Dear Reader,

When I think back to my teenage years, the most vivid memories are those of depression. Of the many times I cried myself to sleep, of the self-harm, and the periods of complete numbness. I grew up in a very traditional Bengali Muslim family, similar to that of my character Mehreen. In our culture, there is little understanding of mental illness. I remember assuming I was abnormal, that there was no one who could understand me. It was also around this time that I found YA literature. I grew obsessed with books on the topic of mental health, becoming overwhelmed at the notion that someone understood what was happening; someone felt the same (even if they were fictitious). But I noticed that all the protagonists of these books were white. No one had that extra layer of feeling their culture and religion were at odds with their mental illness. Which is why I wrote *All The Things We Never Said*. I wanted Muslim teens who suffer from depression and anxiety to feel seen, to feel understood, to know they're not alone. It's the book I wish I'd had as a teenager.

It's also a homage to my best friend. Emily and I have been friends since we were twelve, but neither of us knew the other suffered with a mental illness until our twenties. Emily is my support group. I don't know where I'd be without her, without the books I read, without the strangers I've connected with on the Internet who deal with the same problems. Such discussions have been my saviour, and I think the more we talk about mental health, the more we can help those in need.

yasmin

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Please note that this book deals with sensitive issues that some may find triggering. Turn to page 434 for a list of topics included and links to helpful resources.

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To Mum, for just letting me get on with it.

1. MEHREEN

4th April

Bismillah hir- Rahman nir- Rahim . . .
In the name of Allah, the most gracious, the most merciful . . .

I take a deep breath and step onto the prayer mat, ready to start the dawn prayers. As I mutter verses from the Quran under my breath, I lose myself in the rhythm, letting the Arabic flow through me, cleansing me from head to toe. Mum is kneeling on the mat next to mine. As she turns her head to the left, I see she's got a slight smile on her face, a visual expression of the serenity that encapsulates her when she prays. The same sense of serenity I yearn for every time I pray.

My religion has always meant a lot to me. People make fun of how much it dictates my life, but it's the only thing that's kept me going so far. Sometimes, when the Chaos in my brain is so loud that it feels like my head is about to crack open, I *have* actually found some comfort in prayer. Not like a ray of sunshine floating down or anything, but it . . . it soothes me, drowns out the incessant voices in my head – for a while, anyway. I can't really explain it. I guess I'm just a no- questions- asked believer. I believe in God, I believe in heaven, I believe that the afterlife is what we should be preparing for, that it's the only place I'll find true peace.

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Mum finishes her prayers and leaves the room, but I stay kneeling on the mat. It's said that dawn is the best time to ask for things, so I start a little personal prayer.

Allah,

I feel like there's something wrong with me: something completely and utterly unfixable. I just want to live a life where I don't keep being overwhelmed by sadness. Where I don't suddenly feel like someone has punched me in the gut and I can't breathe, can't think, can't see – when my head is so crammed with worry that I can't even focus on what I'm doing, who I'm with, or even whether I'm breathing. I'm fed up of feeling like this, of being continuously battered by what I call 'the Chaos'. I want my brain to slow down, to just . . . be normal. I need something to live for, Allah, because right now the only thing keeping me here is you. And I'm starting to feel like that's not enough.

As usual, I find myself so overcome with tears that I can't continue. I curl up on the prayer mat in the foetal position, squeezing my eyes shut, clenching all my muscles, trying to push away the darkness.

'Mehreen! Come down and eat!' My mother's voice is at the pitch that tells me this isn't the first time she's called. When I stand up, my body is stiff and the sun is blazing through the curtains. I wipe my face and compose myself before making my way downstairs.

In the kitchen, Mum is at her position by the sink, furiously scrubbing a pan and talking about some drama involving her family back in Bangladesh, while Dad sits at the head of the table, tapping away on his phone, paying no attention to her whatsoever. The

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Angry Birds theme tune hums quietly around the room. Imran is leaning against the counter near the toaster, also on his phone. I slip into the room, fix myself some cereal and sit down at the other end of the table.

No one looks up.

No one says anything.



I spoon some Shreddies into my mouth, feeling the hard ridges of the cereal poke and prod my cheeks and gums. I chew extra hard, trying to cover up the Chaos that's starting to seep through. The Angry Birds theme changes to the melody of having lost a life; Dad grunts, then lets the phone clatter to the table. Imran laughs as he butters his toast. I watch from the far end of the room as Mum dries her hands and touches Imran on the back to squeeze past him to the cupboard. She pulls out a plate and silently hands it to him. He sighs and drops the toast onto the plate before taking a seat next to Dad, who's picked up his phone again.

'Want me to do it?' Imran asks with his mouth full.

'Almost got it,' Dad mumbles. The lost-a - life tune plays a few seconds later. 'Dammit!'

Imran laughs, snatches the phone and starts tapping away.

