’s devastating.”

We lock eyes, and I know she’s having the same thoughts: *Please not a Muslim. Please not a Muslim.*

Not that facts matter. Chances are good we’ll bear the blame one way or another.

She turns on her seat-back TV, switching it to cable news. A red chyron blazes on the bottom of the screen: *Attacker still at large*. I hand the phone across the aisle to my dad. He stares at the screen for several seconds, sadness and frustration etched across his face. Silly Dad, the guy I’ve been teasing all morning, has disappeared. He’s Serious Dad now.

As passengers continue boarding the plane, people around us frown at their phones. I study their faces carefully for the reactions. Dismay. Disbelief. Fear. Anger.

The man sitting next to Dad turns on his TV and lets out a sound of disgust. He glances sidelong at my father. Maybe it’s my imagination, but I sense suspicion. My pulse quickens. He switches from cable news to sports.

“I bet it was a Muslim.” A male voice behind us. Young.

“You think?” A female voice. Quiet.

“An attack like that? Most definitely. Screw those people.”

“God, it’s scary. You just never know.”

“They’re all the same. They shouldn’t *be* here.”

“Coulda been Syrian. Refugee, probably.”

“I work with a Muslim. This chick Rabab. She doesn’t pray and do all that crap. We went out for drinks last month.”

“Yeah, for sure. There’s plenty of good Muslims. I’m not talking about them.”

Though their voices are low, muttering, they bore into my skull. I picture my grandmother in Dallas: my *teta* sitting in my aunt Bilal’s cheerful purple room, watching Amr Diab music videos and reading gossip magazines spilling dirt on *Arab Idol* judges. I wish I could show the passengers behind me what a Syrian Muslim in America looks like. Ask them if *she* is something to fear.

Of course I can’t, and even if I could, I’d chicken out. Dad’s said it forever: Harsh words equal short-term satisfaction. They always backfire. Best to take the high road.

My dad’s phone rings, and he pulls it out of his pocket. “*Kefic, ya Mama? . . . Mabsoot, mabsoot . . . Hamdullah . . . Enha a’al tayaara . . . Inshallah, inshallah,*” he says quietly. “*Ya habibti . . . yalla, ma’asalaama.*” He’s going through the motions with *Teta*, a routine ten-second phone call: How are you? I’m good. We made it on the plane safely, thank God. I’ll let you know when we’ve landed, God willing. Love you. Okay, gotta go.

But the man next to him is now glaring at my father. My dad keeps his head down, his gaze neutral.

Things have become so charged, so ugly. He shouldn’t have taken the call.

The man stands up abruptly. “Excuse me.” He steps over Dad.

I lean forward in my cramped seat, watching him walk up the aisle to the galley. He talks to the flight attendant, who looks our way. He seems agitated, his arms gesticulating.

Her face hardens.

“Dad,” I say.

Before I can say more, the flight attendant is standing in front of my father. “Sir. Is there a problem?”

My father looks up at her, blinking several times. “No, ma’am. No problem.”

“We’ve had complaints about you,” she says.

“Complaints?” I say. The venom in my voice surprises me. “Or just one, from *that* guy?” I nod toward the man still standing in the galley.

“Allie,” my father says, voice low. He shakes his head, almost imperceptibly.

The flight attendant appraises me, her brow knitted. I can’t tell if she’s irritated or confused. She turns back to my father. “Passengers have expressed concern. They said you were speaking Arabic and they heard the word ‘*Allah*’ repeatedly.”

“‘*Allah*’ is a really common word in Arabic, ma’am,” I say. “It’s in, like, every other phrase.”

“Allie, please,” my father says.

Normally I would shut up. I’d be obedient and just listen to my dad, like always.

Today is not that day.

“He was talking to my grandmother, ma’am. She doesn’t speak English. We’re flying to Dallas for a family reunion. We live here, in Atlanta. Actually, just north of Atlanta—in Providence.

You know Providence, right?” A gentle Southern twang creeps into my voice, even though I’ve lived in Georgia for barely six months.

She looks back and forth between the two of us.

My dad opens his mouth again. “Ma’am, there must have been a misunderst—”

“I’m his daughter,” I say, putting on my best For the Adults voice. Dad doesn’t *get* these people like I do. Thank God I dressed nicely and wore makeup for the flight. “I’m a student at Providence High School outside Atlanta. So we’ve just celebrated Christmas, and now we’re spending New Year’s Eve with the rest of our family. For a reunion.” I repeat, my tone upbeat and friendly. I pull out my phone, Googling my father’s name. “See? Here’s my dad on the Emory website. He’s an American history professor there. He has a PhD from the University of North Texas.” I click around on my phone, pulling up another entry. “Oh, so this is an article about my dad in the *LA Times* a few years ago. He wrote a book when he was an assistant professor at UCLA, and it got great reviews. Here’s another one, when he was an associate professor at Northwestern.” I put my hand gently on my mother’s arm. She tucks her blond hair behind an ear, looking concerned. “This is my mom, Elizabeth. She’s a psychologist affiliated with Grady Memorial. We’re American. We’re *all* American.”

This is so not me, speaking up, but I *have* to. It’s my dad.

Listing my parents’ résumés seems to mollify the flight attendant, but Dad’s seatmate is still in the galley. His arms are crossed against his chest, his eyes sweeping over my father accusingly. I



can practically hear his inner monologue: *The daughter and the wife don't look Muslim. But the dad . . .*

I stand up slowly. No sudden motions.

"Here, Daddy," I say, pulling gently on his arm. "Why don't we switch seats? You can sit next to Mommy." I never call her Mommy.

Wordlessly, he stands up and sliding into my seat.

"Please, sir," I call to the man who has accused my father, gesturing palm up toward his empty seat. "After you."

He walks back down the aisle, frowning and avoiding eye contact.

"So sorry for the confusion, sir. My grandma is so silly," I say, smiling as I sit next to him. Smiling is key. It confuses them. Anger . . . indignation . . . that's a luxury we don't have. "I've been trying to get her to learn English for *years*. She should learn! But you know how it is, right? Can't teach an old dog new tricks."

He blinks, looking back at me. His dubious expression softens.

"I'm so sorry you felt uncomfortable." I'm still using the Voice. "Thank you so much for being so understanding, sir. It's very kind of you."

Finally, he nods at the flight attendant. "It's okay."

She scurries away, obviously relieved.

I want to slap him across the face. I want to say: *How dare you judge my father? What gives you that right?* Instead, I draw from years of lessons and hold out my hand, smiling. "I'm Allie, by the way."

“Larry,” he says, shaking my hand in return. He gestures toward my dad, though still not looking at him. “You’re obviously a very well-brought-up young lady. I didn’t realize you were together.” He clears his throat, seeming embarrassed. “Sorry for the misunderstanding. But you know what they say: If you see something, gotta say something. Never can be too careful.”

Now he’s smiling, too. I’ve convinced him we’re safe.

Human, like him.

“Good” Muslims.

I spend five minutes forcing myself to chat with him until I’m sure we’re out of harm’s way. He’s an insurance analyst based in Dallas, returning from a business trip. I remind him of his daughter. She’s a redhead like me. Twenty-three. Graduated from SMU last year.

I smile, working to look interested and make him feel comfortable.

