

Praise for  
*Love from A to Z*

★ “This is a refreshing depiction of religiosity and spirituality coexisting with so-called ‘normal’ young adult relationships and experiences: What makes Zayneb and Adam different is not their faith but their ability to learn from and love one another in a world hurling obstacles their way. . . . Heartfelt and powerful.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ “Morris Award finalist Ali has written a classic romance that’s also a story of love for family and friends, Muslim identity, oneself, and the city of Doha, Qatar. . . . Heartfelt, honest, and featuring characters that readers will fall in love with, this is sure to become a beloved book for many.”—*School Library Journal*, starred review

★ “In *Love from A to Z*, S. K. Ali (*Saints and Misfits*) once again takes an unflinching and moving look at the intricacies of life as a Muslim teen in an imperfect, multicultural world. Beautiful.”

—*Shelf Awareness*, starred review


“Ali skillfully fashions a love story sensitive to the rules of Muslim courtship that’s equally achy and enigmatic.”—*Booklist*

“[B]oth characters are exceptionally appealing as their well-integrated faith leads them in different ways to seek peace, justice, and each other.”—*The Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books*

Also by S. K. Ali

*Saints and Misfits*

LOVE  
from  
A to Z



S. K. ALI



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*To the best of good peoples, my parents.  
And to other good peoples, Anu and Haju,  
without whom this book could not be.*



*This is a love story.  
You've been warned.*







## MARVEL: TWO SATURDAYS IN MARCH

ON THE MORNING OF SATURDAY, MARCH 14, FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD Adam Chen went to the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha.

A thirteenth-century drawing of a tree caught his gaze. It wasn't particularly striking or artistic. He didn't know why this tree caused him to stride forward as if magnetized. (When he thinks about it now, his guess is thus: Trees were kind of missing in the landscape he found himself in at the time, and so he was hungry for them.)

Once he got close, he was rewarded with the name of the manuscript that housed this simple tree sketch: *The Marvels of Creation and the Oddities of Existence*.

He stood there thinking about this grand title for a long moment.

Then something clicked in his mind: *Maybe that's what living is—recognizing the marvels and oddities around you.*

From that day, he vowed to record the marvels he knew to be true and the oddities he wished weren't.

Adam, being Adam, found himself marveling more than ruminating on the weird bits of existing.

We pick up his Marvels and Oddities journal on March 7, four years after that Saturday at the Museum of Islamic Art.

Eighteen now, Adam is a freshman in college, but it's important to know that he has stopped going to classes two months ago.

He has decided to *live*.

On the very late evening of Saturday, March 11, sixteen-year-old Zayneb Malik clicked on a link in her desperation to finish a project. She'd promised a Muslim Clothing Through the Ages poster for the Islamic History Fair at the mosque, and it was due in nine hours, give or take a few hours of sleep.

Perhaps it was because of the late hour, but the link was oddly intriguing to a girl looking for thirteenth-century hijab styles: *Al-Qazwini's Catalogue of Life as It Existed in the Islamic World, 1275 AD*.

The link opened to an ancient book.

*The Marvels of Creation and the Oddities of Existence*.

A description of the book followed, but Zayneb could not read on.

"Marvels" and "oddities" perfectly described the reality of her life right then.

The next day, after returning from the history fair (and taking a nap), she began a journal and kept it going for the next two years, recording the wonders and *thorns* in the garden of her life.

Zayneb, being Zayneb, focused on the latter. She dedicated her journal entries to pruning the prickly overgrowth that stifled her young life.

By the time we meet her at eighteen, she's become an expert gardener, ready to shear the world.

She's also just been suspended from school.



## A NOTE TO UNDERSTANDING THE STORY ABOUT TO UNFOLD

OTHER PEOPLE'S PRIVATE JOURNALS ARE TRICKY THINGS. IT FEELS strange to read them.

And if you do get to read one—say, if a diary were to fling open and stick to the window of the stalled subway car opposite your stalled subway car, and you had highly trained vision that allowed you to read tiny, tilted, cursive writing—even then, while devouring the details of a stranger's life, you would be overwhelmed with guilt.

You may even look around to see if there are witnesses to your peering-and-gulping reading behavior.

In this case, rest assured that you are free to enjoy the thoughts of Adam and Zayneb shamelessly. They have donated their diaries in the cause of . . . yes, love . . . on three conditions. One, that I cut out two incidents (the first involving a stranger's coffee cup, misplaced, that they both drank from by accident, and the second something I cannot write about here without quaking).

The other conditions are that I change their names and that I rewrite their entries in narrative form.