Watching the three of them is like watching a totally normal family interacting. It's nothing momentous, what they're doing, but it's the little things that make a family a *proper* family.

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Mum's started chopping some vegetables on the counter. I drop my bowl in the sink, roll up my sleeves and grab the sponge.

'What're those marks on your wrist?' she asks, turning her head to look at me, the knife poised mid- slice. Her eyes are firmly fixed on my wrist.

There's a jolt in my chest. The heart I thought had become stagnant starts up again. Jumps straight into my throat.

This is it.

The moment I've been both dreading and hoping for.

I shake my arm to loosen my sleeve so that it rolls down and covers the scars, but it only slips down a little. My heart is thudding so hard I can feel it against my top.

I stare at her intently, hoping that she'll finally *see* me, that this pressure, this pain, will finally go. When I was a kid, Mum used to be able to fix everything with a few words and a kiss; I've been secretly longing for her to do the same with whatever's happening in my head. But when she does finally make eye contact, nothing happens. There's no love on her face, no concern. Her brow is creased, her posture stiff.

'Did you get them from your bangles?' she asks, her eyes only lingering on my face for a second before returning to her chore. 'I told you to stop wearing such cheap jewellery.'

Of course she doesn't see. She doesn't realise because things like this don't exist for her. In her world, there's only sunshine and

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butterflies. No one ever hurts. No one ever feels the need to not exist. Everything is *perfect*.

'It wasn't a bangle,' I whisper, shaking the excess water off my bowl before placing it on the drying rack. I shove my sleeves down.

'Bangle, bracelet, same thing,' she says, chopping in Morse code. 'Why don't you use all that time you spend in your room to find a job instead? That way you could afford things that don't ruin your body.'

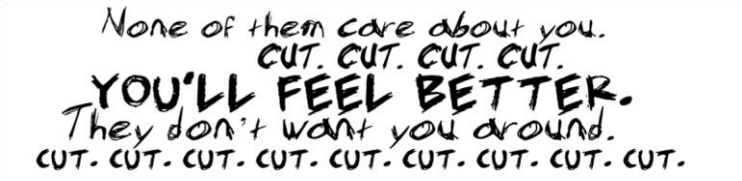
I stare at the knife as it moves up and down between her fingers, willing it to slip, wishing it were my skin beneath it.

'Who'd want to hire her?' Imran laughs from the table, his eyes still glued to Dad's phone. 'It's not like she's actually good at anything. Besides being a loser.'

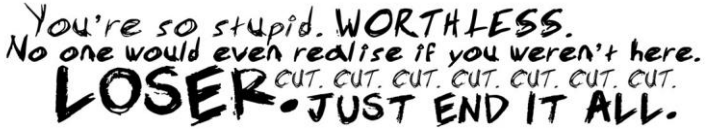
I get that urge rushing through my body, that tight constriction in the middle of my chest, my wrists beginning to itch. There's already an image in my head of the trail of red, the sense of relief I'll achieve. I wrap my fingers around my wrist and squeeze.

Dad's phone lets out an upbeat melody and he whoops, patting Imran on the shoulder as he takes his phone to start the next level. Imran sits back in his chair, looking smug. His gaze moves to me, but before he can even start his next insult, I'm out of the room, up the stairs, slamming my bedroom door.

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The need to cut is a physical thing. My wrists pulse, my heart races, my nails dig into my palms to try to quell the rage within me. But that's never enough. I'm not strong enough to resist. Weak and pathetic, that's me all over. Every time I do it, I hate myself, literally *hate* myself for doing that to my body. But once the thought enters my mind, there's no other way to get rid of it. So I kneel on the floor and take out the craft knife that's hiding under my mattress, like the loser I am.



When I'm done and have tidied everything up, I log on to my laptop, feeling completely spent. Cutting usually makes the Chaos quieten down for a bit; it's one of the only times I can actually think clearly.

I load up the website I haven't been able to get out of my head since I stumbled across it a few weeks ago. MementoMori.com – a website with a simple message on the homepage.

Fill out a questionnaire to be matched with a suicide partner and have a pact tailored to your needs.

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It's like something clicked into place when I found this site. As if it had appeared to me as a sign. I've been thinking about suicide a *lot* recently, but I've also always felt that it was out of my reach. I may not be the best Muslim, but I know that suicide is a sin, that I'll regret it in the afterlife. The thing I crave most goes against my core beliefs. And as much as I try, I can't change my stance on that. But when I found MementoMori, I realised maybe there was a way out. What I needed was someone else to take away the guilt, take the blame. If I were to join MementoMori, then I wouldn't be the one responsible.

I've been visiting the website on a daily basis ever since. I downloaded the information pack, and have read through the questionnaire hundreds of times. I have my answers written, ready to be uploaded and submitted, ready for me to get this process started, to make it inevitable.

