THIS is HOW you FALL in LOVE

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For Dadu, whose stories guided me through
the darkness of the night

1

'Yo, does this chat-up line work, do you think?' Adnan asks, tossing his phone on my bed and interrupting my blissful reading of a juicy new romance in which the main character and the love interest arrive at a remote cabin only to discover that the last room available has one bed.

Knowing he won't give up, I put the book aside and look at the screen. I immediately shake my head at his message: *Have you been covered in bees lately? I just assumed, because you look sweeter than mishti.*

'You know, I can't stand you.'

'And I you, Z,' he responds with ease.

'She's not going to get it and you know that.'

'Why do you say that?'

I tap onto her profile picture on Instagram, reminding myself of who the girl in question is. 'Because she's as white as sugar?'

'Don't judge, Z. She might have some knowledge about Desi culture.'

Somehow, I'm doubtful. But I'll let Adnan stay in dreamland for a little bit longer if it makes him happy. And nothing makes Adnan happier than flirting.

Being such a good friend, all I want is for him to find his happily ever after. Even if he is stupid and only meets girls by sliding into their DMs – I mean, *come on*, show a little imagination. Forbidden love or an enemies-to-lovers arc would be so much more fun. And don't even get me started on a second-chance romance!

'Anyway, I thought you were talking to that new girl at sixth form, Camilla. What happened to her?' I swipe out of his DMs and look up Camilla's profile, lazily scrolling through her latest pictures, when I notice that Adnan hasn't liked a single post. 'Playing hard to get, are we?'

'Don't like anything, Z,' Adnan warns, his Adam's apple bobbing in fear as he prepares to lunge at me if I even consider hovering my thumb over the heart icon.

Seeing how desperate he is, I put him out of his misery and toss him his phone back.

He grabs it mid-air, double-checking that I haven't accidentally liked any photos.

'So,' I press, curious as to why he's so tight-lipped, 'what happened with her?'

He shrugs. 'Nothing happened. That's the problem.'

'What do you mean, nothing happened?' I ask with a raised brow, because something *always* happens with Adnan and the girls he talks to. I don't know how he does it, but he's got some serious game, especially in comparison to me. I mean, you'd think that as someone who practically

lives and breathes romance in any available format I'd stand a chance in the love department, but that would be a big fat nope.

'I'm telling you: nothing's happened,' he says with a deep sigh. 'Cami is a reserved person – I knew that from when we first started talking, but I thought . . . I don't know, maybe I could get her to lower her walls or something.'

Even though I feel bad for him – I can see the disappointment clouding his eyes – I can't help but break out into a sly smile.

'What?' he asks, already rolling his eyes. 'Scratch that. I don't even want to know –'

'You called her C*ami*,' I say, ignoring him. 'You never give girls nicknames.'

'So?'

I poke him in the shoulder like an annoying child. 'You *liiike* her.'

'Shut up,' he groans, but the grin on his face confirms my suspicions.

To be fair, I always knew he liked her; that Camilla – or, sorry, C*ami* – was going to be different from all the other girls he's dated since she joined our sixth form. The first clue was the fact that Adnan *never* asks me to help him with girls. He really doesn't need it, despite his awful chat. Not with the cool-guy persona that he's perfected over the years, his lean yet muscular build and his fashion sense – a mix between preppy and street. It also helps that he's got eyelashes and hair that girls can't help but envy.

OK, *I* can't help but envy. It's seriously not fair. My lashes are never long enough to flutter wildly at people, and my hair, although straight and silky, has absolutely no life to it.

'You're thinking about my fabulous hair and eyelashes, aren't you?' Adnan asks. 'You're doing that thing again with your face.' He replicates my facial expression by furrowing his brows so hard he has to massage his temples – which is exactly what I did only ten seconds ago.

'Shut up,' I say and throw a worn paperback off the stack on my bedside table at him, which he expertly ducks and instead I nearly knock the framed photo of me, Baba and Ma off my desk. 'Oops.'

'Zara!' Ma suddenly calls from downstairs.

'Ma!' I call back.

'Dinner's ready!'

'OK, coming!'

'You guys really need walkie-talkies or something,' Adnan notes as I slide into my slippers.

When we get downstairs, the table is set for a feast rather than a quiet dinner for six. Somaiya Auntie, Adnan's mum, and Ma finish up with making the salad as Adnan and I take our seats, practically banging our cutlery on the table in anticipation of food. Sumon Uncle, Adnan's dad, pours himself a glass of ayran and winks at me as he does so, and I can't help but shake my head at him.

'What have you kids been up to, then?' Uncle asks as he takes his first sip of the yogurt drink, his expression gleeful.

'Adnan's been trying to come up with pick-up lines for

the past hour, but they've all been crap,' I reply for us. 'It's no wonder he's single.'

'I thought the mishti one was pretty good, you know.'

'It really wasn't.'

Adnan flicks me in the temple, and I retaliate by twisting his nipple.

Uncle looks at us with a glint in his eye – one I know far too well after having Sunday dinner with him for as long as I can remember. 'I don't think my son's relationship status is the way it is because of his chat-up lines, Zara. You know, it would be so much easier if you two would just get together already. Everyone can see you're meant to be.'

