



Hani
and
Ishu's
guide
to
Fake
dating







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ADIBA JAIGIRDAR





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To all the Bengali kids who grew up never seeing a
reflection of themselves



content warnings:

This book contains instances of racism, homophobia
(specifically biphobia and lesbophobia), Islamophobia, toxic
friendship, gaslighting, and parental abandonment.







chapter one

ishu

I'M WRAPPED UP IN BIOLOGY HOMEWORK WHEN MY phone buzzes. Once, twice, three times before swiftly buzzing off the corner of my desk and into my bin.

“What the fuck?” I mumble to the air, shutting my biology book with a thud and diving into the bin full of nothing but used makeup wipes and torn-up pieces of paper. I didn't know that my phone was a) that desperate to be trash and b) that sensitive to receiving texts.

To be fair, getting texts is not really something that I'm accustomed to, so I guess my phone isn't either. It is, after all, a cheap three-year-old thing that takes at least a whole minute to load anything up anymore.

The phone is still vibrating when I finally find it. This time, with a call, of all things.

I don't remember the last time I received a call. It was probably from Ammu or Abbu calling to let me know they would be home late or something. This time, though, the phone screen is flashing my older sister's name: Nikhita.





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“Nik?”

“Ishu, thank God!” Nik’s voice sounds so weird over the phone—way higher than I remember it to be. Maybe it’s just been that long since I spoke to her. She left two years ago to study at University College London, of all places. Talk about setting the bar high.

Nik has been back exactly once since she waved goodbye to us at the airport two years ago, for a two-week holiday. She spent the whole time poring over her medical books before swiftly boarding her return flight with bloodshot eyes, looking as if she hadn’t been on a holiday at all. Such is the life of a medical student at UCL. She rarely even calls Ammu and Abbu, but they’re mostly okay with it because Nikhita is making the family proud. She’s making her dreams come true.

“Um, why are you calling?” I only register that it’s kind of a rude question when the words are already out of my mouth. The thing is, Nik never calls me. In all our years of being sisters, I’m pretty sure she has never called me once. She only occasionally texts me on WhatsApp when Ammu and Abbu aren’t available, to ask when they will be available. Never to have a chat with me, or to check up on me.

“God, Ishu, I can’t just call my little sis? Why did it take you so long to pick up?” Her voice comes across as frustrated, but I can sense something else there too. Some kind of nervousness that she’s trying to hide. What does perfect Nikhita have to be nervous about?

“I was studying. Leaving Cert coming up, you know?” She





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can't have already forgotten about the state exams that decide what universities we get into.

"Oh, ha. Yeah, the Leaving Cert. Wow, I remember those days. Wish I could go back to that." She wants to sound biting and sarcastic, I can tell. But it comes across flat. Like her heart is not quite in it. "So, um. Are Ammu and Abbu in yet?"

There it is.

"Um, yeah, I'm pretty sure they are." I turn in my chair to face the window—it's already pitch black outside. I was so absorbed in my work I didn't realize that it's well into the evening. The clock hanging up on my wall reads 8:33 p.m. "They're downstairs, watching something on TV, I think." I can hear the low hum of the television, the words of a Hindi natok floating up through the small crack in my bedroom door.

"Cool, cool. Well, listen. I really need you to do me a favor, okay?"

I sit up straight. A favor is definitely a first. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to respond to that. Should I demand she tell me what it is before agreeing to it? Should I demand a favor in return? Before I've made up my mind, Nik has already launched into what she needs from me.

"Basically, I'm coming back home for a few days to surprise Ammu and Abbu. But I left my keys with them last time I visited, so I just need you to let me into the house tomorrow after school. You can do that, right?"

"You're surprising Ammu and Abbu?" I can't wrap my head around the word "surprise." You don't "surprise" Bengali





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parents unless you want a thappor to your face. Not that Ammu and Abbu are the kind of people to go around giving thappors willy nilly—or ever—but still. Surprises and Bengali parents do not go together.

“Don’t say it like that.” Now Nik sounds offended.

“Like what?”

She sighs. “Never mind. Can you just help me, please?”