Done. Done. Done.



ZAYNEB

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6

ODDITY: *HATERS*

I HATE HATEFUL PEOPLE. \*

Exhibit A: The woman seated beside me on the plane. She swore under her breath when she saw me. Hijabi me. *Muslim* me, on an airplane.

She lifted her carry-on suitcase and slammed it into the overhead bin so hard, I was sure she damaged the wheels on it.

Then she rolled her eyes and whisper-swore again when I took a long moment to get up from my aisle seat to let her in.

My lap had been full. I'd had my Marvels and Oddities journal, a pen, my phone, headphones, and the food I'd bought right before boarding—a saran-wrapped breakfast sandwich and coffee. I had to gather these and, while clutching them to me, slide out.

After Hateful Woman got into her seat, her actions were executed in staccato, each orchestrated to let me know she was mad at my presence. Setting her purse down on the floor, *slam*, snapping the seat pocket in front of her to punch her newspaper in, *pow*, pulling her seat belt strap from under her, *yank*.

"I'm going to need to get up to go to the bathroom quite a bit, you know," she growled at me.

*Nice to meet you, too.*

“Okay,” I said, smiling my smile of deadly politeness. I’d recently learned that smiling calm-evilily in the face of haters, well, *stranger haters*, gets them more inflamed.

“You’ve got to be ready to move out of the way faster than that,” she said.

I tilted my head and blinked at her sweater-set self. “Okay.”

“Shit. Bitch.” She pretended it was because she couldn’t find her seat-belt slot.

“Okay,” I said again, popping headphones on and scrolling on my phone to find the right selection. I turned up the volume and drew the left earphone away from my ear a bit as if adjusting it.

A bit of Arabic, a traveling dua, filled the space between Hateful Woman and me.

She stared. I smiled.

\*I know, I know. *I hate hateful people* was so ironic.

But I was born this way. Angry.

When my siblings and I were young, my parents had this thing where they liked to sum each of us three kids up by the way we had entered the world.

“Sadiah had an actual smile on her face. Such a happy baby! Mansoor was calm, serene. And our youngest, Zayneb? She screamed nonstop for hours. A ball of anger!” Dad/Mom would say, laughing when they got to the punch line: me. When I was way younger, I’d get angry at *this*, their one-dimensional descriptions of us, their reducing us to these simple caricatures, their using me as a punch line. My face would redden, and I’d leave the room, puffing. They’d follow, trying to douse me with excuses for their thoughtlessness.

After a while they learned to follow up the punch line with

descriptions of my positive qualities. “But Zayneb is the most generous of our kids! Did you know she’s been sponsoring an orphan abroad with her allowance since she was six? He’s two years older than her, and she’s been taking care of him!” They’d beam at pre-teen me, at my newly developed guarded expression.

Then, two years ago, when Mom and Dad had stopped this rudeness, I began not to care that they’d called me an angry baby.

Because by then I’d discovered this about myself: I get angry for the right reasons.

So I embraced my anger. I *was* the angry one.

Though, Marvels and Oddities, the right reasons got me suspended from school yesterday.

Exhibit B: The prime villain of the hater squad, Mr. Fencer.

I’ve written a lot about Mr. Fencer in here. But I’ve never given him a whole section in my oddities entries. I guess it’s because oddities are like the nagging parts of life, things that you can sort of escape.

Fencer is inescapable. Every senior has to take at least one of his classes at our small school.

And he is evil personified.

Yesterday, in social science, he rubbed his hands together before passing out his carefully chosen handout:

### **GIRL BURIED ALIVE IN HONOR KILLING**

Police in Gazra have discovered the body of a sixteen-year-old girl apparently buried alive for talking to boys. Her father and grandfather have been charged with the crime, having admitted that they had been upset at the girl for being friendly with several boys in the village. Her

lungs and stomach were filled with soil, indicating that, at the time of burial, she was still alive.

I stopped reading. I knew what Fencer was doing. He was adding fuel to the fire he'd kindled since the semester started in February.

"You're going to use this article to do an analysis with the graphic organizer I modeled last class. Assignment due Wednesday, before break, no extensions. Questions?"

He stared right at me, the only Muslim in class.

He had parked himself in a corner of the room, on top of an empty desk, in order to get the best view of the class, a look of perverse satisfaction on his face. Like he was *tun-tun-da*-ing us.

From glancing around at the other students, I saw that it was working pretty well. Mouths hanging open, sighs, frowns, shifting in seats.

I turned the handout over to begin a note to Kavi.

Mike's hand shot up, already homing in to ace this one. "Sir, do we compare American culture and this particular culture?"

