

Tell Me How You Really Feel

Aminah Mae Safi



Feiwei and Friends
New York

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

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Fiercereads.com

*For Amy Sherman-Palladino. Thank you for never giving
Rory Gilmore a decent boyfriend. She's always had Paris.*

Princeton University: Admission Office
P.O. Box 430
110 West College
Princeton, New Jersey, 08544-0430

March 15, 2019

Dear Sana:

Once again, congratulations. We are thrilled to be offering you admission for the Class of 2023. As you applied early admission, we know you are as excited as we are about this splendid news.

As we wrote earlier, you and your parents or guardians are invited to join us for our April hosting program to learn more about Princeton. An invitation is enclosed with our earlier mailing. Our faculty members are interested in meeting you and we hope you can join us.

We are still waiting on your response card, which you need to fill out and return to us with a May 1 postmark.

Sincerely,
Irene McAndrew Malloy
Dean of Admissions

Re: Congratulations!

April 1

30 Days Until Deadline

1

Establishing Shots

————— Sana —————

“And, finally, *why you?*”

Sana watched the interviewer. The woman had on a dark, boxy suit and had her hair fixed in a sleek, long bob. She was dressed to blend, to be forgettable. But Sana saw the interviewer’s sharp eyes.

Sana smiled—a calculated half smile. “Why me? As opposed to someone else? Look, I know you’ve got thousands of applicants for this position. Who doesn’t want to add *working at a research genetics hospital in rapidly industrializing India* to their future med school application?”

The interviewer nodded. Patient, but unimpressed.

“I’ve wanted to be a surgeon my whole life. I’ve practiced stitching with cross-stitch and embroidery since I was ten. I’ve been playing video games for longer than that. My hand-eye coordination is off the charts, frankly. I’ve taken every premed class you can take while you’re still in high school. I elected to take organic chemistry in my senior year. I’ve shadowed doctors. I’ve done internships. I’m, like, a poster child for *doing the most*. My whole life has built up to being a doctor. My whole life.”

Sana paused so the woman could give another noncommittal nod.

The walls of this room were a faded slate gray. An intentionally neutral room. A space for evaluating fairly. Aside from the interviews Sana did for summer jobs, every interview room she had ever been in had been similarly painted. Similarly outfitted with beautiful, institutional mahogany furniture.

“But that doesn’t make me different. I’m sure all your other applicants feel the same. Have done the same.”

The woman nodded again, her sharp eyes a little narrowed, waiting.

Sana had practiced this part alone in her room. Having to admit to herself what she was about to say had been terrifying enough the first time. But in front of another person was something else altogether.

She took a deep breath, ready as she would ever be. “The thing is, I don’t know. I don’t know what it is to wake up every day and go into a hospital. To actually help people in this way. We didn’t have the money growing up for me to take any of those medical mission trips. And even those, they aren’t everyday conditions, are they? They’re an exceptional week in the life. I want to know what it’s like to go into work every day and treat patients. I want to know that the past ten years of my life will be worth the next forty. I guess that makes me kind of bananas. Train to be a doctor, take the big paycheck, kid. That’s what my dad would say. My father, too.”

Sana didn’t like bringing up her father, but for some reason, he seemed pertinent here. He’d focused on career so much that she only saw him when he came back for birthdays and holidays. And sometimes not even then. Mom was the one who had worked because she’d had to, because she’d had no other options. Her father had thrown himself into his work because he’d wanted to find an honest means to stay away. The interviewer was so focused now that it was nearly impossible to hold eye contact.

But Sana didn't break. "So why me? You know I speak Urdu and Hindi and Bengali. And Farsi, if that matters at all. You know I've got the grades. You probably even know I got into Princeton, even though I turned in my application with you before I'd heard back from them. But honestly, why me? Because I need to know that the future I'm banking on isn't just good in theory. I need to know it's not just good on paper." Sana might have fudged that a little. Urdu *was* Hindi after all. But the interviewer didn't need to know that.

The interviewer bit the inside of her cheek—but Sana wasn't sure if that was to bite back a smile or a grimace. It didn't matter anymore, anyhow. She'd told someone. She'd told the truth, and the truth was the one thing she'd never confessed to anyone. Not to Dadu or Mom. Not to Mamani or even her father.

Sana swallowed. One more hard thing left to say. "I know I'm good at becoming a doctor—the tests and the classes and the science. But I don't know if being a doctor would be a good thing—for me or for my patients. I'd like to figure that out."

"That is, without a doubt, the most selfish answer I have ever heard." But there was no malice in the interviewer's voice. She remained neutral—her tone, her expressions, her manners. She'd clearly been doing this for a long time.

"I know." Sana nodded. "But I thought I'd tell the truth."

The interviewer leaned in, over the clipboard she'd been writing on. "And why on earth would you do that?"

Sana shrugged. "Everything I've gotten in life has been because of hard work and talent and some luck, but mostly this one assumption—that I would be a doctor. I don't want the position on those terms. I want the position knowing I got it, even if I've got doubts."

"And that's your final answer?" The woman looked at her clipboard, then back at Sana. Still unreadable, still inscrutable.

"That's my final answer."

Rachel

Shit. Shit, shit, and double shit. Rachel knew not to say it out loud. Not while the film advisor and photography teacher, Ms. Douga—who everybody just called Douga, even to the teacher’s face—was in the room. But she thought it all the same. And the look, Rachel knew, was written all over her face. An open book—that was what her mother had always said. *I can read your face like it was an open book, Rachel.*

It hadn’t been a compliment.

A freshman had knocked into the props table, causing a Magic 8 Ball to go toppling off of it. That should have been the end of it, since Magic 8 Balls aren’t actually round enough to go rolling around on set. But this one managed a good 270-degree turn before knocking into a light fixture. That should have been steady, too, but one of the crew members must have forgotten to sandbag the base down after Rachel had set the diffuser. The lamp tilted, then wobbled, then went crashing down sideways.

It was like a Rube Goldberg machine from Rachel’s own personal hellscape.

“Are you going to help, peabrain, or are you going to sit on your behind all day waiting for me to solve it?” Rachel shrieked. She rushed over, picking the light back up. But it was too late; the soft-focus light she’d balanced with was done for. Her diffuser now had a solid rip down one side.

The freshman she’d addressed startled, then froze. *Wonderful*, thought Rachel. *Another incompetent sent my way.*

“I guess I have to do it myself, just like everything else around here.” Rachel was constantly doing things for herself. She couldn’t rely on anyone else to actually do a good job.

The freshman—Ryan, she remembered his name was Ryan Ayoub—finally set himself in motion.

“Too late,” said Rachel. “You had your chance and you choked. Don’t ever mistake me for a patient person, Ryan.”

She supposed some people would have just said “freshman” and been done with it. But Rachel knew the importance of names. She knew that it would spur Ryan into better action the next time. Because knowing your name—that was like the Mafia don knowing your family, knowing where you lived. You weren’t a faceless screwup. You were an *individual* screwup. You would be remembered the next time.

“Rachel,” said Douga. “This isn’t boot camp. You don’t get to test if everyone’s tough enough to handle working with you. Leave the poor kid alone.” The tone behind Douga’s words—the “Rachel, you should already feel lucky enough to be admitted into these hallowed halls” speech—was familiar enough.

Rachel didn’t even flinch when she heard *that* anymore.