1. Full name
2. Age
3. Location
4. *Why do you want to die?*

It seems simple enough. Everyone should have a reason for wanting to die – otherwise why do it? But I haven't just got divorced, or lost a kid. I'm not being bullied and I'm definitely not pregnant. So why? Why do I feel like this? I've tried to answer the question so many times, but I can't get it to come out right. My words always sound whiny; I fear the matchmakers will read it and decide that I should just stick it out and wait for life to get better. And there's no way I can do that. So instead I delete the story I'd

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written about how I feel like I don't belong, how I feel invisible and inconsequential. I jab the backspace button on my laptop as hard as I can until the slate is blank once more. I decide that a shorter answer is probably better, and realise that my problems can be summed up in one simple sentence:

I can't handle the pain of being alive any more.

My wrist is pulsing again, my vision blurry from my tears. I hear Mum's laughter float up the stairs and think about her detached reaction to my scars. Without even rereading the rest of my answers, I upload my questionnaire to the website, click the box to accept their terms and conditions and press the submit button before the doubts can creep back in.

2. CARA

You'd think Mum would just go shopping without me, or leave me outside with the dogs on their leads. (I told her I could make a sign that says 'Hungry Disabled Orphan' and make a few quid, but she just rolled her eyes.) For some reason though, she forces me to go in every time, which means I have to be around other people. And I fucking hate other people.

I feel like a bloke being dragged clothes shopping by his girlfriend, having to wait outside the dressing room in that little space saved for men. Unfortunately there's no space reserved for people in wheelchairs. Most of the time there's barely enough room for me to go up the aisles. More than once I've knocked over a

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whole bunch of clothes, the fabric becoming trapped in my chair as I tried to escape.

'I need to grab that biology textbook for you,' Mum says as we leave yet another shop. 'We're starting digestion after the Easter hols, and I need to brush up on it myself before trying to teach you it.' I say nothing.

'I saw this experiment idea on one of those home-s chooling forums. We just need to get some baking soda and . . .'

I stop listening. Her yapping gets really fucking annoying after a while. She thinks that by talking to me all the time she'll make me . . . not depressed or something. It's why she's always dragging me out, as if misery is stuck inside our house.

The sky is so dark it looks like it's about to start pissing it down again. I'm surprised Mum isn't already holding an umbrella over me. I keep my eyes straight ahead as I move towards the crossing. I can tell everyone who passes by is eyeballing me, whether it's a quick maybe-s he- didn't- notice- me look or the braver I'll- stare- as- long- and- hard- as- I- want- to look that mostly comes from old women or little kids too young to be embarrassed. At the traffic lights, I reach out to push the button for the crossing, but a chubby woman with a dog gets there first.

'I'll get that for ya, darlin',' she says, practically shoving me out of the way.

She looks right at me as she presses the button, her eyes skimming over my face, over my wheelchair, settling on my body as she tries to diagnose me, tries to piece together my story.

I turn away, wishing she'd disappear, that her yappy fluffball would eat her up or at least bite her on the ankle so she'll stop giving me the pity face. She stands silently and I know she's

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waiting for me to thank her. For me to act like the damsel in distress I so obviously am.

I've mostly learned to tune people out. Learned not to bother putting up a fight. Stopped trying to make them see that while I might not be able to use my legs any more, I still have a functioning brain. That I'm still a person.

Or maybe I'm not. Maybe I'm only half a human now. (Paraplegic humour, get it?)

I ignore the woman and look straight ahead, wishing I had the courage to move forward right now, straight into the middle of the busy road.

But that wouldn't work; what kind of monster doesn't do an emergency stop for a cripple?

The woman's hovering so close I can smell the vinegar- laden chips she just ate. Her dog sniffs at my ankle, then the right wheel. He lifts his leg.

'Michael, no!' She tugs on the lead and jerks the dog back before he actually manages to piss. He whimpers. 'I'm so sorry!' she says. To Mum, not me. 'He's just a bit . . . over- friendly sometimes.'

'Oh, it's no problem,' Mum says. 'He's a cutie. What breed?'

Vinegar Lady launches into a full- blown conversation about her rat of a dog who's now sniffing at my feet again. I zone out, just listening to the slosh of the tyres on the wet road, the clatter as they go over grates. Wondering what it'd sound like if a car rammed into my chair.

Then Vinegar Lady is whispering, and I know she's talking about me. My disability. You'd think she'd be more subtle,

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especially since I'm right in fucking front of her. Of course Mum doesn't hesitate to give out the gory details.

'. . . car accident ten months ago . . .'

I try to block it out, block her voice out, block the whole world out, focus just on the pedestrian-c rossing light. Why the hell hasn't it turned green yet?

'. . . paralysed from the waist down . . .'