His laptop was open, an iPad beside it. My bet was that Mike was going to start the analysis as soon as Fencer answered him.

"Well, technically you can do any culture you're familiar with. But you must do this culture, Turkish—or actually Islamic—as the comparing culture."

I raised my hand. "Islam isn't a culture. It's a religion."

"A religion that permeates every aspect of one's living, right?" His legs began swinging. Excited. "Like art and architecture, for example."

"Well . . . yeah, some people call it a way of life."

"I define that as culture. A mode of living."

“But in this case, this buried girl is not an example of Islamic culture. You’re stretching again.” I made sure not to add “sir.” Ever. Never.

“Anyone else want to answer that? People keeping up with notes can look back a couple of classes. When we did that extensive chart comparing women’s rights around the world.”

Mike’s hand shot up. He had his iPad up in the other hand for everyone to see. Its brain held *his* brain, so no one else bothered to flip through their own notes. “Sir, we came to the conclusion, with the chart, that certain countries were weaker at upholding women’s rights.”

“And was there something that these countries had in common? Come on, people. Someone other than Mike?”

“They were all Muslim?” said Noemi, a girl with long blond bangs covering her eyes. She was staring at Fencer with an expression at the intersection of Practiced Boredom and Mild Curiosity, Freshly Piqued. “Is that what you’re saying?”

Fencer jumped off the desk and awarded us with his you-got-it stance: hands on his corduroy hips, legs apart, face beaming. “Yes, or, to put it more precisely, you can say that it looks like the majority of those countries follow Islam. Anything else? Zee-naab?”

He deliberately mispronounced it that way. I’d told him it was Zay-nub many times. Even writing it phonetically on worksheets for him: *ZAY-NUB*.

I now bent down over the sheet of paper on my desk and pressed hard with my pen. *Fencer is not going to be here. I’m going to make sure of it.*

The dream: get Fencer fired.

The reality: raise my hand, challenge his BS, get my words twisted, sulk, and, to finish off, pen my anger on a piece of paper.



When Fencer went to the projector, I tossed the note to Kavi behind me. She added something and passed it back to me.

*#EatThemAlive.*

I smiled. She was talking about the online movement our friend Ayaan had recently joined, #EatThemAlive. Its primary function is to take down your regular neighborhood-variety racists and supremacists through Internet sleuthing. But Ayaan is in student council, so she does everything underground. Her way is to collect receipts quietly until she has enough to dismantle someone in a foolproof, methodical manner.

She'd told me she had some stuff on Fencer. Though she hadn't shown me anything.

But at this moment, I let the glee light me up inside—*Ayaan has stuff*—which meant we'd be taking Fencer down soon. I'd already told her I wanted a part in it.

*Fencer is not going to be here. I'm going to make sure of it.*

I stared at Kavi's words underneath mine. *#EatThemAlive.*

A doodle of a pair of hands holding a fork and a knife would go well on either side of Kavi's contribution. She'd appreciate my attempt at art, *her forte*.

I began drawing a sharp-looking butter knife with exaggerated jagged edges and a slender, spiky tip.

A hand clasped the paper from my desk and yanked so hard, my pen trailed ink off it onto my desk.

I looked up at Fencer, my eyes wide, brain registering what I'd just drawn.

A knife. A fierce-looking one.

"Zee-naab, office. Now." He had the calm face of someone who already knew they'd won before the game had started. "I'll be there in five with this threat of yours."

. . .

It was easy for Principal Kerr to suspend me. It was a two-step process.

1. After repeatedly asking *Why would you do something like this?* and getting nothing out of me, Kerr called Mom. She promptly left the travel agency where she works.

2. Holding up my “threatening” note, Kerr outlined, for Mom’s benefit, what I’d done, while I stayed mute, staring so hard at Fencer’s shoes, willing two holes to be burned in them, that he shifted uncomfortably a few times.

Kerr repeated “Eat them alive?” two times, the second time in a higher-pitched voice, and I pictured Kavi’s face, dark hair parted at the side, thin brown arms crisscrossed over textbooks affixed to her chest, her lips doing that barely there smile she does.

I saw her by my locker, waiting for me at lunch, as she’d done almost every day for the past few years.

I’d never give her away.

“Miss Malik, do you realize this could be considered expulsion worthy? A threat, with a weapon, directed at a teacher?” Kerr stared at me.

The anger inside me got switched, without my permission, and traded places with worry.

I want to go to UChicago in the fall. That’s where my sister, Sadia, goes, and she promised to move out of her dorm so we could get a place together.

