

PART 3

YEAR 11: SPRING TERM
FALSTRUM ACADEMY

CHAPTER 9

'Wake up, Muzna!' Ami cried brightly, fluttering round the room like an insanely cheerful canary. 'Wake, oh wake, oh wake!'

She tickled my palm like sweet torture. I hid it under the covers. So she tickled my ribs instead. I groaned, desperate for more sleep. But one glimpse at the clothes Ami had laid out for me was enough to wake the dead.

No way was I going to school in a hot-pink shalwar kameez.

Once I'd finished in the bathroom, I fished out a pair of jeans that didn't make my bum look big (not easy), and paired them up with a slouchy red hoody. The only make-up I ever wore was spot-control related. That, and a sneaky bit of eyeliner.

'I want you in the car in fifteen minutes,' Dad said, pointing at his watch.

'Mmmf!' I agreed, guzzling down my Coco Pops at the kitchen table.

Ami made a face. 'Oh-ho! I ironed your pretty pink suit, and you wear this English rubbish?!'

For once Dad came to my rescue. 'Parveen, she's going to school not a *mela*. I don't want her catching young boys' eyes with that alluring suit.'

Blinding them, more like, I thought. I wished my parents would just trust me to uphold the morals I'd been brought up with. But since Salma-gate, trust was in short supply.

Oh Ami and Dad, I thought ruefully, *don't you realize my face is all the contraception I'm ever gonna need?*

Falstrum was shiny and new. Four years ago the academy had been funded by the National Lottery to be renovated and updated. I was going to a school that gambling had paid for. Maybe they'd have extra classes to teach me how to be a croupier.

The school complex was made up of five gigantic tomb-like buildings. They were called things like 'Building A' and 'Building B'. If I'd been in charge, I would've given them dope names and added a splash of colour. After all, wasn't learning supposed to be fun?

Me and Dad followed the bold signs round to reception, and after an extended goodbye that was straight out of a Bollywood weepy, I waited nervously in reception for a student to take me up to my new form room.

Be cool, I told myself, like some bargain-basement life coach. Things sucked at Rigsby because you let them. This is your last chance to shine. Use everything Salma taught you. Use the friggin' Force, if you have to. But BE COOL.

'Hi! My name's Amie,' announced a girl, making me jump. She wore her rust-coloured hair in a tight bun. Beneath her maroon blazer was a slate-grey uniform. The school crest was a stag leaping in front of a flaming torch. 'What's yours?'

'Muzna,' I said, trying to smile, only my lips kept twitching. God I hoped I wasn't having a stroke.

Be cool! Be cool! Be cool!

'That's a nice name,' she said, checking out the timetable I'd been given by the receptionist. 'Used to go out with a bloke called Mustafa.'

A Muslim boy? 'What happened?' I asked, biting my lip.

Her forehead creased. 'Huh? Oh, you mean with Mustafa! Er, nothing really. We just sorta drifted apart.' She gave me a naughty wink. 'He had a really big one, though!'

I covered my mouth and giggled.

'Is that why you dumped him?' I ventured.

'No, you dirty cow!' she shrieked, cackling with laughter. 'Some of his habits were bare nasty. I'm not even lying! Listen to this, yeah! He used to pick his nose, then try touching me with the *same finger*.'

'Who does that?' I asked with gleeful disgust.

'I know, right?' she said, swatting my arm gratefully. 'I weren't having none of it, so I dumped him!'

I nodded, imagining what it might be like to have a boyfriend – even a gross one. Then I remembered Salma's boyfriend and how that had worked out for her. Fantasy over.

'There you go.' Amie pointed to a classroom. 'You've got Dunthorpe as your tutor. He's, like, so friggin' amazin'! Come on, I'll introduce you and stuff.'

I needed to take a moment to figure out how New Muzna was going to act, but Amie had already thrown open the door. Conversations evaporated, and everyone turned to stare at me. I sank deeper inside my hood.

'Why's everyone gone quiet?' some wise guy asked, getting a round of laughs.

'Hello, you must be Muzna Saleem!' said my new tutor, a guy in his thirties. Argyle tank, nerd glasses and wavy, sandy-blond hair – he was working the geek-chic look like nobody's business. 'My name's Mr Dunthorpe. Nice to meet you.'

'Hey,' I said, with the charisma of a wet sponge. I cursed Amie for not giving me time to get into character.