“Not if he can’t do his job properly.” But Rachel wasn’t trying to scare Ryan—or anyone—away, not really. He needed to learn, the way she’d had to learn. The way they’d throw you into the deep end on a real set. Rachel couldn’t make anyone unhirable. The worst she could do was yell at someone. This was an industry where people lost jobs over not stapling paper at the correct forty-five-degree angle.

Rachel was being positively gentle.

She was shooting the film in color, for God’s sake. There had to be continuity. This wasn’t some accidentally satirical Ed Wood kind of feature. Rachel would bet cold hard cash that nobody ever gave Tarantino this kind of shit on set. Rachel hated Tarantino, but at least he got respect from the people he worked with. Rachel knew she was supposed to calm down; knew she’d been told to calm down on many an occasion. But she wasn’t blowing a fuse over something minor. She didn’t actually care where the props table was set up or how much people talked between takes. This was about the colors that the camera was picking up. This was about lighting continuity.

White balancing was *important*.

“The white balance isn’t *that* off.” Douga wasn’t just the photography teacher and the cinematic advisor for the Royce School. She was a natural-born peacemaker. A smooth talker. That’s what the head of a department had to be, when they dealt with the kinds of parents and administrators that Douga dealt with.

Douga’s tone gave Rachel the sensation that she only got Douga’s attention as much as she did because she’d become a real pain in the ass. Rachel watched the faces of her crew as Douga’s words landed. Rachel was losing them. Maybe she’d already lost them. She’d probably never had them.

“It’s off.” Rachel found the balancing board, then she shoved it in Ryan’s hand. “Do you think you can manage holding this still?”

He nodded meekly. Better than she’d expected out of him, honestly. Rachel adjusted the camera efficiently. The soft, muted tones she wanted for the piece were what people might call seventies inspired, or Wes Anderson–esque. But to Rachel, they were an homage to Sofia Coppola. Her viewers were going to be haunted, à la *The Virgin Suicides*. But she couldn’t do that if the balance was off from the start. She couldn’t do that if the lighting changed within a scene *for no reason*. Postproduction could only correct so much. One more adjustment, one more twisting knob. Perfect. The balance was perfect.

The scene, on the other hand, was far from it. The sophomore she’d cast as Helen of Troy wasn’t performing half as strong as she had been in auditions back in September. The props looked ridiculous, and the entire premise, Rachel realized, was falling apart because of it. Not that Rachel was blaming the props master, per se.

As the director, the burden of the credit—and failure—of a production fell to her. But these details were taking the scene from raw and honest to camp. And not the good kind of camp, not the intentional kind. The shitty kind that led to the creation of shows like *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. Rachel would not make a cinematic production

that belonged on *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. Rachel was going to make art, goddammit.

Allison Heron—the girl playing Helen—called out “line” for the fifth time that day; Rachel had enough.

“Cut,” she said. Mostly for herself. Mostly to calm her frayed patience, which, as she had informed Ryan, was thin on its best days. “That’s a wrap. Everyone, go home. I need to do some massive rewrites. Don’t bother coming back, Allison.”

Allison looked like she was about to cry. Douga put her head in her hands. This was not, as everyone new to the set could tell, an unusual occurrence for Rachel.

Rachel instructed Ryan on how to pack up the lighting and sound equipment. She herself took apart the camera, piece by piece. She wound the cords efficiently, neatly. It was sacrosanct, this ritual. Nobody else could be entrusted with the equipment. It was too valuable, too precious. The money was one part of it—Royce had shelled out a good deal of it for the camera alone. But it was more than that. Directors should understand how to handle their own equipment. They shouldn’t just let their lackeys and crew members on set do all the labor. Directors ought to understand all the jobs they were effectively managing. They ought to respect that they were captains of a ship and needed to be able to do even the smallest tasks.

Douga stopped about a foot away. “Rachel.”

“It’s just wrong,” said Rachel—cutting Douga off—with her signature whine in her voice. She hated that whine. Made her sound like Mickey Rooney, complaining that the newfangled movies had gone to the dogs. But Rachel could never keep the tone out of her voice. Acting had never been her forte. Everything she was feeling came out and came through, in whatever she was doing. “I know it’s wrong. I thought this would be believable but it’s far from it.”

“You don’t know that from one hour of shoots, Rachel,” said Douga. “You haven’t even seen the dailies.”

Rachel didn't need dailies, not on this one. She could see it in her mind—the shoot was already totally derailed. Again. Between the lighting and her piss-poor lead, she'd have to reshoot it all. True, she'd already gotten her application materials in, so none of this counted toward college admissions or scholarships. But Rachel had chosen to do an independent study as her final send-off from school.

Her last semester.

Rachel looked her advisor dead in the eye. "I know what makes a good film. I know when it's right. And this, all of this. It's just wrong. None of it works. None of it's believable. None of it makes you want to take that leap of faith. It's just bad." Rachel picked up what was supposed to be a light diffuser but was actually just a cheap paper lantern and threw it on the floor. Not in a rage. Not in a tantrum. Just to show how easily the illusion shattered.

"Nothing on set is built to last, Rachel," said Douga, and then, even lower, so only Rachel could hear, "We need to talk."

Before Rachel could argue, Douga turned to the room at large. "Good job, everyone. When you're done, I want to have everyone meet in the film lab."

Douga shot Rachel a pointed look. She was probably regretting putting Rachel in charge, even if Rachel was a second-semester senior. Probably thinking about what a control freak Rachel was. Probably thinking what a waste it had been, giving this shoot to her, giving this spot to a kid with a chip on her shoulder.

Except they both knew Rachel was good. Honestly, she was better than good. She was going to go to NYU—as long as the scholarship money came through—and she was going to be a filmmaker, damn them all and their horrible nicknames for her. Rachel was bossy, it was true. She was controlling. But she was good. She was so fucking good. And even if she made them hate working for her, they had to acknowledge that. That she had talent and a drive that couldn't be matched. She

had a vision, goddammit. She wouldn't let Ryan or Allison or even Douga get in the way of that.

Douga turned her attention back toward Rachel now that everyone had left set. "I gave you the benefit of the doubt last winter when you said you needed an extension on your project. You said you wanted to make a full ninety-minute pilot that you could workshop around. I believed you were capable of it."

Douga paused, and it was the worst pause of Rachel's life because she knew it was a giant, unsaid "but" to everything that had come before it.

"Now it's April. You've got no pilot. No movie. Not even a five-minute short to turn in. You've got two semesters' worth of credits that you *need to graduate*. If you cannot produce something, *literally anything*, by the end of this month, I'm going to have to report you to NYU."

Rachel sputtered. "What?"

"I'm sorry, Rachel. It's my job. I can't in good conscience tell them you finished an amazing project I wrote you *a letter of recommendation for* if you can't get it across the finish line. You've gotten so many opportunities. More than one second chance on this alone. Do something with it. You've got until your showcase on May first."

Rachel watched as Douga walked away, carrying the promise of Rachel's dreams, her scholarship money, her college admissions in her wake.

Rachel packed away the camera and she slung her messenger bag over her shoulder. She could deal with this project. She could deal with lugging this equipment across campus all by herself. She could deal with being called into the principal's office to have a discussion about morals and values and upholding the Royce model of behavior again and again at a school she certainly never belonged at—because that's what the Royce School was, a school Rachel attended but didn't belong at—and be lectured on what an opportunity was, and not burning

bridges down when she got them. She'd learned to nod meekly and apologize. It was the only time Rachel could find any meekness inside of herself. But she'd learned to do it. To bite her tongue then, to bide her time.