I wilted in the chair beside Mom. She glanced at me, worry flitting her own eyes, so I shot her a pained look: *Say something.*

But she was a people pleaser, so she nodded at Kerr, almost groveling-like.

My stomach clenched. Mom wasn’t going to help me out.

I dropped my gaze and saw Fencer's dark brown loafers again.

The sight stilled the tears that had begun pooling. I blinked them away and concentrated on boring more holes in Fencer's shoes.

But maybe Kerr saw my wet eyes. Because suddenly she cleared her throat, and when she next spoke, her voice was calmer.

"The only reason we've decided to give Miss Malik a week's suspension instead—which will go into her records, by the way—is due to her exemplary academic record over the years. I'll see this as a terrible, terrible decision she's made. Mr. Fencer agrees with me on this." Her voice hardened again. "But give me one more thing to make me reconsider, Miss Malik, and we may be seeing your college future at stake. I will not hesitate to make that so."

Beside Mom, Fencer sighed as if he were pondering college-less me. Anger welled and churned inside.

*Eat them alive.*

*I'm going to get him. I'm going to get Fencer.*

As soon as we got in the car and she turned the ignition, Mom began. "I never thought we'd have this sort of trouble with you, Zayneb. A threat against your teacher? A knife?"

"It wasn't a threat! It was about getting him fired. And the knife was a butter knife. I was just about to draw the fork." I frowned at the front of Alexander Porter High with its ugly green double doors.

"We didn't bring you up like this. I'm ashamed." Mom's voice was small, which meant it was going to be the crying kind of lecture.

"You didn't say anything!" I turned to her. "Nothing about what he's doing! You acted like it was my fault!"

"I can't prove anything about your teacher. Every time Dad

and I offered to talk to him before, you said no.” With the car stopped where the entrance of the school parking lot met the road, she glanced at me, mouth trembling slightly. “Can’t you just graduate in peace?”

“You mean, *Shut up, Zayneb! Don’t make a scene, Zayneb!*” I put my hand on the door handle. “Can I get out? I’ll just walk home like I always do.”

She let me.

Ayaan had alerted me to Fencer before I entered his class this semester. There are only a few Muslims at Alexander Porter High, so we’ve gotten into this looking-out-for-each-other thing.

She told me Fencer was an Islamophobe. That she’d had two classes with him—one in junior year and one first semester of this year—and, somehow, he brought an uncanny number of topics and discussions around to how Islam and Muslims were ruining the world.

The thing is, Ayaan has wanted to become a lawyer since forever, so she’s about building up a case. She doesn’t say anything, *didn’t* say anything to Fencer, and just kept collecting information when she’d been in his class. Collecting *evidence*. Including, recently, data from his online personas. She was supposed to show me some screenshots soon. She said I had to come over to see them, as she wouldn’t risk sending them via messaging or e-mail. She didn’t say it outright, but I’m pretty sure she was worried I’d pass it on somehow and ruin everything.

The other thing is that Ayaan doesn’t wear hijab. She’s Muslim, and Fencer knows it from her full name—Ayaan Ahmed—but he’s not sure what kind.

Like, he doesn’t know if she cares about her identity or if she practices her faith. Or if she simply has a Muslim name.

He doesn't know what I know: that Ayaan is a devout Muslim who goes to the mosque more than hijabi me. That she prays and believes and is on a million Muslim committees.

She's been able to keep track of Fencer quietly, stealthily. Undercoverily.

But from the moment I arrived, I wouldn't stop challenging his bullshit to his face.

Which made him more excited. And caused him to dial up his antics. It's like, when I walk into his class, I can practically see his glasses train their crosshairs on my hijab.

What riles me is that people think Islamophobia is these little or big acts of violence. Someone getting their hijab ripped off, someone's business getting vandalized, someone getting hurt or, yes, even *killed*.

No, there's the other kind too, and it's a more prevalent kind: the slow, steady barrage of tiny acts of prejudice, these your-people-are-trash lightsaber cuts that tear and peel strips off your soul until you can't feel your numbed heart any longer.

Angrier than angry, because then you've got almost nothing positive left inside.

Then the truth reveals itself: The world doesn't make sense, doesn't work for you.

For me.

And I know it won't ever work for me, no matter how much I fight or how angry I get.

That's how I felt unlocking the door to let my suspended self into the house.