Once the flight takes off, I politely make excuses and pull out my iPhone, finally feeling safe enough to relax and read a new novel I’ve downloaded. The guy nods off somewhere over Alabama, and it’s only once he’s asleep that my father gets up to use the bathroom, kissing me on top of my head before walking into the back.

My mom leans across the aisle. “I’m sorry, honey,” she whispers.

“It’s okay.”

The rest of the flight passes without incident. When we land, the guy takes a phone call as soon as we’re on the ground,

loudly talking as we deplane. He doesn't make eye contact with my father, disappearing into the crowd at DFW.

Look, I did what I had to. If you break open your moral piggy bank and spend a little, you'll buy a lot of goodwill in return.

I've paid frequently over the years—turning the other cheek, smiling at offenders, pretending I don't mind, laughing.

*Do you feel comfortable? How can I help? Here, that ignorance must be superheavy—let me carry that burden for you.*

Thing is, my emotional piggy bank is running out of change. Soon, I might not have anything left.



In Aunt Bila's sedan, as my family gossips about the usual drama, my parents don't mention a thing. I sit in the back next to my mom, staring out the window.

What would have happened to my dad if I hadn't been there?

Would it have escalated? Would the police have been called?

Would they have kicked him off the plane?

Or worse: Could he have been arrested? Just for being Muslim?

Nobody's getting arrested just for *being* Muslim.

I don't think.

Maybe I'm being way too dramatic. Dad's always told me to keep the Muslim thing on the DL, because people get *weird* when they hear the M-word. It's a safety issue.

Honestly? It's a convenience issue, too.

Sometimes it's better if people don't know.

For me, hiding is easy: reddish-blond hair, pale skin, hazel

eyes. It doesn't matter that I look textbook Circassian, like a lot of light-skinned Muslims from the Caucasus region. (Hey, they don't call it Caucasian for nothing.) I don't trigger people's radar. People have an image in their head when they hear the word *Muslim*, and I just don't fit.

But Dad doesn't have that luxury. When people meet him, they take one look and decide he's clearly From Somewhere Else—no matter how much he tries to blend in and deflects by saying “From Texas” when people ask that annoying “Where are you from?” question. Assimilate, try to shed the accent, it doesn't matter. Once people mark him as different, they treat him that way, too.

I try to drown it but the million-dollar question bubbles up once again—the one that haunts the edges of my brain every time there's an incident, every time people float casual bigotry, every time I move to a new school.

Will people still like me if I show them the real me? Maybe I'm betraying my fellow Muslims by stuffing half of my identity away. Maybe I'm just a cowardly traitor dripping in white privilege.

We barrel down President George Bush Turnpike, the exits a blur of strip malls and steakhouses, the horizon visible for miles. It reminds me of childhood, a fuzzy collection of afternoons spent daydreaming in the back seats of cars. Everything is bigger in Texas.

My family was still living in Richardson when I started to realize my dad wasn't treated like my friends' dads. The incidents were piling up—little comments, little looks.

We were at Albertson's, the bag boy playing *Tetris* with my dad's groceries as the cashier looked at my dad's ID suspiciously. "Muhammad Abraham?" the guy said. He turned the ID over a few times, as if a new name and country of origin would suddenly materialize.

"That's me," my dad said, wallet in hand. But I've gone by Mo since I was eighteen." Not coincidentally, that's the year Dad moved to the US, to study history at Columbia. My *teta* loathed the new nickname and refused to use it, considering any shortening of the beloved Prophet's name unforgivable blasphemy.

"Uh-huh," the cashier said, looking unconvinced.

"Is there an issue, sir?" my father asked politely. I looked back and forth between the two of them, not sure what was going on but knowing it wasn't good. He was just trying to buy groceries. With Dad finishing his PhD, Mom was the breadwinner—household responsibilities were his domain.

The cashier peered at the driver's license again before staring at the contents of the grocery bag. "Sure you're allowed to drink with a name like that?"

"I won't tell my parents if you don't," Dad said.

The cashier laughed, disarmed, handing the ID back to my dad as he ran the credit card. "I get it. You're not one of *those* Muslims." He gestured to me. "This your daughter?"

At seven, I still had strawberry-blond hair, not yet deepened into dishwater brown, begging to be dyed. My eyes were less hazel, more green, and my face was covered in freckles. If you saw photos of my dad when he was a kid or were familiar with Circassians, you'd know I strongly resembled him—but to

a stranger, I couldn't have looked less like him if I'd been adopted from Sweden.

My dad was as patient as ever. "She is."

"Okay, Mo. Enjoy. Good luck to you both," the cashier said, pushing our groceries toward us and turning to the next customer.

"What did he mean, Daddy?" I asked. "By 'those Muslims'?"

My father waited until we exited the store. He held the door open for a series of shoppers, going out of his way to smile and be polite and nonthreatening,

"He was being silly," Dad said, opening the car door for me.

"He seemed mean, not silly. Does he think Muslims are bad?"

"I don't think he was mean," Dad said, with that familiar look reassuring me that everything would be all right. He checked to make sure my belt was secured in the booster seat. "I think he was scared."

"Why?"

"People are scared of what they don't understand. Right now, a lot of people don't understand Muslims, and fear brings out the worst in them. It doesn't make them bad. It just makes them . . . confused. Do you understand?"

"I think so," I said.

He got in the front seat, turning around. "Sometimes it's best not to tell people you're Muslim, though. It's . . . safer if people don't know."

"Oh."

And now, nine years later, I'm still trying to work it all out. After all, no matter how much their words sting, no matter

how much their actions wound, nobody sees themselves as the bad guy.

So here we are. I've spent the past several years trying on masks—taking my dad's lessons about hiding to heart, amplifying the American part of me, being whatever people need me to be. Learning how to pass as the perfect surfer girl in California, as a Tory Burch— and Vineyard Vines—wearing prep in New Jersey, as a laid-back athleisure kid in Chicago. Now that we live in the South, the land of pearls and sorority legacies and Instagram makeup, I went for a classy Old Hollywood vibe. My 1950s thrift-store dresses have become my *thing* in Providence, Georgia, these past several months, as much as my self-deprecating snark and my love of movie musicals. My friend Wells commented recently on an old Instagram photo of me wearing an oversized sweatshirt, my hair scraped up in a topknot—“Whoa! You look so different!”—and I was both embarrassed and thrilled. He'd had to scroll *way* back to find that picture. You'd never know it was me.

New town. New school. New look. New life.

“You okay, Alia?” Aunt Bila glances in the rearview mirror as she exits onto Jupiter Road. “You're quiet, *ya rouhi*.” Mom puts her hand on mine. She's been quiet during the ride, too.

“I'm fine, *Amtol!*” I stuff my voice with cheer. “Excited to get to your house and see everybody!” Aunt Bila doesn't know what happened. And ultimately, it was nothing. Less than nothing.

Just like all the other times.



## CHAPTER TWO



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On New Year's Eve, Aunt Bila's large ranch-style house in Richardson is family HQ, as always. Strains of Nancy Ajram music and laughter fill the rooms, packed with a raft of extended family still jet-lagged from Saudi, Jordan, London, and New Jersey, here in Dallas to celebrate New Year's Eve together. Everybody is a cousin, or a friend of a cousin, or the cousin of a friend—and they all go back decades, most to the old days in Jordan.