She could even deal with another lecture from Douga.

What she couldn't deal with, what she refused to deal with, was this final project being anything less than spectacular. It was going to be better than good. It was going to be the best. Her work and her passion and her obsessive control were going to take her places, the way it took boys places. She wasn't going to end up stuck editing local TV for the rest of her life.

No, Rachel Consuela Recht was getting out, and she'd claw her way there if she had to.

9

Never Let Go

————— *Sana* —————

Sana slipped out of the interview room. She was on the far end of the Royce School’s campus, and she’d scheduled herself for the last interview of the day on purpose. There was nobody to run into her, nobody to see her leave.

Nobody who knew she was considering deferring from Princeton for a year. Nobody who knew that she hadn’t put down her deposit yet.

Sana hunched her shoulders slightly. She could hear the way her grandmother, Mamani, would fuss at her about posture. She could practically feel Mamani’s fingers pinching her shoulder blades. Only Mamani could manage to convincingly nag someone when she wasn’t even around. But Sana persisted in her slump. Once she got farther away from the room, she’d relax her shoulders and straighten her back.

Sana made her way out of the building, out into the early spring sunshine. It was the kind of day Los Angeles was famous for—sunny, but not hot. Blue skies and a small breeze. Sana inhaled—dust and smog and the faintest hint of eucalyptus. She dropped her shoulders, repositioned her backpack.

She’d done it.

She'd interviewed for a year abroad and nobody had found out. She probably wouldn't get it. The competition to work in a genetics hospital—actually work, not just file paperwork or shadow a doctor—was fierce. But she'd done it all the same. Without anyone being the wiser.

Including Mom. Including Princeton.

Sana had taken a few more steps when she caught sight of a figure moving across the lawn, weighted down with several cases and bags. Sana froze for a moment, watching.

Rachel Recht.

She must have been carrying camera equipment. That's what all those bags and cases were. Sana squinted, just to be sure; it really was her. Rachel Recht, a film student so extraordinary that she was granted a scholarship plus special filming privileges within the high-walled hedges of the Royce School. Rachel Recht, who was the kind of girl who vibrated *going places* and *doing things* and *get out of my way already*.

Rachel Recht, who had hated Sana with every fiber of her being since they had met in October of their freshman year.

Sana knew she needed to unstick herself from this position before Rachel noticed her staring. She'd learned to turn away, to not look at Rachel for as long as she wanted to, over the years. Learned that Rachel sneered at her whenever she caught Sana looking. So Sana tried her best to ignore Rachel. Ignore her own urge to look. Ignore the way her heartbeat kicked up a notch. That was just the leftover thrill from having finished her interview, anyway. Sana grabbed both of her backpack straps and pulled, willing herself to turn away and keep moving.

And that's when everything went haywire.

Sana watched in slow motion as Rachel tripped over something. A sprinkler head popping out from the field. Rachel began to stumble, all that equipment still in her hands. She was either going to land on the equipment and do some serious damage to some expensive cameras, or the cameras were going to land on Rachel and do some serious—

and likely as expensive—damage to her. Somehow, Rachel missed both as she came crashing down onto the ground.

But Sana was in motion and halfway to Rachel before she realized she was running. And by the time she realized what she was doing, realized she was running, it was too late to second-guess herself. She slammed chest first into Rachel, just as Rachel had recovered and was standing back up again.

Sana tried to catch Rachel, she honestly did. But Rachel clawed the entire way down and the two went tumbling over each other. Sana landed on top of Rachel, her arms on either side of the girl's head, their skulls millimeters from cracking into each other. Sana breathed heavily, her legs tangled in between Rachel's.

Holy Hades.

Sana ignored the jolt she felt at the touch. She buried the thrill down deep, easily covered by the choreographed stiffness with which Sana had to hold her body in that moment. Rachel was all softness, her years spent behind a camera rather than on any athletic field. Sana supposed Rachel's arms had muscle from her time spent hauling all of that camera equipment. But everything pressed up against Sana right now was so, so soft.

It was dizzying. And it was terrible. Sana had never wanted to know that Rachel's hair smelled like pineapple shampoo or that she had faint freckles across her tan cheeks. Didn't need the knowledge that Rachel didn't have pierced ears—they were small and unmarked. That would just make all those daydreams Sana had to tamp down on so much more *vivid*.

"Get off of me," said Rachel, her tone at once righteous and imperious and every one of the worst kinds of -ouses that Rachel could probably muster.

Sana reeled backward. She should have been used to it by now, but she wasn't. She lifted herself off of Rachel—efficiently enough so that Rachel wouldn't have further cause to yell at her for lack of speed, but

not so quickly as to possibly jostle Rachel in the process. Rachel got up immediately. And then, without warning, Rachel shrieked. Sana rushed forward, to see if Rachel had hurt her leg and needed support standing. She held her arms out to Rachel's, but the girl slapped Sana's arms away. The sting in her forearms chased away any lingering heat left in Sana's limbs.

It was probably better that way. *Remember this sting, not the pineapple shampoo.*

"Stay away from me, you incompetent purveyor of benevolent sexism!" Rachel shoved her, then she ran toward where her camera case had fallen.

That's when Sana saw it. The latch to the pelican case must not have been secured. The camera had come tumbling out of it. She covered her mouth with her hand.

Oh no. "I'm so sorry. Do you need help?"

"Stay. Back." This, Sana knew, was Rachel's most authoritarian tone. There was probably only one tiny thread of control left to keep Rachel from a full-blown meltdown.

The lens in Rachel's hand looked fine, but Sana saw the body of the camera. A huge crack ran down the front, on the right-hand side. It was probably cosmetic. Hopefully. Sana stayed still and quiet.

Rachel placed the lens into the pelican case. Then she caught sight of the camera. She whimpered, picking up the camera body gently. She looked up to sneer directly at Sana. "Look what you did. Oh my God, just look."

Sana took a step backward. *This was all her fault.* "I'm really sorry."

Rachel was scrambling with equipment and taking stock of the damage Sana had unwittingly caused. "Oh, good. So long as you're sorry. Jesus. You nearly destroyed the camera. You're lucky this is just a crack in the plastic that hopefully doesn't affect any of the actual mechanism or mounting functions. You're lucky you don't have to explain this damage to the head of the photography department, like I do."

"I'll go explain what happened." Sana didn't want to have to do it—resented that she'd listened to her own instincts and tried to help Rachel in the first place—but she wouldn't run away from the consequences of her own stupidity. This was why Sana made plans and to-do lists and action items. She had to counter bad instincts. Instincts that had her running over to Rachel. Instincts that were trouble.

"Don't bother." Rachel snorted.

But, despite the meanness and the tension flying between them, Sana acted on instinct again. She reached out and touched Rachel's arm. It was almost like she couldn't help it.

Rachel wrenched her arm away from Sana's touch. "In your dreams, Khan."

The two girls stood there, locked in that moment, by bitterness and memory and, for Sana, no small amount of longing. Then the grass rustled—and around the corner stepped Nashville Harrison, his hair still wet from the pool. He took in the tension between Sana and Rachel and he froze.

Everyone called the boy Diesel and had been doing it for so long that few people ever thought to ask why anymore. Diesel was a water polo player and the kind of guy people jokingly called a golden god, because between the athletics and the bleached-out hair and the deep tan, that's what the dude looked like. But he was Sana's friend and had been since the beginning. Though even Sana didn't know why he went by Diesel, especially since Nash ought to have been a perfectly good nickname for "Nashville."