After dinner, Dad knocked on my bedroom door before opening it gingerly. He'd already given me a lengthy speech while we were

eating (*The best way to challenge these Islamophobes is by succeeding in society. Getting suspended is not succeeding! Don't you want to join your sister and brother at university?*), so I wondered what he wanted now. On the bed, cocooned in my ancient, raggedy but cozy blanket, Binky, I paused the reply text I'd been composing to Kavi, slid my headphones off, and stopped a comforting episode of *The Office* on my laptop, my questioning eyes on Dad.

He stroked his beard and cleared his throat. "Okay, I don't want you to see this as a reward, but Auntie Natasha is on the phone with Mom. Trying to convince her to let you come earlier."

"To Doha?" I couldn't stop the stunned joy from escaping me. The blanket cradling my head dropped back as I uncrossed my legs. "Like, what do you mean, 'earlier'?"

"Mom looked at flight options, and you could leave tomorrow afternoon if we drive you to Chicago. Auntie Natasha said instead of moping here, you should spend the next week with her, before Mom joins you guys."

"Oh please, could I?" I shrugged out of the blanket, got up from bed, and went to the suitcase Mom had wheeled into my room last night with orders to fill it over the course of next week for our planned spring break trip to visit her sister in Qatar.

But with this news, I'd potentially be getting to Doha on Thursday, when everyone else at school had a week to go before break!

If Dad and Mom agreed to Auntie Nandy's idea, that is.

I dropped the orange hard-case luggage on its side on the carpet and knelt to unzip it. "Please? I'll pack right now?"

"But this is not a reward, you understand?" Dad crossed his arms. "You'll have to do whatever Auntie Natasha says. She's still working, you know. She's not going to appreciate you giving her problems."

“I promise, Dad.” I let the two halves of the suitcase fall open and looked up just as Mom came up behind him. Her face was sad, so I smiled to prove I’d gotten over being angry at her. “I won’t bother Auntie Nandy. I’ll be quiet and compliant.”

Mom and Dad looked at each other and exchanged weird expressions, in between amusement and disbelief. Then Mom spoke. “The only flight you can take has a layover in London. I’m a bit worried about that.”

“Mom, all I have to do is get out of the plane and wait in the airport for another one. Please?”

She turned to Dad. “Well, it *is* just two hours. Not a long wait, really.”

He nodded.

I couldn’t stop myself from jumping up. I went to stand in front of them, my arms open slightly, a hug cue.

They took it, enveloping me in forgiveness. Mom spoke into my hair. “When we come back from Doha, you’ll only have a couple of months of school left. Can you promise us you’ll do your best until the end?”

I nodded. Everyone has a different definition of what “doing your best” means. For Mom and Dad, it means not rocking any boats.

For me it means fixing things that are wrong.

Dad let the hug go first, but it was to address me. “Going away on your own often changes you. Maybe this bit of time in Doha is just what you need.”

“I’m going to try to leave the angry part of me here for the next two weeks,” I said, turning back to the suitcase.

When I glanced up, Mom and Dad were exchanging looks again, so I felt the need to emphasize my commitment to calm.

“I promise you I won’t cause any more ruckuses. Anyway, it’ll be easier, with less rude people around me.”

The less-rude-people thing hasn’t worked out.

Exhibit A: The hateful woman I’m stuck next to on the plane.

We’ve been in the air just under two hours, and this woman has made me get up from my seat four times already. I’ve been writing in you, Marvels and Oddities journal, on and off since the plane took off, and she won’t stop peering at my words.

I promised Mom and Dad I wouldn’t make a scene, so I’ve kept my responses limited to unrelenting smiles, but now . . . I think it’s time to get to her.

So to really freak her out, here, journal, have some Arabic words, written nice and big.

إن شاء الله

**MARVEL: AIR**

Air, as in what I’m flying through. Well, the plane I’m sitting on is flying through. Air.

(Also, air holds the cellular signals that will allow further communication between Kavi, Ayaan, and me. So that we can plot Mr. Fencer’s takedown.)

إن شاء الله

Oops, that went into oddities territory there.





ADAM

THURSDAY, MARCH 7

MARVEL: TOUCH

SINCE I STOPPED GOING TO CLASSES TWO MONTHS AGO, MY DORM has gotten crowded.

It's a good thing my roommate, Jarred, is practically never here. I mean it's a good thing his girlfriend has her own place.

The tools are on my side, spread across my desk mostly, but somehow the things I make end up on his desk while they wait to be finished.

Jarred's desk currently holds a working clock made out of an old marble chessboard, with chess pieces for numbers, awaiting another coat of sealant. A plastic-robot phone-charger station awaiting wiring. A tiny Canada goose, midflight, glued together from bits of discarded wood chips, awaiting painting. Several parts of a foam Boba Fett helmet awaiting assembly.