The dog coughs or sneezes or farts by my feet and I look down at it. He's still sniffing around, nudging my loose shoelace with his nose. I tell my feet to give him a little kick, but of course they don't listen. He raises his leg again and starts pissing all over my white Converse.

I shoot forward, away from the pissing dog, away from my mother who can't stop talking about me as if I'm invisible, away from the stranger who thinks she has a right to know everything about me.

I'm on the road now and my heart's hammering, the adrenaline pumping. Cars roar around me and I know one's coming, closer closer closer.

Brakes screech. I wait for Mum to shout, to come running after me, but none of that happens. Am I already gone?

I look to the right and the car is still. The people inside it are still.

It's silent.

And then . . .

BEEPbeepBEEPbeepBEEP.

The pedestrian light has turned green.

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When we get home, Mum unloads the shopping while I throw my shoes away. She has to make three trips because she refuses to use the handles on my wheelchair to hang stuff, like I keep suggesting. I told her she could even put stuff on my lap and use me as a trolley, but she just rolled her eyes again. Not one for disability humour, my mother. My therapist, Dr Sterp, says jokes are a coping mechanism a lot of paraplegics adopt. I almost told him that a better coping mechanism would be death.

Almost.

I'm not an idiot; I know he'd tell Mum right away if I said anything suspicious. Lately our sessions have been filled with him talking about all these *inspirational* wheelchair users and me replying with light- bulb jokes.

'What about Jess Stretton?' he'll say. 'Won gold at archery at the Paralympics when she was your age.'

'How many actors does it take to change a light bulb?' I'll ask.

'She even has an MBE,' he'll say, ignoring me.

'One,' I'll say, ignoring him right back. 'They don't like to share the limelight.'

And so on until I run out of jokes or he runs out of examples.

There's no point trying to tell him that maybe I'm not as good a person as these celebrities. Maybe I'm not destined for great things. Maybe that accident should've been the end of me. He wouldn't understand. No one does.

Mum falls asleep on the sofa halfway through *EastEnders*, head flopping to the left, a line of drool down her chin. I listen to her snore for five minutes before deciding it's safe to make my escape.

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Being with her all day is harder than you'd think; she's like a toddler bursting with energy, trying to get me to play when it's literally the last thing I want to do. I've probably got a half- hour, if I'm lucky, before she wakes up and freaks out that I'm not right by her side.

I go to the bathroom. One of the *many* things people take for granted is just dropping their pants and pissing. I position myself near the toilet and lock my wheels. After moving myself to the edge of my chair, I reach out and place one hand on the toilet seat while keeping the other on my armrest. Then I push myself up and try to pivot my body over onto the toilet seat. My palm slips and I lose my balance, knocking my elbow against the toilet as I tumble down. My cheek slaps against the tiled floor as I land with a thud.

'Shit!' is all I manage to say as the pain shoots through my body. I try to sit up, to roll myself into a more comfortable position, but there's no such thing, just stinging pain all over. All I can do is lie here, waiting for Mum to wake up. For her to pick me up, place me in the tub and clean up the piss that's beginning to pool under my body. Fucking kill me now.

'Are you sure you don't need anything else?' Mum asks, covering me with the duvet, as if my arms don't work either.

I snatch the material out of her hand. 'I'm *fine*. I just want to sleep.' The soap on my skin reeks of incompetence.

She looks at me for a few seconds before patting my hand and standing up. 'OK, well, shout if you need anything.' She turns the light off and hovers until I settle down under the duvet, wrapping it around myself and closing my eyes.

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I force my tears back inside and wait until she goes off towards the living room. As soon as I hear the TV turn on, I grab my laptop from the bedside table. The sudden brightness of my screen makes my eyes burn and the tears start coming. Pouring, gushing, burning, weak tears. I pull the duvet over myself so Mum doesn't hear me sniffling.

I wipe my nose with the back of my hand and google 'find a suicide partner'. The screen is filled with news articles about dead people and blogs trying to convince me that 'suicide isn't the solution'. The phone number of a charity pops up at the top. As if the Samaritans would understand what I'm going through. I scroll through a few pages of the search results until I find a forum filled with posts from people like me. I read a few of the messages, my tears falling faster and harder when I find one from someone else in a wheelchair.

Amy123: Sun Jan 22 15:53:50
Hi. Looking to die asap. Need someone with a foolproof plan. I can't deal with being in this wheelchair any more. I'm just a burden to everyone and they're better off without me.

I click to reply, but then realise the post is from months ago. Amy123 is probably dead by now. I think about posting my own message, but judging by how few people have replied to previous threads, there's no point. I need a website that's fast and reliable. I go back to the search results and keep scrolling and clicking, to the pages no one ever bothers going down to. I find a website called MementoMori.com. The description reads: *'Fill out a*

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questionnaire to be matched with a suicide partner and have a pact tailored to your needs.'

A matchmaking service for suicide partners? PERFECT!

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