"We're just over a month into second semester and you're already picking fights with the cheerleaders. That's got to be a new record, even for you. Leave them be, man. You know they don't have the ego to handle you." Diesel winked.

Rachel sighed and rolled her eyes, like Diesel was too stupid to even be worth the time of her insulting him properly. Except the only thing Diesel had ever been stupid about was thinking that staring longingly

at a girl for years would do anything to further his romantic interests. Sana and Diesel were, unfortunately, alike in this way.

“Do you need any other help?” Sana knew she would be rebuffed. She asked anyway. She was a one-woman masochism parade today.

“You’ve done plenty already, thanks,” said Rachel, still hunched over her gear.

Diesel had already started to help Rachel get the camera and lenses and equipment back into the pelican case. His movements were quick and efficient. “There we go. Easy solve. You’ll be all right.” Diesel clicked the latch to the case shut.

“No thanks to her.” It was the first time Rachel hadn’t ignored something the water polo player had said, even if it was an indirect kind of statement that mostly took aim at Sana.

“I said I was sorry,” said Sana.

“That’s not good enough,” said Rachel.

“Was there any other damage to your equipment?” Against her better judgment, Sana stared into Rachel’s eyes. They were a deep golden brown that reminded Sana of the best kind of bitter tea.

“Luckily, no. You just made the camera look awful, not work awful. And it’s not my equipment. It’s the school’s. I can’t afford a camera like this. I don’t go out and buy everything I need for my activities. There’s not some vending machine of technical equipment that I’ve got unlimited access to. There’s a reason I’m aiming for a scholarship for college.” Rachel looked Sana up and down.

Sana wished it had been a different kind of elevator glance, rather than this cutting one. But disdain was the only thing she’d ever gotten from Rachel, and probably would be the only thing she would ever get from her. She’d somehow become the girl’s nemesis, and all she’d been trying to do was ask for her phone number that one time.

It had gone horribly sideways. Everything where Rachel Recht was concerned went horribly sideways.

“I’m glad you’re not injured,” said Sana, knowing she shouldn’t say

anything but needing to say something. “And I’m glad your camera equipment is still working, despite the crack.”

“Yeah, thanks, Khan, for nearly damaging thousands of dollars of school property.”

Sana nodded at Diesel. “That’s my cue.”

Diesel gave a slight, sad nod. Like he remembered that once upon a time, Sana had tried asking out a girl on her own for the first time. And that that first girl had been Rachel Recht. Because what Diesel didn’t know, what he probably did not suspect, was her crush wasn’t firmly rooted in the past tense.

As Sana walked away, she willed herself to take deep breaths again. It was a trick Sana had learned a long time ago. Breathe in, breathe out. The more deep breaths she took, the more she envisioned the tension leaving her shoulders.

It stung to know that Rachel was clever and ambitious and pretty, that Rachel created whole worlds and put them onto film, even with a shoestring student budget, and she thought Sana was lower than dirt. But Sana knew better than to expect anything anymore. Even if moments like this—where Sana could smell Rachel’s hair or look directly into Rachel’s bright brown eyes—made Sana forget she wasn’t supposed to have a crush on Rachel at all. And anyway, the feeling was *mostly* in the past.

Sana certainly wasn’t about to tell anybody the truth, not even herself.

———— Rachel ————

Fucking Sana.

“It’s not her fault,” said the water polo player. Like he could read Rachel’s thoughts.

Rachel’s eyes snapped toward him. She hadn’t realized he was still

here, hadn't realized he hadn't gone with Sana. He had a stupid name, like Chet, or Chip, or Colt, or Petrol. *Diesel*. Rachel snorted. *Who names their kid Diesel?*

Rachel put her hand on her hip. "What isn't her fault?"

"Any of it." Diesel watched her, like he was trying to pick up clues for some kind of mystery that only he knew about. "Even if she knocked you over, I know Sana. I'm sure she was trying to help."

"Look, meathead," said Rachel, resenting his close inspection. "I get you think you're helping. But some jock saying the cheerleader is really nice underneath it all doesn't mean shit to a girl like me."

Rachel had learned that when it came to pretty girls, people would bend the rules—even laws—for them. Nobody had ever bent the rules for Rachel. Much less laws. Rachel waited for his response. But instead he just shook his head. He handed her the pelican case wordlessly and walked off the field. *Great*. She'd just been deemed less than by a guy named Diesel.

Fucking Sana.

It had always been like that between them. Sana was one of those perfect, delicate, tiny girly girls. Her shirts were never wrinkled and her skirts—the girl only ever wore pants when practicing her stupid, idiotic cheers—were never stained. Her ponytail was always sleek and in order, despite humidity from the marine layer or sweltering heat or even spring breezes. She was like a South Asian Elizabeth Taylor.

More Maggie the Cat than Martha, though.

Even from the start, Sana had looked like that—like a leading lady who'd stepped off the silver screen. Back during freshman year, Rachel had walked by Sana several times, having noticed her on campus pretty immediately, without knowing who she was. It was hard not to notice Sana. And Sana, she'd been watching Rachel the whole time too, of that much Rachel had been sure. *Did Rachel look that out of place among these people? Could this perfect cheerleader notice the difference so immediately so as to always stare in her direction?* It had been impossible to say.

But one October morning in that fateful first year, Sana had come right up to Rachel with her prim, swishy ponytail and had said, “Hi,” in a way that was all smiles.

Rachel had known just by looking at Sana to mistrust that girl’s intentions from the start. “What?”

Sana’s smile had faltered then, slightly. But she’d pressed on regardless. “I’ve seen you around. But only after school. Are you new?”

It had been a perfectly normal question, as far as they went. But it was one Rachel hated. It was why, up till then, she’d mostly hung around the film labs, the darkrooms, and the film lab, trying to hide away.

Rachel’s work had caught Douga’s eye during a summer arts program that she’d applied to on scholarship. Douga had thought that Rachel showed promise, so the instructor had gone to the Royce administration with Rachel’s final film project to show them the exact nature of that promise. They’d offered Rachel a spot then and there, but Rachel initially had turned it down. She didn’t know anybody with forty-five grand to blow every year on her college education, much less for high school. The Royce School had amended their offer, telling her that *of course* she would be there with financial assistance.

That’s how they had phrased it, “financial assistance.” Rachel was being given a specific kind of training for her specific kind of talents that the Royce School thought worth investing in. They had a whole fund for this kind of human investment. In this world, *new* and *outsider* seemed to mean about the same thing.

Rachel had shrugged, trying to play it cool. Her mother had just left and Rachel spent most of her waking hours back then either making films or trying to pretend everything was okay, was fine, was totally and completely all right. “Kind of.”

Sana had tilted her head, her ponytail swishing along with the move. “Cool.”

Rachel had stared, mesmerized by Sana’s hair. It had reminded her

of one of those desk toys, what were they called? Perpetual motion machines. Sana's hair was like that. A perpetual motion machine.

"Do you wanna grab a coffee sometime?" Sana had asked, breaking Rachel's reverie.

"What?" Rachel shook her head out, like she'd left on monitor headphones and someone had been trying to talk to her through them.

"Coffee? Or like if you don't drink coffee, tea. We could swap numbers." Sana's eyes had been so wide, so hopeful, that they were a punch to Rachel's gut.

"Are you fucking with me?"

Sana had gasped; her glossy mouth had dropped open. Sana's expression had turned raw and naked; it had confirmed every one of Rachel's worst fears.