Also awaiting assembly: a gift for my sister, Hanna.

Yesterday I took the thin pieces of grooved balsa wood and fit them together in a grid pattern inside the box I'd already made. As the square compartments revealed themselves, smooth and flush without any screws or nails, I thought about touch.

I thought about how, without the ability to feel the wood, the

plastic, the foam, the metal, without the sensation I get when I clasp the ryoba saw and the jolt from snipping a thick wire or the hum that goes through my fingers when I'm sanding, without all this I wouldn't have anything, wouldn't be happy.

I like that I still have the ability to touch. And that I can use it to make stuff.

So, since January, since second term started, I've just been making things.

I've dropped out of school.

I don't want to run out of time.

Speaking of touch, I haven't had a voluntary *human* touch in a long time. A real one, I mean.

In September, I hugged Dad and my little sister, Hanna, at the airport before leaving for London.

The last I-love-you touch.

*Technically, you could say, what about on Fridays, Adam? At the mosque, after prayers, when everyone says salaam and hugs one another, you included?*

Those hugs are cursory. They don't go much beyond the shoulder-slam, hey-I-see-you-bro.

There's another kind of touch: the *kind* kind. It means a lot—well, to someone who craves it.

I crave it. I haven't stopped thinking about how much since I realized how long it's been.

It was the tick marks above my bed, underneath the bunk on top of mine, that got me thinking about when I'd last extended my hand to anyone. Or anyone extended their hand to me.

Someone who lived in the dorm before me had recorded their days at university like a prison sentence, carving into the wooden

slats under Jarred's bed, and, one night a week ago, reaching up to run a finger over the tallies, I touched the gnawing in me.

I realized it had worked its way around inside, gouging, for a while.

It must be a hole I've carried since the start of freshman year. (Though sometimes I wonder if it carried over from years before that.)

Simple tally marks etched with a pocketknife woke me to my hollowness.

Now it's Thursday morning, and I'm supposed to be getting up and getting going, but instead, I reach up and touch those tally marks again, wondering if people can get used to this feeling.

Like they get used to other sad stuff.

Anyway, this journal entry is a marvel, so it's supposed to be positive.

Positive: It's spring break, and this afternoon I'll be on my way to Doha.

In about eight hours I'll hug my family again. Show love to Dad and Hanna again.

And be loved back. For a bit.

Ryan was waiting for me in the common room, sitting in one of the worn-out armchairs, a laptop open on his legs. "Where's your luggage?"

I lifted a shoulder. "Here."

"A small duffel? For two weeks?" He closed his laptop and slid it into his backpack before getting up.

"I already got clothes there. This is just stuff I can't live without," I said, holding up my guitar case. "You know about the detour we have to take, right?"

“The Rock Shop, aye, aye, sir. I didn’t know you were into metal music.” He led the way down the stairs to the door opening onto the side street, the only place you could find parking, if you were lucky. “That’s not the kind of stuff you play.”

I smiled but kept my mouth shut.

We opened the door labeled *THE ROCK SHOP*, written out in pebbles. The storefront had no window, so your first taste of the Rock Shop’s wares was literally on the door.

The door yielded the rest of the shop’s treasures. Rocks, pebbles, gemstones, fossils assembled in little baskets placed around the tiny store.

Ryan looked at me. “What’s this? Why are we here?”

I laughed. “Present for my little sister.”

“We could have got some for free near the maths building,” Ryan said, picking up a nondescript-looking gray rock from a tray. “You know, all those shiny white rocks they have around the planters out front?” He turned over the rock in his hand. “Three quid for this? Really?”

I headed straight to the minerals section.

Hanna had asked me for azurite, a blue mineral, to add to her collection. When we were talking on FaceTime, she showed me the space she’d made for it, and I couldn’t help noticing the old Ferrero Rocher tray she kept her favorite rocks in. I knew she liked the candy box for its rounded compartments, perfect for holding each stone, but I could imagine how excited she would be to have her own *real* display case.

Like the one I’d made for her, now packed between my clothes in the duffel.

• • •

After we stopped to eat, Ryan dropped me at the airport. I checked in the case containing the guitar that I'd carefully bubble wrapped, silently praying it would safely reach Doha.

Finding a seat near my boarding gate, I set my duffel between my feet and leaned back into the vinyl.

A couple was right in front of me, their arms draped around each other, laughing at something they were watching on a tablet propped between their laps.

I looked to the left and was met with the sight of another two kissing each other by a mobile-device charging pole.

I glanced over the whole place. Yup, couples dotted here and there, everywhere.