In the living room, my head ping-pongs back and forth as I work to decipher the Arabic conversation between my favorite cousin Houri, her older sister Fairouza, and three elderly Jordanian women who are related to me. (I think. Like, 75 percent sure.) Events like these are equal parts exhilarating and exhausting—I love seeing my billions of cousins, but it's overwhelming going from our quiet, boring routine of spaghetti, Scrabble, and Netflix to Aunt Bila's lively universe, where everything is sparkly



purple, the Arabic music is blasting at volume nine thousand, and I'm constantly playing a game of Telephone to understand my own family members.

Houri catches my confused look. She gets it, as usual. "Speak English so Allie can understand."

One of the women asks a question in Arabic and Houri shakes her head no, responding, "*Laa.*"

"You are a member of the family?" one of the women asks me kindly in heavily accented English.

I nod. "I'm Mo's daughter—um, Muhammad's daughter. Alia. Allie."

Her eyebrows zoom toward the ceiling. "*You're* Muhammad's daughter? Why don't you speak Arabic?"

I look into the next room, where my dad is sitting in the formal living room drinking a cup of tea, surrounded by my uncles, his younger brothers. Uncle Sammy cracks a joke and everybody laughs, looking at Dad. He stiffens, smiling politely. Ever since my grandfather *Jido* died, my dad might technically be head of the family, but there's always something invisible, indefinable setting him apart.

I know a little something about that. Every family reunion, we take a group photo of all the cousins. It's a sea of dark brunettes, chattering and laughing in English and Arabic—and then me, on the fringes. One of these things is not like the others.

"He never taught me," I say quietly.

The woman makes a disapproving noise—whether for him or for me, I'm not sure. "But you pray, right?"

Houri stands up before I can disappoint further, pulling on

my elbow. “C’mon. Let’s get some tea.” She drags me away from the living room and down the hallway. I feel the women’s curious eyes on my back. “I don’t really want tea,” she says in a low voice. “But I *can’t* with the judgment. Besides, I don’t pray, either.”

“Hi,” I say, adopting a jokey tone to hide confusing pangs of emptiness. “Welcome to my world.”

The thing is, I’m not religious—I barely know what being religious *means*. Growing up in America, I probably know more about Jesus than the Prophet Muhammad (peace onto him . . . peace be upon him?). I know you’re supposed to say *something* after his name out of respect, I just don’t know what.

And after so many moves, so much change, so little stability, it’s started to feel like something’s . . . missing.

“Remember when I took those cheesy Arabic lessons? That book was the worst.”

Houri’s got two laughs: the polite one and the belly one. She busts out the belly one. “Right! Seriously, who still teaches Modern Standard Arabic? It’s like Shakespearean English. Besides, your accent was all wrong.”

“Points for trying, though, right?” I ask hopefully.

“Sure. But who cares?” Houri waves a hand dismissively. “Your dad’s right—you don’t need Arabic. You’re fine.”

Easy for Houri to say: Like all thirty-seven of my first cousins, she grew up speaking it fluently, zipping between English and Arabic with zero effort.

At least I know a little: You can’t grow up in a family like mine without soaking up something through osmosis.

*Inshallah* is probably the most important word. It means

“God willing,” and you’ll hear it constantly. You say it before something happens, or if you want something to happen—like, “*Inshallah*, Allie will get into a good university.”

*Hamdulilah* means “thanks to God.” It’s one of those any-time phrases: partially sincere but also filler. You say it after something happens, if you’re grateful for something happening, or if you don’t know what else to say. My family swallows the word—it sounds like *ham-du-lah*—and I always wonder: Is that a Circassian thing? A Jordanian thing? A people-from-Amman thing? Or is it just my family being lazy?

The mystery persists.

There’s *mashallah*, which I guess means “God willed it,” but is really like a talisman against the evil eye. It’s an absolute *must* when complimenting somebody, unless you are a horrible person who wishes to curse their family. If you’re saying how beautiful a baby or bride is, you’d better be *mashallah*-ing all over the place.

*Wallahi* means “I swear to God.” Used a *lot*.

And then there’s the word you’ll hear every eight seconds in a house with kids: *yalla*, which means “hurry up,” not to be confused with *ya Allah*, meaning “oh God.” Like, “*Ya Allah*, my son is dating an actress!”

Dad has always promised to teach me more. Mom wants to learn, too. We’ve tried over the years, listening to phone conversations and asking what this or that means.

The lessons never materialized. I took things into my own hands the summer before seventh grade, buying books and downloading lessons and practicing on my cousins. But my

accent sounded Egyptian, they would say, giggling, instead of Jordanian like theirs.

Within a few weeks, I'd stopped trying.

If I'm being honest with myself? My dad probably never wanted to teach me Arabic. He married the most American woman in all of America. (Okay, they're soul mates, too, but details: She's a tall blond psychologist who was class president of a private high school in Key Biscayne and grew up taking ski vacations in Gstaad, Switzerland, for God's sake.) He never calls me Alia, only Allie. He's never taken me to a mosque—the few times I've been were with my *teta* when I was little, her patiently washing my feet and slowly enunciating the prayers. He goes by Professor Abraham or (*haram!*) Mo, rather than Muhammad, and we don't have a Qur'an in the house.

Aunt Bila's house is covered in beautiful, elaborately calligraphed Islamic texts; Rashid's even talked Houri into putting a few up.

Ours has none. No reminders of Dad's heritage. No reminders of his religion.

For somebody who's devoted his life to history, he seems pretty eager to forget his own.

We find an empty sitting room and collapse on a purple overstuffed couch underneath a gold mirrored decoration of the *Ka'baa* in Mecca, pulling a blanket over the two of us like we've done since we were kids. Aunt Bila's lived in this house for decades and we didn't leave Dallas until I was nine, so gossip sessions with Houri on this couch have been a rare constant in my life.

In the center of the fireplace, an extravagant, gold-framed photo of my beloved grandfather *Jido* in military uniform sits in the place of honor, surrounded by oversized candles. The walls are covered in sumptuous, brightly colored orange, purple, and gold tapestries that I'm pretty sure Aunt Bila picked up in Amman for a shocking amount of money, with shiny purple curtains threaded with gold draped over the windows. Mirrors cover every inch of available surface. It's a bit over the top—okay, it looks like the sitting room of a narcissistic genie—but I love it.

“We haven't had a moment alone, just us. I've missed you, Aloosh,” she says, pulling out an ancient nickname.

“Aloosh. Wow. I haven't heard that one in a trillion years.” My phone buzzes and I pull it out of my pocket, hoping it might be Wells.

Nope.

“How's mom life?”

“The best. The worst. Incredible. Exhausting.”

“Where's Lulu?”

“Rashid's on it. *Baba* thinks splitting baby duty is weird. He barely lifted a finger until I was in middle school.”

I love Houri and Rashid's equal partnership. Just like my own parents.

My phone buzzes again.

“Got someplace you'd rather be? Am I boring you?”

“Sorry.” I laugh. “It's just Snapchat.” I swipe through my phone, turning it to show her a photo of Emilia and Sarah blowing noisemakers. “All my 'friends' are at this party.”

“Why the tone?”

“What tone?”

“You said ‘friends’ in air quotes.”

“I don’t know.” Emilia and Sarah. They’re as interchangeable as Madison, Hannah, and Ashley were in Wayne, or Chloe and Jess in El Segundo, or Rachel and Olivia in Evanston. “We don’t talk.”