"You are. I can see it. You're totally messing with me." There was no way the girl wasn't. Rachel had seen *Carrie*, for Christ's sake. And that scene from that godawful movie *Never Been Kissed*. All anyone had to do was watch a teen movie for about ten minutes to get the message: Never trust beautiful people bearing invitations.

It wasn't a question of whether or not Sana liked girls. It was that Sana was so secure in her position. She came from the right kind of family and she had the right kind of pedigree. Her mom worked in the movies and her dad was some kind of big-deal TV reporter.

Rachel was so wrong that even at this point, she still hadn't figured out the right kind of sneakers to wear so that nobody noticed how out of place she was. Rachel's hair had been short and she'd spent as much time as she could covering it up with a beanie. Her curls were too coily to wave in a tousled way—the way that girls with short hair had looked in her feed—and not quite curly enough to make a nice halo around her face. The haircut had been a disaster. Rachel had been a disaster.

Rachel had felt her voice shaking. She wasn't going to cry. Wasn't going to let some rich, entitled cheerleader get to her. She belonged

here. She wasn't just an outsider muscling her way in. Wasn't just *new*. She had talent. Just because this girl thought she looked like an easy target, that wouldn't stop her. No. It would *fuel her*. She'd show Sana. She'd show them all. "Stay away from me. I'm not a joke. Asking me out is *not* a joke."

"No—" Sana had said, like she could apologize for this kind of cruelty. "I meant—"

But Rachel had already whirled off.

Fucking Sana. Fucking cheerleaders. Stupid fucking water polo players with hearts of fucking gold.

Rachel shook her head. She was sick of the lot of them. She hauled up all her equipment, squaring her shoulders and balancing the weight of the bags and cases and cameras. She had footage to review and she couldn't waste her time worrying about Sana or Diesel or even Douga. Rachel had to focus.

She had to find a new lead for her final project.

Again.

3

Your Big Dumb Combat Boots

———— Rachel ————

Tip tip tip. Tiptiptip. Tip.

Rachel watched as the back of her pen hit the counter.

“Will you stop that racket.” Jeanie held a pitcher in one hand and a platter of food in the other. Jeanie Silber was anywhere between forty and sixty, though she liked to tell everyone she was still thirty-eight. Her hair was pulled back into a long, poofy ponytail and her orthotic shoes squeaked along the linoleum of the deli floor. “And table six is ready to order.”

Rachel stopped tapping her pen. She pulled out her notebook and went over and took table six’s order. They were one of those couples that kept waffling with their order, each one depending on the other to be able to finalize a decision. Neither one willing to bear the brunt of being wrong.

They finally settled on a matzo ball soup and a Reuben with turkey. A Rachel, ironically enough. Because of all the sandwiches in the world, Rachel had to be named for the one that took something delicious and made it weird and healthy. Which—what even was the point of a Reuben without the pastrami?

Rachel put her order in back at the counter and waited. She pulled her hair back off her neck and away from her face. She'd contemplated cutting it again, but for now, she slicked as much gel in it as she could. At least with it to her shoulders, Rachel could pull her hair back when she needed.

"What are you just standing around for?" Jeanie managed to be everywhere and nowhere at once.

"I've got one table. It's five thirty on a Tuesday." Rachel huffed.

"So go help bus."

Rachel sighed. Nobody else would dare sigh at Jeanie, but Rachel knew she could. Jeanie pointed toward the uncleared tables. Rachel went and grabbed a rag to wipe up.

Because Rachel would do what Jeanie told her to. When Rachel's mom had left and it had just been Rachel and her dad—everyone in the Jewish Mexican community had reached out to see if she'd wanted help. If she and her father had *needed* help.

¿Necesitas ayuda? they had asked.

And she had needed help. But instead she had recoiled. Papa had been drinking then and Rachel hadn't known what to do. She'd run from the people who had reached out. Run from her usual—though only attended on High Holy Days—synagogue. Run from everything that had been familiar and known.

She and her mother had been alike in that way.

And in all her running, Rachel and her dad had run out of money. There ought to have been a safety net, a cushion to fall back on, but there hadn't been. Faith wasn't something Rachel had in a religious way. To her, faith was community. It was the safety net she had rejected, had run from. But despite running from help when everything had gone wrong at home, that community—that safety net—had only been lying dormant. All she had to do was pick it back up again. Two years ago, Rachel had marched straight into Factor's and right up to Jeanie and

asked for a job busing tables. Jeanie had taken one look at Rachel and immediately taken her in. Trained her on the spot to wait tables so she could earn more in tips.

Papa had gotten back on his feet again soon after, which had helped. Had kept them out of real dire straits.

But Rachel couldn't forget how Jeanie had let her start over. Jeanie wouldn't let Rachel forget that she'd been the only person Rachel had let in. So Rachel would huff and sigh but ultimately do what Jeanie told her. And Jeanie, for her part, wouldn't ever force Rachel to do anything unpleasant. She was a believer in hard work, but never for its own sake.

Jeanie was worth a thousand perfect tracking shots.

Rachel finished wiping down the table. The order for table number six was ready and she served that without a smile. Jeanie never made Rachel smile.

Rachel refilled water glasses and double-checked soda orders and waited for the dinner crowd to pick up a bit. The rush was typically at lunch. Weekday dinner was a pretty mellow situation. Jeanie fussed over a couple of tables, so Rachel went back and cleaned them again. Did the setup nice and exact.

Rachel worked part-time. She only cared about her grades that involved writing or film work. Her math and science grades weren't bad, they just weren't anything to particularly brag about. She didn't see how biology would affect whether or not she'd make a solid film. Though she had enjoyed using trig to construct triangulated shots and line up imaginary rigs on paper.

The rest of the evening was slow, which was less than ideal from a tipping perspective but more than ideal from a needing-to-think-about-how-to-recast-her-film-lead perspective.

Rachel was all out of ideas, though.

Then Rachel had the joy of checking her email and getting a particularly fun message in her inbox.

Subject: Equipment Checkout

Rachel,

The camera you checked out has been returned with a GINORMOUS CRACK IN IT. Please come to my office first thing in the morning to sort out.

—Doug

Rachel was not one to take criticism lying down. Or standing still. She sent her response right away.

Doug,

Had a run-in with a cheerleader. Double-checked the equipment and no damage done to the camera. Purely cosmetic.

R

There. That would show Doug. Until a ping sounded, letting Rachel know she'd gotten a quick response.

Rachel,

Bring the cheerleader.

—Doug

Rachel clicked the lock button so hard she was surprised she didn't do any lasting damage to her phone. She was not going to meet up with Sana. She was not going to take her to Doug's office. That was Rachel's space. Her domain. She wasn't about to have it invaded by some pretentious cheerleader who thought asking out an outcast and a film nerd as a prank was some kind of hilarious joke for everyone to enjoy.

Except Rachel didn't have any leeway in this. She was already hanging on with Doug by a thread. And now she'd returned damaged equipment back to the film lab. She'd have to explain herself. And

unfortunately, Rachel had to explain herself with the one person she truly hated in the world right by her side.

Rachel would rather watch a Tarantino movie double feature than face what she had to tomorrow morning.

———— Sana ————

Sana and her mother lived in a one-story bungalow in Studio City, which they had bought back before Studio City had become the place to buy for young and upwardly mobile professionals in the film industry. Sana's mom had bought the place when the neighborhood was filled with all the cinematic support staff—studio lot workers, crew members, craft services, and the other countless invisible jobs of the movie industry. Back when Sana's mom was just a carpenter on set and too young and too determined to fail.