Spring break.

I don't dare bring up my predicament with Jarred, my dorm mate, or Ryan, my closest friend here in London. They're both in kind of steady relationships and will tell me to start my own.

They'll tell me to get a girlfriend. Get it on.

But it's not physical. (Though that's mixed in there somewhere too.)

It's this thing beyond that. I know that may sound weird.

But that's me.

Besides, Jarred and Ryan don't get how, for the type of Muslim I am, it's a one-relationship deal. With one person. Without trying it out or half investments.

And so I gotta be right about a relationship. Before I get too into it.

When you think about it, that seems scary. Impossible.

How do you meet that one *exact* person who's right for you?

• • •

I've met only one person who I thought could maybe be *exact* for me.

She was a freshman orientation tour guide, and then I saw her again, working as support at the computer lab. The next time I'd noticed her was at the Muslim Student Union welcome dinner.

We started talking every week, mostly at the lab or the MSU.

I liked her because she smiled easily and her voice had this *sure* quality to it. Like she was confident of whatever she was talking about.

By the end of October I'd made up my mind to ask her if she'd want to get to know each other seriously, and not just at MSU stuff. But then in November, I'd gotten news I didn't want.

And when I looked up from being so preoccupied with it, she was gone. Literally. She went to Lebanon over the winter holidays and came back engaged.

It was a good thing, too. She couldn't have been the right one for me.

My November news told me I had other things to deal with.

So I've been training myself to make my peace with aloneness.

I rubbed my eyes to clear the happy coupledness scenes from my brain, and, just as I was about to take my laptop out of my duffel to go online, a girl came and sat two seats to the left of the couple in front of me.

She had on a hijab that was almost exactly the same shade as the azurite I'd bought for Hanna. Brilliant blue.

I'm pretty sure that's why I noticed her. That and how she didn't take her eyes off the phone in her hands, the one she was speed-clicking on, not even to check if the seat she took was clear, not even when her carry-on suitcase fell over, with her coat on the handles, and lay on the floor in a pile.

She left everything there, and then even let the flowery purse on the crook of her arm slip down and join its mates on the floor.

The handles on the purse sprung apart to reveal its jammed contents.

An orange book sticking out caught my eye. In big, bold, black handwritten letters it said *MARVELS AND ODDITIES JOURNAL*.

I think I must have made a sound, because she looked up, her eyes inquisitive.

I looked down at her feet. At the jumble around them.

She looked down herself and gave a start, setting her phone on the seat beside her to gather everything up and set them properly.

I took my laptop out and opened it on my knees—but I'd be lying if I said I was browsing online.

Instead, shielded by eyes staring at the log-in screen, my mind was in scrambles, wondering how, sitting across from me, was someone with a journal exactly like mine.

## ODDITY: *SECRETS*

The kind of secret that punches people in the gut.

The kind written on the folded paper in my duffel, ready to be carried onto the plane to Doha.

The reason I avoided flying back home for Christmas holidays. The reason I stopped going to classes.

After I received it, in November, I spent too much time incessantly unfolding it to pore over it. Then, one day in December, I folded it up for the last time and kept it that way.

I haven't looked at that bit of news since then.



ZAYNEB

THURSDAY, MARCH 7

ODDITY: RUMORS

I'D WANTED TO GET AWAY—MAYBE EVEN FIND THAT ELUSIVE THING called *peace*—but everything followed me.

Exhibit A: The messages I got on every social media platform when I landed in London.

Somehow someone had gotten a picture of my note—*Fencer is not going to be here. I'm going to make sure of it.* (Bad knife drawing flanking #*EatThemAlive*)—and shared it with others who were then sharing it on and on.

Some people thought it was funny, but those people were few. Fencer wasn't exactly popular, but he wasn't considered mean, either, so most students were giving my suspension a thumbs-up.

And then *i* and *t* words started showing up underneath my profiles.

*She's ISIS.*

*ISIS girl should have been expelled.*

*I can't believe Kerr let the terrorist off.*

*You terrorist cunt.*

Then it became crazy stuff.

*Heard your father is in ISIS.*



*Someone should tell the cops to check her house.*

*I already did. Told my dad who's a cop.*

*They already found stuff on her.*

Then I got a slew of private messages from Ayaan: *What did you do?*

*I mean Kavi told me.*

*But what did you do?*

*SUSPENDED?*

*AND you blew everything.*

*And you take off for Doha?*

*WTH Zayneb*

These messages came flooding in as the plane taxied on the tarmac at Heathrow and my phone got service again. After disembarking and walking to the gate for my connecting flight to Doha, I was able to start answering Ayaan once I found a place to sit.