“You use sign language? Morse code?”

“I mean we don’t *talk* talk. Not about stuff that matters.”

The upside of moving every couple years? I’m a chameleon and have learned from necessity how to slot into a new social scene easily. I joined the JV cheerleading squad at Providence this year: an easy-thought-temporary path to an instant group. The downside? I’ve spent half my life being friendly with everybody, and friends with nobody. Worse: I can’t remember the last time I said what I truly think at school. And I haven’t had a *real* best friend since Sophia Weinstein in third and fourth grade, before Dad finished his PhD and we hopped on the academia hamster wheel.

But now Dad finally has a tenure-track job, so we’re in Providence to stay. We’re putting down roots, they say. We’ve bought our first house, so we *can’t* move.

We’ll see.

“Any guys?” Houri asks.

I pause. She picks up on it.

“There *is* a guy! Not surprised—you’re a hottie with that red hair. It’s better than the boring brown.”

“Gee, thanks.” Despite myself, I blush.

“This boy.” She rubs her hands together, grinning. “Tell me all the things.”

“Shh. They’ll hear you.”

She nods knowingly. “Sneaking around?”

“There’s nothing to tell. He’s just a friend.”

“Friends to lovers.”

I snort. “We don’t call it ‘lovers,’ Grandma.” Even though Houri is five years older and already a mom—I can’t—she’s the closest thing I have to a sister.

“Didn’t your parents always say you could date once you hit sixteen?” She tugs at her brown curls, pulling them into a loose bun on top of her head. Uncle Ramy, her dad, is Egyptian, so Houri looks more like that side of the family than the pale Circassian Ibrahimis.

“Supposedly,” I say, “but it’s not an issue—because *I’m not dating.*”

“Dads and dating. The worst combo ever.”

Houri had to sneak around with her early high school boyfriends. It wasn’t until she started dating Rashid that she decided to test the waters with her dad.

None of the cousins had ever had a Black boyfriend, and Uncle Ramy was clearly prejudiced despite all his protesting—but Rashid was Muslim, which was ultimately what mattered to my uncle. He was one of us. Unlike cousin Amal’s longtime boyfriend, Bret, who was captain of the golf team and talked a lot about wakeboarding on Lake Texoma.

Rashid magnanimously forgave my uncle, although I’m not sure he ever forgot. How could you?

“Is he hot?” Houri asks. “Tall, dark, and handsome?”

“He’s *really* tall, he has the cutest curly dark hair, and he’s

beyond gorgeous,” I say, pulling up Wells’s photo on my phone.  
“See?”

She laughs. “You *do* have it bad.”

My phone pings.

*Stop the presses: Wells has texted.*

“Oh my God,” I say. “He texted.”

“What’s it say?”

“It says ‘Happy New Year!’”

She leans over, grabbing my phone. “What are you going to write?”

“Um . . . ‘Happy New Year?’”

She laughs. “No game at all.”

“Houri, stop. He’s just a friend.”

“So you said.”

I look down at my phone. “Should I add an emoji? I’m not sure if he’s an emoji guy. He might think it’s uncool.”

She leans back on the couch, putting an arm behind her head and smiling. “Why do you care? You know: if he’s just a friend.”

I blush. “Maybe one emoji,” I say, adding a party hat before pressing SEND.

*Shakespeare’s got nothing on you, Allie.*

“What are you doing in here, girls?” Aunt Bila asks, entering the room carrying a tray of sticky dessert covered in crushed pistachios. “Houriya, Alia, *yalla*. I made *kanafeh*. *Ta’alou*.”

“Coming, *Amtu*,” I say, standing up and following her into the formal living room, where my parents have now ensconced themselves in one of the scores of chairs Aunt Bila has procured,



my grandmother holding court in the center. Aunt Bila's house has an open-door policy, and most of her six kids are always popping in to say hi, ask for advice, borrow things, eat dinner, or drop off their babies while they go to the store. Today is no exception, but instead of six guests, there are probably sixty.

Some of the women are dressed casually, like Houri's oldest sister, Amal, who favors flouncy dresses, tank tops, and everything Who What Wear recommends. Others, like Houri's other sister, Fairouza, are wearing silk or cotton headscarves. Aunt Bila and Uncle Ramy aren't thrilled by Fairouza wearing a hijab, but they long ago learned to pick their battles. My family runs the gamut: religious, liberal, devout, devoid, and everything in between.

Aunt Bila places the *kanafeh* on the table, next to a stack of china plates. "Yalla, please. *Sahtain*," she says to the family and friends spread out around the room. She serves a plate to my grandmother before leaving the room. Houri sits next to Rashid and pulls their toddler Lulu onto her lap, covering her sticky face with kisses. Lulu giggles before reaching out to play with her father's long, meticulously groomed beard.

"Alia," *Teta* says. "*Ta'ali hone*." My grandmother puts down her dessert and pats her lap. I do what's expected of me, walking across the room and sitting on her lap. She pulls me down to her chest, smothering me against her bosom as she dots my head with kisses. Kids run in and out of the room, screaming, while Aunt Bila deftly navigates around them with a tea tray, pouring steaming cups. In the adjacent den, several of my cousins pray together.

"Um, *kefic*?" I say, asking how she is.

“*Mabsoota, ya omri, ya Alia. Wa enti?*” I’m happy, my life, Alia. How are you?

“*Mabsoota, ya Teta.*” I’m happy, too, Grandma.

“I kiss you, my eye,” she says in her thick accent, pulling out a lost-in-translation phrase I’m 75 percent sure is an expression of deep love. Her English is about as good as my Arabic.

“*Ya habibti, Teta.*” You’re my beloved, Grandma.

We stare at each other awkwardly, our conversational limits reached. I pat her on the shoulder and lean down to give her a kiss on the head before scooting off her lap and grabbing a plate of *kanafeh*.



As the clock ticks down to midnight, my father commandeers the remote and switches it from an Arabic satellite music channel to a replay of the ball drop in Times Square, bringing to an abrupt stop Assala Nasri warbling “Ad El Horouf” to the haunting strains of oud and violin.

“We were listening!” my cousin Salma says, protesting more to her sisters dancing around her in a circle than to my dad. Although my dad is off in his own world, he’s still the eldest son and, since *Jido* died, the de facto head of the family. The few times a year he’s back in Dallas, whatever he says goes.

Muna, Salma’s beautiful older sister, pulls up an Arabic playlist and blares it on her cell phone’s tinny speakers, and the girls relocate to the kitchen to resume their hypnotic forearm swaying and finger snapping.

Near midnight, Wells responds to my text.

Hang when you get back?

I stare at my phone.

*What do I say?*

*Should I be noncommittal? Breezy? I could do sarcastic and poke fun at him.*

*Maybe sarcastic is a cop-out. Maybe it's better to be earnest.*

*Oh God. What do I say?*

*You're overthinking this, Allie.*

After typing out and erasing several responses, I reply with one bulletproof word:

Cool

I stuff the phone back into my pocket, feeling like I have the world's most wonderful secret as my gigantic family crowds into the living room to watch the ball drop, popping Martinelli's sparkling cider and blowing on noisemakers.

He only said he wants to hang. That's it. We've hung out before. Actually, we've been hanging out a lot recently.