Sana had apparently lived in some crappy apartments in the Valley and North Hollywood, but she'd been too young to remember anything but this place as home.

A bang sounded from the front of the house.

"Sana-joon, I'm home!" shouted Sana's mom into the void of the house. Farrah Akhtar was many things—punctual, diligent, and a real pain in the butt to anyone in her way—but quiet, formal, and home at a reasonable dinnertime were never any of them. She made up for this by bringing free food home from the set whenever she could. "I've got dinner!"

"Coming." Sana hoped her mom had brought home Chinese. After two hours of cheerleading practice, all Sana wanted was endless piles of noodles and salty, tangy chicken.

"You would not believe"—Mom kissed both of Sana's cheeks—"the day I've had."

"Oh, really?" asked Sana.

“Yes, really. We couldn’t get the electric department in, so the grips had all the lights set up and in place, but nobody to plug them in.” Sana’s mother sighed. The grip department could position lights, but not plug them in. The electrical department dealt with anything with plugs. For real. “That’s six hours wasted on set, and we were going to have to go to time and a half if I kept them, because of course the delay happened after the lunch break. Ida needs to take control of the set again. She’s losing them. It’s not her fault, but she’s losing them. And I’m losing the production’s money in the process.”

Ida Begum was the director of Mom’s current project. Sana knew her mother sympathized with female directors. As a woman who had clawed her way up from carpenter to art director to production designer, Sana’s mother couldn’t help but understand what it was to be a woman in a largely male space. But Mom tended to say that the leeway was millimeters for women where the male directors got miles.

“You’re not in charge of budgets anymore, though,” said Sana.

That had been her mother’s job as an art director. All of those daily tasks, all of that system administration, all of the coordination between costume and set and FX and the director. But now Farrah was a production designer. Mom had climbed and carved her way to the top of her field.

“Of course it’s my job. It’s all my job. The buck stops with me on this one. Even if I don’t spend my day in the details, it all reflects on me.” Farrah waved Sana’s hand away with a swat. She set the reusable grocery tote that she carried over one shoulder on the kitchen counter. “Luckily crafty was amazing today. And there were tons of leftovers that Rebecca couldn’t reuse tomorrow. So we’ve got a total feast on our hands.”

Mom started pulling out containers from her bag. One had egg rolls, another had little sandwiches filled with roast beef or tuna fish. She had one with salad in it and another with mozzarella sticks.

Sana pointed at the cold, rubbery cheese, trying to figure out how

anyone thought *that* was a good idea to have on a table on set for several hours. "Really?"

"The lead on this production. You wouldn't believe his contract requests. There's no end of the shit he pulls. He's the one causing all the disruption with the crew, too. Trying to undermine the director while she's working. Pissing off the electric department and in turn causing them to piss off the grips, which of course pissed off crafty, makeup, and me. Some men just can't take direction from women."

"He sounds like the worst."

Sana's mother grabbed a plate of food, then moved into the living room and collapsed onto the couch. "Tell me about it. But, and I quote, *he pulls in the theater*. Heaven forbid you give a woman the directorial keys to a large production without a leading man to bring in box office numbers."

Sana put several sandwiches, two egg rolls, and a heap of pasta salad onto her plate. She took her plate into the living room and sat beside her mother on the couch. "That's unfair."

Farrah shrugged, like she was used to how unfair the world was. "Nobody likes to take a risk with fifty million dollars. Particularly not the good old boys in charge of the studio money."

"Gross. Oh! This girl picked a fight with me at school today," said Sana through a mouthful of food.

"That cow! What did she do?"

"You don't even know her. Or what she did. I could have deserved it."

"I'll call her as many names as I want," said her mother. "And I doubt you deserved it; you are my most perfect child."

"I'm your only child. Which probably makes me your *least* perfect child as well. And I saw her trip over a sprinkler or something, which was going to knock her video equipment out of her hand. Of course I try to help and end up knocking her video equipment out of her hand. And breaking it. She says I'm going to pay for what I did."

"That's tough. I guess I'll just have to see you in the next life, then."

When you've got that kind of money. I am assuming you're talking Royce School levels of camera of equipment here. Maybe after you've gone to Princeton and have become a world-famous surgeon."

Sana felt her eyes go tight and her jaw clench as she forced out a laugh. Sana's mother didn't notice the tension, though. She got up and went back into the kitchen. She grabbed several of the containers of food, all balanced perfectly along her arms, like she was used to bearing a heavy burden with ease and grace. She set the containers on the coffee table.

Once that was done, she snapped on the TV. "There. Much better. We can have as much as we want without having to get off of our butts. I don't want to have to leave this couch again. Not after the day we've both had. I live here now."

"Cheers," she said, lifting her plate toward Sana's like it was a glass of champagne. "To the end of a lousy day."

"Cheers!" Sana returned the gesture with more enthusiasm than she had. An extra tilt of the head. A brighter smile than normal. It was hard to find the right expression anymore. Harder to figure out what her face should look like. But Sana knew she had to find the right expression; otherwise, her mom would start asking questions.

Sana grabbed a container of noodles that she had missed before off the coffee table. She piled some on her plate and then slurped them down with greedy noise. Everything was salty and tangy and perfection. It was delicious. That, at least, she didn't have to fake.

April 2

29 Days Until Deadline

4

Alright, Alright, Alright

———— Rachel ————

It had taken Rachel three years to get the niggling sensation that she was an intruder out of her head as she passed through the Royce hallways. The precise sort of person who was meant to be kept out by the wrought iron gates and the high, manicured—but of course, sustainably planted—hedges. Somehow along the way, she went from feeling like she violated every sacred code this school held dear to sailing through its shitstorm. Not as though she belonged, but more like she knew the treacherous waters. Here there be dragons and monsters and coral and shoals and Rachel knew where they all lay now.

Rachel had to find Sana and convince her to go to Douga's office.

Tell her, more like.

Besides, Sana was a cheerleader—she must, on some level, *like* to follow orders. Rachel had it all mapped out. She was just going to walk right up to her and tell her they had to go into Douga's office because of the broken camera. There was no way Sana was going to stay no. Rachel was going to get to her in the early morning hours, before either of their homerooms started. And Rachel knew from the couple of times she had done early morning shoots that Sana was the sort of girl who

arrived early to school, well before the first bell. And not because Sana was scrambling to do her homework at the last minute.

Sana clearly *liked* school.

Rachel shuddered. School was a means to an end. A way to get to where she wanted to go. Sure, she could start working on a crew at any time. But she *needed* the pedigree, the legitimacy that a degree would provide. Men could climb their way up the blue-collar work of the film world in a way women couldn't. And even the women who did—they went up through the stunt-coordination route more often than not. And Rachel was not what anyone would term stuntwoman material. Or even stunt coordination material.

Rachel was decidedly sits-in-the-editing-bay-with-snacks material.

Lost in thought, Rachel didn't realize she'd come up on the senior locker area. She startled as a small, shadowy form stepped into her path.

"Hello." Sana had stopped a foot away. Her eyes were a beam of spotlight that refused to let go.

"Sana." Somehow the rest of Rachel's planned speech went flying out of her head.

Sana didn't break eye contact. And Rachel wouldn't. They would be stuck in this state, eyes locked, staring each other down, possibly until the end of time. Rachel was unable to speak. She just watched the way light played across Sana's face.