I clicked apology after apology to her, imagining her sad, sad face looking at all the evidence she'd been collecting on Fencer for so long going up in flames.

Kavi had already told me this morning, after apologizing in tears to me last night for *her* contribution to getting me suspended, that she'd apologized profusely to Ayaan for writing *#EatThemAlive*, possibly alerting Fencer to what was going on.

If he googled those words, I'm pretty sure he'd come upon the hashtag and then see the many people who'd been removed from their jobs for their racism. He'd get a whiff that he himself was being tracked, and, *poof*, he'd delete his online presence.

The one Ayaan's been researching.

The one she needs to turn over to the school board, because they'd probably not believe her screenshots, so easily photoshoppable.

Yes, I did blow everything.

I kept sending a string of apologies, but deep down I knew Ayaan would never trust me again.

And to think, I'd considered what had happened on the rest of the flight to London with Hateful Woman had been bad.

When she saw the Arabic I wrote in you, Marvels and Oddities, she pressed the flight-attendant call button incessantly.

*"Either I move or she does,"* she hissed at the attendant who came by. "She's threatening me. Writing something about me the whole time."

The flight attendant, a guy with dark hair and white glasses, looked at me.

"I'm just writing in my journal. I don't get how that's threatening," I offered.

*"Move me now."* She began gathering her things.

I swept my stuff together, put my tray up, and stood to let her pass. She stepped out in front of me, into the aisle, her eyes on other passengers, her head shaking hard in an attempt to solicit sympathy for her plight.

"Ma'am, please stay seated. I haven't found a spot for you yet." The attendant put his hands on his hips and looked down the aisle.

I turned away, to the back of the plane, willing myself to be calm. Willing myself *not* to tell the woman off.

Or even explain myself to the flight attendant.

*You promised Mom and Dad.*

*Stay quiet.*

*Shut up, Zayneb.*

Some of the other passengers peered at me, and I beamed back at them. Maybe if I looked like a happy Muslim teen, someone

would offer to trade places with Hateful Woman or even with me.

No one moved.

I turned around so I wouldn't make it even further awkward for everyone.

"Sit down, please, ma'am. I'll come back after I check," the flight attendant said to Hateful Woman again, his gaze then falling on my face.

Maybe I looked weird in my attempts to appear nice, because he shook his head slightly before turning to walk to the front of the plane.

Hateful Woman and I were still standing, me in the aisle, her in front of my seat so I couldn't even sit down, her back to me as she watched the flight attendant go in search of "comfort" for her.

I clutched my things tighter to me and looked around again, at the passengers' faces—some blank, some frowning, some whispering—my stomach squeezing over and over.

Most of them probably believed everything bad that they'd heard about Muslims, the headlines, the "news" stories, the online comments, the rumors.

Was there anybody on this plane who wouldn't look at me and think *troublemaker*?

Or worse, *terrorist*?

Hateful Woman was moved to first class, and, even though I had both seats to myself, I stayed tight and unmoving, fuming.

Then I noticed a girl my age across from me, up one seat. She was working in a sketchbook, a container of colored pencils in her lap along with headphones, snacks, and a stuffed animal.

Coloring girl was white and blond.

The sight of her tore a hole in me.

The way she was bobbing her head while her pencil moved rhythmically across the paper, like she was immersed in some happy music only she could hear, though her headphones were not even on her ears.

Part of the coat she was sitting on stuck out into the aisle—cutesy for her, but if *I'd* let that happen? *Belligerent*.

Seeing her totally okay, completely comfortable in life, made me tear up.

I mean I'm sure that girl might have all sorts of other problems going on. Most probably she did.

It's just that when people first saw her, a bunch of crap thoughts didn't instantly load into their brains.

Her coat sticking out didn't sum *her* up.

My coat sticking out could. Because of all the years of rumors about *people like me*.

I didn't have to open my mouth or do anything for people to judge me. I just had to be born into a Muslim family and grow up to want to become a visible member of my community by wrapping a cloth on my head.

I just had to be me.

Angry people are not known to be public criers. They usually don't succumb to displays of grief.

But I let the tears fall and fall without a care of who saw them. I didn't sob or heave or make any movements. I just sat there staring at the white girl coloring happily and cried.

Maybe it was Fencer's sigh in the principal's office yesterday, the suspension note in my student file, and the fact that Ayaan hadn't replied to any of my messages before I'd left home this afternoon.

Maybe it was imagining Hateful Woman enjoying first class, getting rewarded for her rudeness to me.