It's not a declaration of like. It's not a declaration of anything other than *Your company isn't horrible, and I want more of it, please.*

But as the clock strikes midnight, I can't contain my jubilation, hugging my family members extra hard and giggling with my cousins as we launch into a rendition of "Auld Lang Syne."

New year. New life.



## CHAPTER THREE

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Sunday. Back in Providence. Exhausted.

One of these nights, I'm going to sleep longer than five hours.

"Allie? Breakfast!" my mom calls.

I shower quickly, trying to wash my anxiety down the drain. I woke at three in the morning, yanking myself out of a nightmare. Faceless police officers were dragging Dad away in handcuffs, Mom and me running down the plane aisle screaming, failing to save him as strangers held us back.

"You're one of us now. Isn't that what you wanted?" a Southern voice was cooing in my ear as hands gripped my arms.

Yeah, that wasn't creepy or anything. It took me a while to fall back asleep.

After blow-drying my red curls sleek and using an iron to

create fat waves, I give my hair several aggressive spritzes of finishing spray. I use a hand mirror to painstakingly examine my hair from the back, fluffing and spritzing it again and again until it's perfect.

In the kitchen, Mom and Dad are at the table, Mom reading news on her iPad and mainlining coffee. Dad is, as always, plowing through work.

“An outfit on a Sunday?” Mom asks, looking at my pleated skirt and pussy-bow blouse. She says the word *outfit* like the name of a distant cousin or a weird uncle. She still finds it amusing that I ditched my leggings and messy buns in favor of tailored dresses and sleek waves once we moved to Providence. “I thought those were for school.”

A buffet-style spread of Middle Eastern foods spans the table: homemade hummus; tabouleh; *foul mudammas*, a fava-bean dish; chopped tomatoes drizzled with olive oil and artfully arranged on a plate with parsley leaves; a selection of cheeses; pita bread; black olives; and Arab sweets. My dad goes ten miles out of his way to an Arabic grocery store in Midtown Atlanta once a week on the way home from Emory. The weekend is the only time we eat Middle Eastern food. Otherwise, it's easy-to-prepare meals: spaghetti, burgers, grilled chicken. Boring.

“I have plans. Remember, I asked for a ride . . . ?” My eyes dart to my father, who is drinking probably his fifth cup of coffee for the day, though it's only eleven.

My mouth waters at the sight of the *foul*, but *no way* am I going over to Wells's house for the first time reeking of garlic.

My phone buzzes. A text from Wells with his address.

I still can't believe I'm going to his house.

I met Wells in Algebra II class on the first day of sophomore year. He walked in, sat down next to me, and smiled. First impression: kind eyes, easy smile, messy curls, mouth slightly too big—like Harry Styles. I immediately wondered what it would be like to kiss his lips.

He spoke first.

“Hey, I'm Wells.”

“I'm Allie.”

“You're in chorus, right? Second period?”

I nodded.

“Thought I recognized you. Are you new?”

“Yeah. Today's my first day.”

“Technically, today's everybody's first day,” he said, smiling to let me know he was teasing.

I smiled back. “I just meant I'm new here.”

“Happy first day, Allie. Where are you from?”

I paused. An opportunity. Clean slate. I could be whoever I wanted here. Not shy and dorky. Cool and confident. The kind of girl worth paying attention to. I took a deep breath and then tossed my head a little, the way the girls who never doubted themselves did it.

“Heaven.”

His laughter burst out of him like rocket fuel. “The new kid is a comedian, folks.”

Bantering was *so* not me. Talking to most boys usually made me tongue-tied. But Wells's gentle eyes and encouraging smile made me feel bold.

It was a good feeling.

“I’ve moved a lot,” I said, still smiling. “Chicago via New Jersey via LA via Dallas . . .”

“Whoa. Military?”

“My dad’s a professor. Forever in search of the perfect job that doesn’t exist. Yay, academia.”

“My dad’s family’s from New York,” he said. “Never been to New Jersey, though.”

I didn’t know how to respond. Students started filing into the classroom.

“Wanna hear something?” he said after a pause.

“What?”

“Today’s my birthday.”

“Your birthday is the first day of school? That *really* sucks.”

He shrugged. “August birthday, price you pay.”

“And I thought I had it bad with a February birthday.”

“Why? Valentine’s Day?”

“Basically.”

“C’mon, what are you complaining about? You get valentines and birthday presents. Double trouble.”

I wanted to reach over and poke him gently. I was looking for an excuse to touch him. But there was none. Instead, I said, “Hey, so I have a present for you.”

“How? You didn’t even know me five seconds ago. Quick, what’s my name?”

“Walter? Warren? Wallace?” OMG, I was still bantering.

“I look like your grandfather?”

“It’s Wells,” I said.

“Good memory, Artemis.”

I made a big show of rolling my eyes, but secretly I was d-y-i-n-g.

“Okay, birthday boy,” I said. “Meet me after school by the picnic benches near the log cabin. That’s where you shall receive your reward.”

*Look* at me, being all breezy.

He squinted at me. “Sounds like the prelude to a horror movie. Should I holler, ‘Be right back!’ before I walk outside?”

“Only if you say it immediately after losing your virginity,” I said, trying to act cool by referencing the famous movie cliché but instead promptly blushing.

Some people blush nicely, all cute and delicate and dainty. Not me. My blushes are splotchy and mottled and impossible to ignore. My face and neck are always looking for new and interesting ways to betray my perennial embarrassment.

He laughed.

“I still can’t believe I’m at a school with a log cabin,” I said.

“Welcome to Georgia. We fancy.”

Mrs. Martinez entered the room as the bell rang, and launched into the Algebra II syllabus, but I spent all class sneaking glances at Wells and noticing the way his Chuck Taylors tapped against the desk to an invisible rhythm. I felt giddy, like I had a new secret.

After school, I grabbed stuff from my locker and walked to the log cabin, excited to see Wells again. Anxiety and curiosity jockeyed for dominance, which sums up my life pretty well:

*The Allie Abraham Story: Anxious but Curious*



*Wherever paperbacks are sold.*

He was waiting for me.

“Hey!” He stuffed his cell phone in his pocket.

“It really is your birthday, right?” I asked, suddenly consumed by doubt. Maybe this was a bad idea. What was I thinking? I couldn’t pull this off.

“Yeah. Wanna see my permit? Once I take driver’s ed, it’ll be a license.”

I reached into my backpack, pulling out a cupcake from a brown bag. “Happy birthday,” I said, offering it to him with a little smile.

He looked at me doubtfully. “Got a cupcake vending machine in your locker?”

“My mom stress-bakes. She put it in my bag this morning.”

“You’re giving me your leftovers and calling it a present. Smooth.” He smiled at me to show he was kidding.

“Okay, well, if you don’t want it . . .” I pulled the cupcake back, and he put his hand on my wrist. It was soft. My heart leaped at the feeling of his skin on mine.

“I didn’t say that,” he said, and grinned.

I held the cupcake out again, and he stepped closer, looking down at me. Our eyes met—we didn’t just look at each other, but for a second it was like we were looking *into* each other—and I nearly passed out. Instead, I said, “Imaginary candle.”

“Imaginary wish,” he replied, leaning over and blowing out in a short puff as my heart beat a staccato *ohmigod ohmigod ohmigod*.

And that was that. New friends.

Maybe more.