“You know it’s the middle of the school year, right? Why are you coming tomorrow? Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine,” Nik says in a voice that suggests that everything is definitely not fine. I hope when she’s a doctor she’ll be better at reassuring her patients. “I just haven’t seen you guys in so long, and . . . I have some news. Will you help me or not?”

“Well, I’m hardly going to slam the door in your face.”

I can hear an exasperated breath on the line, as if Nik has been trying really hard to keep her exasperation to herself but I’ve made it impossible. “Okay. Thanks, Ishu. Um. I’ll see you tomorrow, I guess.”

“See you tom—” Nik has already hung up.

I know I should probably worry more about whatever’s going on with Nik, but I figure we’ll deal with it the way we always deal with things—each on our own. My responsibility here is to open the front door and let her in. I can definitely do that.

Plus, I still have an entire chapter of biology I want to make notes on. So, I toss my phone on my bed and flip open my biology book once more, putting Nik out of my mind.





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It's a good thing I spent last night studying because Ms. Taylor springs a surprise test on us as soon as we walk into double biology in the afternoon. Surprise tests are her absolute favorite thing, even when she hasn't actually taught us half the material she's supposed to have covered. At least once a fortnight we start biology class with a test—if not more often. I have a feeling these are about to become even more frequent the closer we get to our Leaving Certificate.

Somehow, my classmates are still surprised by the test. I just roll my eyes, pick up my pen and dig in.

Most of the questions are on the chapters I was making notes of last night, so I'm feeling pretty confident. On the other side of the aisle, Aisling Mahoney is biting her lip so hard that I'm surprised she hasn't drawn blood. When she looks up and catches my eye, she gives me a nasty look. I shoot her a wicked grin in return.

It seems to get under her skin, because she scowls and goes back to her test—which is more blank space than anything else. Maybe if Aisling spent more time paying attention and less time snapchatting in class she would actually know some of these answers.

Humaira comes around to our row at the end of the test, collecting up our papers.



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“How’d you do?” she asks Aisling.

“Bad.” Aisling casts me a glare as if it’s my fault she didn’t do well. “I hate these surprise tests. I can never keep up with biology; there’s way too much to study.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll help you out, yeah? We can go over some stuff during lunch,” Humaira offers with a smile. She’s the only other Brown girl in our class—the only other South Asian girl in our year—and because she’s been in this school for longer than me, sometimes I think people expect me to be exactly like her. But Humaira is the most annoyingly helpful person I’ve ever met, so everyone was a bit disappointed to learn that I’m the most annoyingly unhelpful person they’ll probably ever meet.

“Thanks, Maira.” Aisling flashes her a smile, like it isn’t her own fault for not paying attention, for not studying. I notice my fists are clenched on my desk. I unclench them slowly, trying to rid my body of the tension it has built up in the last few minutes, and open up my biology textbook.

Humaira doesn’t need my help or protection, no matter how much I want to shake her and say *For God’s sake, stop!* She’s way too eager to lend a listening ear, to be the person that everybody goes to for help. She doesn’t see the way they’re leeching her of everything she has and giving back nothing in return. Sometimes I wonder how Humaira has lasted this long. Sometimes I wonder how much longer she’ll be able to last.

But it’s none of my business.



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It's not like Humaira and I are friends.

When I first moved to this school in second year, Humaira was the one tasked to show me around and guide me. I had no doubt it had to do with the fact that we were both Brown girls and everyone assumed that we would get on. But Humaira and I couldn't be more different, even if we are both Bengali.

Humaira shuffles toward me next, surprising me with a smile. "How'd you do, Ishita?" I don't know how she can code switch so effortlessly. Because our parents are Bengali, we have two names—I'm Ishu to family and most Bengalis, and Ishita to everyone else. But Humaira has so many names at this stage that it's difficult to keep them straight.

"Fine, probably." I shrug. If I'm being honest, I'm pretty sure I aced it. Like I've aced every single test since I started at this school—As all around. But Aisling is already glaring daggers at me and she might actually murder me if I don't show at least some humbleness.

"Nice." Humaira sweeps my test away into her bundle.

"How'd you do?" I ask.

She gives me a small smile and taps the side of her nose before moving on to the next row of seats.

I roll my eyes. I'm pretty sure if Aisling had asked, Humaira would have been more than happy to share.

But whatever.