Real people should not look like an incredibly tanned Hedy Lamarr.

Sana tilted her head. "Is this about the camera equipment? Have you come with an itemized bill?"

Rachel felt her heartbeat pick up a kick. As Sana's ponytail swished, Rachel visualized her plan crack in half, then fizzle and pop as it drained neatly out of her mind.

"I need you in the film lab."

Whatever Sana had been expecting, it clearly wasn't for Rachel to say *that*. She stood there, blinking repeatedly. Rachel noticed a cup of

coffee in the other girl's hands. Much like Sana, the cup looked like it would photograph well. Made to be in a staged picture even more than it was made for real life.

Leave it to Sana to blow six dollars every morning on a cup of coffee.

"I'm sorry. I must be hallucinating this morning. There's no way you asked for my help in the film lab." Sana turned, as though to get back to her business at her locker.

It was a dismissal. Rachel refused to bow to it. "You're not hallucinating. You, me—Douga's office. Right now."

Sana turned, her hand still absently on the lock. Her eyebrows drew together. They were full and straight eyebrows, not bushy ones. Though on anyone else they would have been bushy or at least overpowering. On Sana, the eyebrows and their expression were simply striking. "Why?"

"Douga asked for us both." Rachel shrugged.

Sana leaned into her locker. The action brushed her shoulder and that damned swishy, shiny ponytail up against Rachel's arm. "I see."

Rachel held her breath, waiting to see what Sana would do. She'd probably abandon Rachel to her fate. Leave her to be yelled at alone by Douga.

But Sana turned and shut her locker door. "Lead the way."

Douga's office was a glassed-in side room off of the film labs. She had a big slab of a desk with papers strewn all across it and seemingly little to no method to her madness. She had bookshelves in her office, but they were empty. All the paperwork was either on the table or on the floor.

It was the camera equipment in the film lab itself that pulled the focus off any of Douga's organization efforts. There her organization system shone. Everything was filed on a shelf and tagged in a pelican case and placed in order by type, by model, by function. Her office, by contrast, was mostly a place for her to put stuff that she would prefer to never do. And Rachel had seen Douga's inbox over the teacher's

shoulder. She was one of those psychopaths with two thousand unread messages.

Douga saw Rachel and Sana approach and waved them in. Rachel sat down opposite Douga. Sana took the seat farthest from the door.

Douga pulled out the camera and placed it on top of some papers on her desk. "Explain."

"It's a purely cosmetic crack on a camera," said Rachel. "The overall functionality is undiminished."

"Rachel," said Douga. "You cannot return damaged equipment."

"But it's not real damage!"

Douga made a silencing motion with her hand. She looked over at Sana. "Your turn. Answer carefully."

"It was an accident. I ran into Rachel by the practice field." Sana looked Douga in the eye and everything.

Rachel snorted. *Accident my ass.*

"It was, even if you don't believe me."

"You know I don't."

"There's a shocker."

"Almost as shocking as being tackled while innocently crossing a lawn."

"You were carrying too much equipment! You nearly fell over all by yourself! I was trying to help." Sana folded her arms across her chest.

"So you decided to sprint tackle me and finish the job? I know you're a cheerleader, but where was the logic in that if it *wasn't* to take me out?"

"You are so dramatic. I have never nor will I ever aim to take you out."

Rachel raised an eyebrow. She had just the retort for that.

"GIRLS."

Rachel and Sana both turned to Douga. Rachel had almost forgotten that the teacher was sitting there.

“Do you honestly think I want to sit here, listening to you two whinge, as I try and figure out if there was a responsible party to this destruction?”

Rachel and Sana answered with a grumbling and simultaneous, “No.”

Douga looked over at Sana. “I don’t think you did this on purpose, but just because you look innocent—well, looks can be deceiving.”

Rachel felt a smirk coming on.

Then Douga turned her focus onto Rachel. “And you. You should have help putting away the equipment. You should be delegating some of this to your crew members. *You should not be firing your lead again and derailing your final project right now.*”

The smugness that had been enveloping Rachel was destroyed—like a well-coordinated flash bang effect across her mood.

Douga pinched the bridge of her nose. “Here’s what we’re going to do. You, Rachel, are going to cast Sana as your lead because I have no time left to deal with your casting shenanigans. And you, Sana, will take time to film in Rachel’s project as a show of goodwill that you meant no harm.”

“But you don’t even know if she can act?!” Rachel would *not* be casting Sana. She couldn’t.

“How do you know I *can’t*?” Sana crossed her arms and glared.

“Enough.” Douga held her hands up in the air. “You two will work together. There will be no more damaged equipment. If I don’t hear that things on set are improving, I am going to be very disappointed. Neither of you want me disappointed right now, got it?” But Douga didn’t wait for their assent. “That’s all. Get to class.”

And with a wave, Douga shooed them out of her office.

Rachel’s palms had begun sweating. She ought to make a quick retreat and live to fight another day. Right in front of her was the heartless girl Rachel knew. She stared at Sana for a long moment.

This is a terrible idea. One of Douga’s worst.

“Well, Khan. What do you think?” Rachel waited for Sana to destroy all of her dreams with a swift and vicious *no*.

Sana swallowed hard. “I can help. I mean, I can at least try. I have cheer practice until five most days. I can’t do anything until then, obviously. And I usually have organic chemistry lab during lunch.”

“Right. Organic chemistry,” said Rachel.

Sana took more advanced science than she did. She was probably nice to children, too. A regular *Mary Fucking Poppins*. Minus the button nose. A strange kind of misery began to well in Rachel’s chest. There had to be a catch. There was always a catch. A moment where the angle of the camera changed and what had once looked like a dream transformed into a fearscape from hell.

Sana put her hand on her hip. This caused her head to tilt again, which invariably caused her ponytail to swing back and forth like a goddamn pendulum. “Look, do you want my help or not?”

“Not.” *Not not not. An infinite loop of nots.* “But I need it. My film project needs it.”

Sana nodded, short, perfunctory, and full of an understanding of doing unpleasant things for a higher purpose. “Then meet me in the gym tomorrow after five.”

“No. *You* meet *me* in the film lab after five.” Rachel sure as shit wasn’t ceding home court advantage. The stakes were too high.

Sana sighed. “Fine.”

“Good.” Rachel gave a tense nod in Sana’s direction. Some piece of her brain began to scream about all of the setup she’d have to do after school to get an audition room ready by five that evening. She was definitely going to have to skip last period. Maybe she could get Douga to send a note and get her excused.

Unfuckinglylikely.

“Great,” said Sana. “The bell’s about to ring.”

Rachel readjusted her messenger bag across her shoulder. She wasn’t going to be dismissed, she didn’t care who Sana thought she

was. Rachel wasn't done relaying the most essential pieces of information. "No need to bring a monologue. I'll provide the lines. You're just going to read and I'll see if you've got it. I mean, I doubt you do, but I'd be stupid not to check. Come straight after practice. Don't be late."

Sana must have seen something in Rachel's expression because her next move was to salute Rachel, full of sarcasm, and say, "Aye aye, captain."

And before Rachel had time to retort, Sana swished her way out of the hallway. Rachel had just sacrificed her dignity on the altar of cinematic production.

————— *Sana* —————

When looked at from a logical perspective, Sana shouldn't have loved cheerleading as much as she did.