“What’s that smile?” Mom now asks.

“Nothing,” I say, jamming my phone into my bag.

“Is it time for the sex talk again?”

My face burns red. I glance at Dad. “Mom. C’mon.”

Dad frowns, pausing from grading papers. “Be careful.”

“Would you say that to our son?” Mom asks him.

“We have a son?”

“If we had a son.”

“If we had a son, I would be exhausted. I would be forty years old, raising a baby. Is there something you’re trying to tell me? Can my boys swim again?”

“There’s no son,” my mom says. “It’s a metaphor. And plenty of forty-year-olds have babies.”

“Okay . . .” Dad smiles impishly at me. “This fictional son—I hope he likes the LA Galaxy, by the way—yes, I would also tell him to be careful.”

“Mm-hmm,” Mom says. “Sure you wouldn’t take him out back for cigars?”

“I abhor cigars. Smoking is terrible for you. I would never.”

“Do I need to separate you two?” I tease.

Mom laughs, nodding meaningfully toward the phone in my hand. “Can’t wait to hear more.”

I blush.

No surprise, Dad’s a little weird about guys. On the other hand, Mom has always been supportive of my secret crushes—even when they were on unworthy-but-cute boys. (RIP the Dusty Diggerson obsession of seventh grade.)

But here's the thing with Wells: He's cute, but his personality makes him even cuter.

That's the kind of thing my mom used to say when she'd catch me swooning over a hot guy and would take my half-baked attraction as an opportunity to launch into yet another one of her patented I Know You're Eventually Going to Have Sex, So Please Be Safe talks. (Way more awkward than the Drugs Ruin Lives, So Please Don't Do Them, Except Maybe for Occasionally Cannabis, but Just as a Casual Experiment and Never While Driving in a Car, Okay? talks.)

*Mom: "It's what's on the inside that counts."*

*Me: "That sounds like something you'd get from a fortune cookie."*

*Mom: "When you're older—"*

*Me: "Mom. You are not seriously playing the 'When you're older, you'll understand' card."*

*Mom: "When you are older, you'll understand that good looks are nice, but attraction can fade. It's important to find somebody quality. Somebody who shares your values."*

*Me: "I value extremely ridiculously good-looking boys."*

*Mom: "Hilarious. I give it a five out of ten. Your routine needs work."*

*Me: "I especially value—"*

*Mom: "No, no. We're done here."*

I would always joke with my mom about the It's What's on the Inside thing. Then I met Wells. Now, I get it.

He has a great sense of humor—teasing and generous. Last month's newly learned fact: He volunteers at the animal shelter

near his house. He's incredible at soccer, and used to do Quiz Bowl, just like me, and can match me point for point on everything from the best Star Wars episode (he votes *The Empire Strikes Back*, but *The Force Awakens* is way better) to the greatest band of all time (Wells says it's a tie between Pearl Jam and Foo Fighters, but I've been in love with the Beatles since I was a kid, because my dad used to sing me to sleep with their songs).

Even better, he's not arrogant. He must know how girls look at him—but he also has that obliviousness you see when people didn't grow into their looks as fast as everybody else. He's humble and he's kind and he likes cats, and I just died because he's perfect.

And he actually . . . maybe . . . likes me back.

"So, what's his name?" Mom asks.

Busted.

Dad looks up from his stack. He refuses to switch to an iPad, insisting on grading papers by hand. "Whose name?"

"Wells," I mumble.

"Wells?" Dad says, his brow furrowing as he looks between us.

"He's a boy, honey," Mom says.

Dad's frown deepens. "A *boy*?" he repeats, his entire being one giant italicized expression of incredulity.

Fear grips my stomach. Has my dad been pretending to be cool this entire time? Is now when Scary Dad unmask himself and reveals he's actually *not* cool with me dating?

"A friend," I say, clarifying.

Who I want to make out with.

Dad doesn't say anything.

“We’re going to study,” I say.

Mom cocks her head. “Oh? You don’t have any homework yet.”

“For Quiz Bowl.”

The corners of my mother’s mouth turn up. “Looks like a perfect Quiz Bowl studying outfit. Besides, I thought you were dropping Quiz Bowl this semester so you could focus on your course load.”

I shoot her a look.

“Odd given name,” Dad says. “Wells. Maybe it’s a family surname. British, no doubt. Or perhaps Irish.” His dark eyes narrow as he ponders.

The joke of it is, people are constantly trying to guess my father’s background—dark hair and bushy eyebrows contrasting with paler-than-you’d-expect skin and an accent he’s never managed to shake. Northern Italian? Serbian? Croatian? Nobody ever guesses Circassian via Jordan—nobody’s even *heard* of Circassians.

I’m relieved he’s focusing on the name of the guy rather than the fact that there’s a guy, period.

After all, though my dad is progressive compared to a lot of Muslim dads, most Muslims don’t really date.

Then again, I’m barely Muslim.

“He’s the same guy you hung out with before Christmas, right?” Mom’s face is serious, but her eyes are laughing. She takes way more pleasure out of embarrassing me than is appropriate for a parent.

“Yeah. I can go later, if you want,” I say, praying she won’t take me up on it.

“Go! I’ll drive you.” Mom pushes back from the table, taking one last sip of coffee. “I’m going to have a rage aneurysm if I keep reading the news.”

“It might be a diminutive for Wellington,” Dad says, stuck on the name. “In which case, still British.”

“You sure it’s okay?” I ask hopefully. “I feel bad missing breakfast.” We haven’t spoken about it, but what happened on the airplane has felt like the elephant in the room ever since.

It’s not like Dad hasn’t been discriminated against before. But with the way things are going nowadays . . . it feels different.

It’s hard to explain.

“My sweet girl.” Dad raises his cup of coffee in my direction. “Have fun studying, pumpkin.”

“Studying. Riiiiight,” my mom teases, grabbing the car keys from the bowl and walking toward the door.

I shoot her a look—*OMG, will you stop?!*—before giving Dad a kiss on the cheek.

“Love you both—even when you’re the worst.”



“This can’t be right.”

I double-check the address Wells texted me. His house is fifteen minutes away from mine, on the other side of the border between Providence and Milton.

It’s a three-story brick Colonial with a cross-gabled roof, white columns, and a sloping green lawn wide enough to land a fleet of jumbo jets. In the distance, I see stables.

*You have got to be kidding me.*

This isn't a house. It's a freaking mansion. Mom looks impressed. "You didn't tell me the new boy's a Rockefeller."

"I would have," I say, "if I'd known."

I fire off a couple of texts.

ME: I'm outside.

ME: Also, um, your place is bigger than the White House.

WELLS: Coming out now

WELLS: PS Don't judge

"Park behind that, I guess," I tell Mom, pointing to a black Mercedes G-Wagen in the circular driveway.

A minute later, Wells comes out from the side of the house. When I see him, I feel like I'm free-falling.

Every single time.

He smiles as I get out of the car, gently closing the door. "Hi," he says. His voice is low and scratchy.

"Hi back."

I turn toward Mom, waving her off. Instead, she rolls down the window, grinning at Wells. "Hi! You must be Wells. I'm Allie's mom."

Wells walks over to the window and reaches through, offering Mom his hand to shake. "It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Abraham. I've heard a lot about you."

"Likewise." Mom is still grinning, and now fully checking him out.