'I agree!' both our mums shout as they bring out two different types of salad to the table: one with Naga Morich and one without for Adnan, who can barely even inhale the scent of chilli without having a coughing fit. Even now, as Ma places the bowl meant for everyone but Adnan at the other end of the table, I can see Adnan eyeing it up like it's his mortal enemy.

'Would it really be so difficult for you two to at least *try* to date?' Ma asks as she takes her seat next to me.

Adnan and I share a glance, already thinking the exact same thing: why can't our parents be like other Desi parents? Because our parents are absolutely *not* like your typical Desi parents. They're never uber-strict and never forbid me from dating before marriage like you hear some South Asian parents doing. But perhaps that's because of the distance from their own parents and how hard they

fought against the stereotypes society placed on them as soon as they set foot on British soil.

Which, I can admit, is incredibly admirable, but also incredibly frustrating considering it means they are sometimes *overly* involved in my love life. In particular, the one that doesn't exist – nor will *ever* exist – between me and Adnan.

'Sumon!' Like a blessing in disguise, Somaiya Auntie disrupts my train of thought and steers the conversation elsewhere. She has the palm of her hand to her forehead and is trying to grab the glass of ayran from Uncle. 'You can't drink that!'

Uncle only recently found out he's lactose intolerant and you'd think, from the way he's been crying about it for the past two weeks, that he was grieving a person instead of a type of sugar.

'I need it!' He dodges her attempts at grabbing the glass by chugging it all down in one go, much to Auntie's dismay.

'Don't you come crying to me when your stomach hurts, you hear me?' Auntie is wagging her finger in the air like a typical Desi mum and, in solidarity, so do Adnan and I.

'Farah?' Baba shouts Ma's name as he comes through the front door.

'Arman?' she shouts back, her voice echoing off the walls and practically shaking the wooden ornaments hanging off them.

'Walkie-talkies,' Adnan whispers in my ear. 'Seriously. I fear for your family's vocal health.'

'Sorry I'm late.' Baba kisses my head and Ma's cheek

before sitting down next to her. For a second, Baba frowns as he takes in the abundance of food in front of us, but then he dives into a story about a young woman who was picking up her prescription at the pharmacy where he works.

'. . . And then I noticed this thing on her wrist. It was a birth control ring,' he says, shaking his head. 'She thought that was how it was meant to be worn! But you know the best part?'

'What?' we ask in unison, wondering how the heck it can get better than this.

'She came back a few minutes later with a pregnancy test and said, "I think I might be needing this."'

A deep, rumbling laughter fills the room. By the time my stomach stops hurting, Baba repeats, 'Pregnancy test!' and gets me going all over again.

'We shouldn't laugh,' Ma says, trying to be serious but unable to stop another giggle escaping. 'Poor girl, her parents mustn't have been very open with her if she doesn't know how to use contraceptives.'

She clears her throat in an attempt to change the subject before we all start laughing again. 'Does anybody want cha and mishti?'

We all nod our heads except for Baba, who looks like he's got a stick up his bum.

'Arman?' Ma prods as she fills up the pot and places it on the stove.

'No mishti, but cha, please.' He smiles but it's stiff and unlike him. It's only a few seconds later that we understand why. 'But not doodh cha. And without sugar, please.

Turns out I'm diabetic,' he says, his voice even, like he's not dropping a bomb on us.

'Ki?' Ma shrieks at the same time as I say, 'You're kidding?'

'I'm not kidding.'

'What do you mean, you're diabetic?' Ma abandons the pot, spurring Auntie to take the lead on our beverages instead.

'I'm absolutely fine, I promise.'

'What did the doctor say?'

'Farah?' Somaiya Auntie interrupts. 'I think there's something wrong with your stovetop. The gas isn't lighting.'

But Ma doesn't respond to Somaiya Auntie's concern. She's glaring at Baba. 'I didn't know you'd been to the doctor.'

'I didn't want to worry you.'

'You didn't want to *worry* me?' Ma asks the question like she can't believe the words that have left her husband's mouth. Adnan, Uncle and I watch the back and forth between my parents like it's a tennis match while Auntie keeps fiddling with the stove.

'It's making a hissing sound, Farah, and it's not even on yet.' The pitch in Auntie's voice increases and when I turn to look at her, I see that there are beads of sweat on her forehead.

'Let me help, Auntie,' I say, getting up from the table. As I'm about to turn the knob, Ma's and Baba's yelling becomes louder.

'How could you keep this from me?'

‘I wanted to protect you!’

‘Protect me? How was lying to me protecting me?’

‘I wasn’t lying!’

‘But you were withholding!’

I look over my shoulder at my parents. I’ve never seen them behave this way before. Adnan catches my eye, a tight-lipped look on his face.

‘Farah, please, you need to –’

‘I need to what? Keep listening to your lies?’ Ma shakes her head. ‘No, I’ve heard enou—’

‘Farah, I think the sto—’ Auntie interjects at the same time as Uncle says, ‘I need the toilet. I think the ayran is ready to make its appearance.’

But their voices are drowned out by my parents’ yelling, nothing able to get through to them.

And then the stove explodes.