First there was the obvious, which were the uniforms: scarlet and gold, long sleeves and short skirts, a combination that was practical neither for the weather nor for modesty. There was also the ribbon that went in her hair with her name in puffy paint: SANA in neat, bright, bold block print. There was something deeply impractical about a hair ribbon that was meant to be read while she was being thrown up and down in the air or bouncing or shouting or cheering.

But of course, Sana tied hers tight with a square knot and then a double bow so that her name always faced out on the ribbon just so. She had a secret, small rebellion—she refused to put a curl in her hair. She smoothed and pressed her waves flat. But otherwise, her hair was tied up just like Coach K had taught them: a sleek, tight ponytail and a neatly bowed ribbon.

Then there was the fact that Sana spent every Friday night in the fall—and Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays in the spring—cheering on a bunch of boys she felt lukewarm at best about as they

played a sport she couldn't have cared much less for. Oh, Sana knew when to cheer. Cheering for four years gave her knowledge of the rules, gave her some sense of play in the game, whatever the game was.

But there was a good joke there—in a girl who liked other girls spending her free time cheering for boys and fawning over their lockers with homemade decorations and baked goods.

Purveyor of benevolent sexism, indeed. Sana held in a snort at the thought.

Then there was the fact that this was LA and cheerleading didn't really make a girl popular anymore. Not in a school where people were connected to moviemakers and Hollywood legacies and the real, serious money of global entertainment empires. Sana had enough industry connections that cheerleading didn't affect her social standing, one way or the other.

But Sana didn't cheer for the popularity. Or the uniforms. Or, clearly, the boys. Or the love of some game.

Sana cheered because she loved to.

There were very few times in Sana's life that she didn't care what everyone else thought about her. But cheerleading was one of them. She didn't care if anyone else liked her or for flow and parallel structure didn't because of it. And so she put up with the sweaty, entitled boys and the skepticism of her grandparents and the friendly derision of her mother. The casually sexist uniforms and the immense amounts of hairspray and the particular hierarchy of the cheerleading world itself. She waved them all away for the chance to be basket tossed in the air after standing on one foot and holding her other beside her ear.

She liked the impossibility of it—she made shapes flying through the air that required flexibility and strength and no small amount of nerve.

It was the only way that Sana could forget herself. Forget that she'd agreed to help Rachel Recht make a movie. Forget that she'd gone

behind her whole family's back and applied for a medical fellowship. Forget that Rachel's hair smelled like pineapple. Forget that Rachel could dream up movie after movie, but couldn't imagine a world where Sana wasn't her enemy.

Sure, learning to do a horizontal split in under a second after being thrown upward had been difficult. Not to mention the first time she'd put on her cheerleading uniform and realized she would be flashing an entire crowd with an underwear cover that was basically just underwear with her name monogrammed on the butt. Thank goodness the uniform had sleeves, or she'd never have been able to convince her grandparents she was doing a legitimate athletic activity.

But the sensation of her muscles flexing while her body launched skyward—if only for a few seconds without any other support or protection—was a high Sana had no name for, in any language. It was probably the only space in her life Sana could be untethered. Up here, in this fraction of a second, she wasn't cheer captain or honor student or only daughter. Wasn't a future surgeon. Wasn't even Sana Khan. She was just a mass, momentarily in defiance of gravity.

It couldn't last, though.

Gravity did the inevitable, pulling Sana back to earth.

Sana jackknifed so that her body was caught in a cradle—two girls at the bottom who locked their arms to create a human net—and her arms were caught under the shoulders by a back spot.

"Excellent," said Coach K. "Really excellent, girls. Everybody follow Khan's lead here. She's a second-semester senior and she's still not slacking. You hear?"

Sana cringed a bit, but said, "Yes, Coach," in unison with everyone else.

Everybody knew Sana had gotten into Princeton. That she'd applied there early action. That she'd pulled all her other college applications. That she'd given her nonbinding commitment. That she was

perfect. That's what they always said. That was the way they looked at her. *Too good* and *too perfect*. It was nauseating, but Sana had cultivated the image on purpose. She supposed she had to live with it now.

What they didn't know, what they couldn't guess, what they'd never suspected was this—Sana hadn't put down her deposit. It had sat on her desk, hidden under her books and her school folders. She hadn't secured her spot. Instead, she'd been working on her application material for a fellowship that would probably come to nothing.

Instead, she'd been dreaming of a future that didn't have clear, delineated lines. Instead she'd been wondering what life looked like without getting on a path at eighteen and never getting off until she retired or died.

Then the drill was setting up again and she was up, up, up in the air. Sana let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding in. *Whoosh*, she was flying. *Snap*, she'd been caught again. She didn't have to think midair. She just had to act. It was one of the only places Sana could trust her instincts. Trust that she'd catch herself.

"All right, girls. That's it for practice today. I'm really proud of all the work you've all put in this year." Coach K scanned the small crowd of girls. Because even though cheerleading was open to all, benevolent sexism really hadn't changed all that much.

"We've just got the tail end of basketball left. The next pep rally is only ten days away. We're still going to decorate all the players' lockers before the game, which means some late nights after practice this next week to get all the decorations together. I will remind you that cheering is the heart of our school spirit and pride. I know you'll all live up to this."

Coach went on—about the responsibility and the visibility of the cheerleaders, about the kind of character and reputation expected of young ladies at the Royce School. Sana could practically deliver the speech verbatim herself. The squad members were ambassadors to their school—on the field and off. Nobody was more visible than a

cheerleader. Except maybe a water polo player or a lacrosse player. But they were boys and they weren't expected to behave like ladies. They were allowed to roughhouse and blow off a little steam.

But cheerleading *was* how Sana blew off steam. She didn't drink, she didn't smoke. She didn't particularly like to swear.

What she wanted was to be thrown high into the air and not have to come down for a long while. What she wanted was for time to stop and for May first to just never arrive. If she could cheer and work on new stunts, Sana wouldn't have time to think about her deadline for Princeton or her pending fellowship application or being in a movie directed by Rachel Recht. Besides, the deadline was basically a whole month away. She didn't have to think about the future right now. She'd be fine for a little bit longer.

Coach K wrapped up the last of her regular pep talk. "If you have any requests for lockers that you want to decorate, remember to get those in to your captain by the end of tomorrow."

Sana pasted on a big smile. She didn't even try to act surprised that Coach had passed the responsibility onto her. She wasn't, and she didn't need the squad to think she had been. Everybody trusted Sana to get things done.

That was the problem.

Sana was trustworthy and reliable. She didn't get stage fright or performance anxiety. She already had the locker decoration assignments done for all the girls on the squad. She had written down their preferences at the beginning of the year. Getting things done had never been an issue until she'd gotten a form from Princeton asking for her dorm selections. Her mind had gone in circles until she'd tucked the papers out of sight. Like that helped and like email notifications weren't also a thing that Princeton was sending her.

Sana had a lot of unread messages these days.

She went over to her bag and pulled out the sheets she'd printed with everyone's locker decoration assignments. That was something

easy that she could do. Achievable. Get papers out of bag. Pass out sheets. Nod and smile at the squad. Generally act like she knew what was going on, like everything was fine.

Like she wasn't stalling on her future. Like she wasn't making a bet on a fellowship that would never come through.

Sana was more of a planner than a visionary. She saw a goal and she broke it down until it was in actionable, completable tasks. But she'd completed all her tasks, save for the most obvious, looming one from Princeton. And she'd cleared her mind in the last hour of cheerleading practice. As she got together her gym bag, all she had left was how on earth she was going to spend the next month helping Rachel Recht make a movie.

She had to get out of it. There was no other option.