Seriously, this is mortifying.

I look him up and down, seeing him through her eyes. Messy

brown curls. Straight-cut dark-denim jeans. Chuck Taylors. One hand jammed into the pocket of the same faded navy zip hoodie he always wears. It's unzipped, with a white T-shirt underneath. It says THIS IS WHAT A FEMINIST LOOKS LIKE.

"Okay, have fun, you two!" Mom says. "Call me to pick you up, Al. Give me half an hour heads-up, okay? Love you!"

With a wave out the window, she's finally gone. "I like your dress," Wells says to me shyly. It's a skirt, but I don't bother correcting him.

"Thanks," I say, trying and failing to hide my dorky smile.

Wells and I take a step closer to each other and hug awkwardly. He smells fresh, like soap and cinnamon gum.

As we break apart, he lightly taps me on the hand. "Joey and Zadie'll be here any minute. Mikey and Sarah are running late, and Emilia's at a horse show. My mom ordered pizza. Hope you like pepperoni."

I don't eat pepperoni. My lapsed dad might drink alcohol, but pork? That's a deal breaker. I don't want to seem high-maintenance, though—and I definitely don't want to get into it. "Sounds great!" I say.

I'll pick it off when he's not looking.

I follow him through the side door. We walk through a large vestibule filled with muddy boots, dog food, and umbrellas, into a windowless back hallway covered in pastoral horse drawings and inspirational plaques. I read one: FAITH IS BEING SURE OF WHAT WE HOPE FOR AND CERTAIN OF WHAT WE DO NOT SEE. He leads me down a set of stairs to a finished basement.



“And this is where the magic happens,” he says, raising his hands to the ceiling, palms up, as if a shepherd welcoming his flock.

I giggle. “Magic? Is that what you call it?”

His face goes pink.

Mine does, too. Couldn’t pull it off.

I reach into my bag, clearing my throat. “Hey, I brought you something.” I hold out the latest Black Series Star Wars figurine.

“Whoa! Where you’d get this?”

“I went to a couple stores.” Five over the holidays, to be exact, spending my entire allowance for the week. “You like it?”

“It’s awesome.” He grins, looking back and forth between me and the limited-edition collectible. “*You’re* awesome for remembering.”

“It’s not a big deal.” I wander around the massive basement room so he can’t see my blushing cheeks. There’s a big-screen TV opposite an L-shaped leather couch, with an old-school *Ms. Pac Man* arcade machine in the far corner. The TV console shelves display soccer trophies, a lone Quiz Bowl trophy, and Manchester United gear: framed and signed pictures, a Man U flag, bobble-heads. Framed concert posters cover the walls, mostly bands I’ve never heard of.

“Metallica? Are we in 1990?”

“Yeah. What? They’re rad,” he says, sitting down at the massive drum kit in the corner. He picks up a drumstick and twirls it between his fingers. I debate making fun of him—he’s clearly trying to impress me—and yet I *am* impressed, so the joke’s on me.

“*Rad!* Okay, now I know you’re trolling me. You don’t seem like a heavy-metal fan.” He’s such a cheerful teddy bear.

He laughs. “Mental note not to expose you to my full music collection. I’ll stick to socially acceptable stuff that won’t freak you out.”

“I might surprise you.”

“What’s your thing? Music, I mean.”

“I like everything.”

“Heard that before. You mean everything *but* country and rap, right?” he says, looking doubtful. “And opera, and musical theater, and classical, and blues . . .”

“No, really. Everything.” I shrug. “Good music’s about story-telling. If you’re open to someone else’s story, you can appreciate anything.”

He stares at me. The searching look makes me feel exposed, as if I’m under a microscope.

I break away from the heat of his gaze, making a beeline for the bookshelf on the opposite wall. Books. Distraction. Conversation. “Nice, you’ve read *Under the Rainbow*? One of my faves.” I pull it off the shelf—an old, tattered copy with a weather-beaten cover and dog-eared corners. Well loved. My favorite kind of book.

“I know—you mentioned it after Star Wars.”

“And you bought it?”

“You have good taste. I knew it’d be all right,” he says, shrugging.

I run my finger lightly over the tops of his books, continuing to scan. “Okay, you have *not* read *Ulysses*.”

“I skimmed the last chapter,” he says, grinning.

“Fail.”

“Ooh! *Harry Potter!*”

“Favorite one?” he asks, putting the drumsticks down and coming over to stand next to me. He brushes the back of his hand against mine casually as we face the bookshelf. The unexpected touch startles me, but I keep my hand still, trying to play it cool.

“Tie between *Goblet of Fire* and the *Deathly Hallows*. You?”

“*Deathly Hallows*,” he says. “Gotta love the Horcruxes. And Mrs. Weasley screaming at Bellatrix. Epic.”

“Best house?” I ask.

“Ravenclaw. No question.”

I exhale. “You have passed the test, young Jedi,” I say, knowing picking the same house doesn’t mean anything and yet secretly feeling it really, really does.

“We’re probably the coolest people in school,” he says.

I want to grab him and kiss him in response, but I don’t. Of course I don’t.

The truth is, I’ve never kissed a boy.

It has nothing to do with being Muslim—okay, maybe a teeny bit. It’s hard not to internalize the message against dating, even with liberal parents like mine. But it’s also only been a year since I’ve realized boys sometimes flirt with me. Not all the time. But sometimes.

And it’s weird and it’s cool and it’s scary and I don’t know what to say when a guy smiles at me in a way that’s less like

*Thanks for lending me your phone charger, and more like Hey, let's make out.*

If you had asked me last year, I would have said it was impossible: No boy would like me, ever. I would make it through my entire high school life without experiencing the miracle of liking a guy *at the exact same time* he liked me back. Without somebody holding my hand. Without a first kiss.

But now here I am. And he keeps inviting me to hang out with his friends at the mall after school. And he laughs at my silly jokes. And now we're alone in his basement. And he's looking at me with *that* look—the look I've wanted but have barely allowed myself to dream about, for fear of being disappointed.

The look that makes me feel dizzy and panicky and alive.

Like I make him happy, too.

“Hi!” It's Zadie Rodriguez, walking down the stairs carrying pizza boxes, followed by Joey Bishop. Wells and Joey high-five.

“Hi!” I say, standing up and giving them suitably breezy air-kisses. Of all Wells's friends, I feel the most comfortable around these two: Zadie and Joey are awesome.

Zadie wears her coolness like a badge: the purple streaks in her hair, the way she carries herself with pride and holds people's gaze and never mumbles. She is who she is, and she's confident but not rude, and if you don't like what she says, that's your problem, not hers.

I wonder what that feels like.

Then there's Joey, who's brilliant—he had the second most points in north Fulton County on last year's Quiz Bowl

team—but doesn't show it off. Not to mention he's an incredible soccer player—even better than Wells. He's tall and lean, and his skin is a warm sepia brown. He always looks as if he just finished doing something wholesome, like fishing or sailing or playing touch football on the beach. He's basically a Hollister ad come to life.

Like me, they're stealth dorks, though. At least there's that.

"Your mom gave me this," Zadie says to Wells, holding up the pizza boxes before setting them on the coffee table. She grabs a slice and sprawls out on the couch.

"Pizza?" Wells asks me, leaning down to give me a slice.

I take the slice, discreetly rearranging the pepperoni and taking strategic bites.

Except Zadie notices. She does that: pays attention. "You don't eat pepperoni?" she says.

Busted. "I mean . . . not really," I say. "It's okay. No worries."

Wells frowns. "You should have told me. I would have ordered one without."

"It's not a big deal, really. I can pick it off. See?"

"Vegetarian?" Zadie asks. "Or full vegan? My sister Tali is vegan, and it drives our *abuela* up the wall."

"Nah. Just not my thing," I say. I don't know them well enough to get into it.

See, here's the deal.

I haven't always felt comfortable telling people my . . .

I hate using the word *secret*. It implies that being a Muslim is something to be ashamed of, when it's not.

But the older I got, as the incidents piled up (even for my blond-haired, blue-eyed, Catholic-born mother) and *especially* after we moved to Georgia, it became abundantly clear that there were people you told, and people you accidentally forgot to tell.

Unless I tell them, nobody realizes I'm a Muslim. I'm cloaked in white privilege. I look like them.

Which makes me safe for bigots.

It's happened my whole life: In the back of an Uber, with the white driver conspiratorially telling Mom and me about the smelly foreigner he just drove. At school, with nice kids you wouldn't expect making random jihad jokes.

Once I tell people, things change a little.

Even with liberals.

Most of the time, I don't think about it: Self-preservation is easier. Of course, you know how it goes when you try to keep yourself from thinking about elephants.

Providence High School has a Muslim Student Association, but I don't really know any of the kids. And when I see them in the hallways or sitting at their usual table in the cafeteria, I feel guilty, like I should say something in solidarity. Like I'm siding with the wrong half of my heritage. Like I should do a better job of announcing myself, instead of trying to pass.

It takes a *lot* for me to publicly claim my Muslimness. But every once in a while, something snaps.

The few people I've pushed back on—sometimes even pulling out my crappy Arabic—always respond with the same textbook progression.

First: flustered. (“Oh! Oh my goodness!”)

Next: confused. (“But . . . I mean . . . how? You don’t look . . .”)

Finally: three potential scenarios.

Scenario A: “Whoa, I never would have known! That’s cool. So, do you pray five times a day, or . . . ?” (Translation: Are you a “scary” Muslim, or a “just like us, so I-can-pretend-you’re-not” Muslim?)

Scenario B: annoyed. (Translation: Look, I’m not talking about people like *you* . . .)

Bigotry is always horrible, but it’s especially awkward when somebody realizes you’re not a safe receptacle for their garbage.

I’ve never had to deal with Scenario C, but I know it exists: danger.

“Dude, why’d you drop Quiz Bowl?” Joey asks Wells now.

Wells shrugs. “I don’t have enough time. I’m doing the music thing hard this year. Soccer, plus volunteering, plus SAT prep classes starting . . . it’s a lot.” I like this about Wells. He’s not one of those people who thinks trying or caring is uncool.

“So you were insecure about getting fewer points than me,” Joey says. “I get it.”

“Dream on, man,” Wells says.

He rolls up a straw wrapper and blows it at Joey’s face. It bounces off his forehead, and they both laugh. Joey crumples up a napkin and lobs it at Wells in return, and they spend a good minute lobbing it back and forth like a tiny volleyball until Wells drops it.

“No!” Wells cringes.

“Victory!” Joey raises his hands above his head in mock celebration.

Zadie shakes her head. “Y’all are dorks.”

“And that’s why you love us,” Wells says.

Eventually, the conversation turns to somebody named Tessa.

“Who’s Tessa?” I ask.

“My girlfriend,” Zadie says.

“Wait, you have a girlfriend?” I say.

The three of them laugh, and I feel embarrassed, like I’ve somehow gotten it wrong.

“I mean, of course I knew you dated girls,” I hasten to say. “I just didn’t know there was *a* girl.”

“I wish Tessa would move back,” Wells says.

“Me too,” Zadie sighs, looking wistful. She looks at me. “Her dad flies for Delta. They bought a new place in Peachtree City last year, and she goes to school there now. You know Atlanta—she might as well live in Florida, it’s so far away.”

“Do they *really* drive golf carts around Peachtree City,” Wells asks, “or is that just a myth?”

Zadie nods. “It’s real. And it’s *so* weird. There’s a golf-cart parking lot at Tessa’s high school.” When she mentions her girlfriend’s name, she looks sad again.

“I’m sorry she moved,” I say. “That sucks.”

“It’s all good. We’re ‘long-distance’”—she uses air quotes—“until college, and then we’re both applying to Georgia. Fingers crossed.”

“College.” Joey picks up a Manchester United coaster from



Wells's coffee table and twirls it like a top. "I don't want to think about it."

Wells leans forward and snatches it up. "We've got at least a year before we need to panic."

"What are you worried about?" Zadie scoffs. "You're a shoo-in."

"A shoo-in?" I say. "For where?"

"Didn't you know?" Zadie says. "Wells is going to Yale."

He scowls. "I'm not. I'm not even applying."

"Um, sorry," I say. "Why *wouldn't* you go to Yale?"

He pulls a face.

"He's a legacy there," Joey explains. "And his dad, and his grandfather, and his great-grandfather . . ."

"Can we not?" Wells snaps.

"Easy, boy," Zadie says, holding up her hands. She mock-whispers to me, "Touchy subject."

"Sorry," Wells says, sinking into the couch cushions and resting his head on my shoulder for a second. The unexpected touch sends a jolt up my spine. "College means something. I don't want to be bullied into reliving my dad's glory days."

I want to slap some sense into him, thinking: *What a luxury, to have a dad who could get you into an Ivy League university with a single phone call. Why would you scoff at that chance?*

I mean, my dad went to an Ivy League university, too . . . but through the back door, after transferring in from a military college in Jordan. No freaking way could he call up the president of Columbia University and piggyback me in. Legacies are only for rich people.

I banish the frustration. “What is this integrity you demonstrate?” I say.

We lock eyes, and a grin slowly spreads across both of our faces. Looking at him makes my eyes happy.

And now it’s just the two of us—like we’re in a staring contest and I can’t look away.

“Okay, people, get a room,” Zadie says.

I snap out of it, certain I’m beet red.

He shifts on the couch again, and now our hands are lightly touching.

“Hey, losers!” Mikey Murphy says, bounding down the stairs like a Labrador retriever. He’s carrying a six-pack of Coke. Kids he’s never spoken to know details about his personal life. He’s been on homecoming court two years running. It’s like his entire life has been a practice run for high school.

“Zademeister,” he says. “Broseph.” He slings the Cokes on the table, pulls out his vape pen, and takes a puff.

Joey and I smile, because that’s what you’re expected to do when Mikey shows up. But Zadie—she can barely hide her disdain. Apparently, Mikey’s known Wells since they were in preschool. It’s one of those hard-to-shake friendships that only makes the cut because of personal history.

I try to focus on the rest of the conversation: on how hard Joey’s mom’s fibromyalgia has been recently; on Zadie’s *abuela* finally taking English lessons; on Wells’s expensive car conking out, though his mom bought it only a few years ago for herself.

But all I can focus on is Wells's hand, brushing against mine. On the deliciously clean scent he wears, which wafts my way every time he shifts on the couch. And on the fact that I wish I were brave enough to take him by the hand, pull him into the back room, and press my lips against his for the first time.