'Oh Lord, it's a terrorist!' bellowed a large mixed-race girl in the front row.

BE COOL switched to *DON'T CRY*.

'Sade!' Mr Dunthorpe snapped.

'Well make it take its hood off, then!' Sade said, flapping a

hand at me. 'How'm I supposed to know it ain't Anjem Choudary under there?'

'You need to shut your face!' growled a boy by the window. Kicking back in a black hoody, manspreading with the latest Nikes, you could just smell the 'Rude *Boi*' vibes coming off him. I glanced up at his face.

OH. MY. GAWD.

He looked like a marble statue from the V&A. You know the type: angular brow, dominant nose, noble cheekbones. His hair was so intensely black, and his complexion seemed to glow. The goatee hugging his square chin killed it. One hundred and ten per cent Guy Candy.

Sade glowered, but the look in her eyes told a story of fear. 'Wish you'd never come to this school,' she grumbled.

'Aw, but Arif's so *beautiful!*' squealed a girl in the back row.

'Beautiful terrorist, more like . . .' muttered Sade, though I don't think anyone else heard.

'I'd do him,' volunteered another girl, setting off a wave of sniggering.

Arif stayed focused on Sade, turning his death-glare up to a solid ten.

'Sade and Arif, you both have ten-minute detentions with me at break-time,' Mr Dunthorpe announced, his green eyes suddenly piercing. 'Everyone else, be quiet.'

'Sorry, sir,' the hot boy said, looking like a naughty puppy. 'My third day at Falstrum, right?' (Which explained the lack of uniform.) 'Definitely not looking for trouble, me. But Sade's got no right to bully the new girl, innit?'

'We'll discuss it at break,' Mr Dunthorpe said firmly. 'Now Sade, apologize to Muzna so we can get on with the day.'

'For what?' she boomed.

He ignored her question. 'Quickly, please.'

‘Sor-ree!’ she said, glaring at me. ‘Not sorry.’ she muttered under her breath.

My tutor turned to me with a smile. ‘Muzna, I’m afraid I *am* going to have to ask you to remove the hood, please. It’s school rules here at Falstrum.’

Oh God, how I wished I’d entered the room with my hood down in the first place. I felt like a bride at a wedding – one with a Halloween surprise lurking beneath her veil. And for some mad reason, the fear of disappointing Arif made me feel like I was going to puke.

I ripped the hood off like a plaster. Twenty-two pairs of judgemental eyes gave me epic vertigo. ‘Hey, guys!’ I said, giving a cheerful little wave.

‘Hey, guys!’ mimicked a boy with Justin Bieber’s old hairstyle.

‘Afraid you’ll be seeing an awful lot of me, since I’m also going to be your English teacher,’ my new tutor said. ‘Congratulations! You’ll be in Set One.’

As the teacher of the subject I cared about most, I was going to make it my mission to impress him. Download one of those word-of-the-day apps, devour past papers, read an intimidating classic like *War and Peace* or *Anna Karenina*. Whatever it took, I was on it.

The pips sounded, signalling the end of registration.

‘Sarabi, could you join us here for a minute, please,’ Mr Dunthorpe said.

A petite Asian girl with a mile-long plait walked over, ignoring the taunts from Sade telling her to run for her life.

‘Could I get you to look after Muzna for a week? Do a good job, and I’ll stick a whole load of achievement points on SIMs for you.’

‘It’s fine, sir,’ Sarabi said, giving Mr Dunthorpe a really pretty smile. ‘I’ll show her the ropes.’

'OK, Muzna? And I want to apologize again for Sade's poor behaviour. If anybody upsets you, please inform me right away. We operate a zero-tolerance bullying policy at Falstrum.'

I nodded, though honestly I wanted to forget the whole thing. It wasn't the first time I'd had the T-word flung at me. But what it had done was make me drop my New Muzna persona. If I didn't want to end up as Doormat Muzna, I couldn't afford for it to happen again.

'Have a great day, girls!' Mr Dunthorpe said, waving like an overenthusiastic kid.

'He seems friendly,' I said, as Sarabi walked me to my first class.

The corridors were wider than they'd been at Rigsby. Less pushing and shoving had to be part of the reason the kids were behaving better. Then there were the uniforms. Nobody seemed to be pushing it – no mini ties, no rolled-up skirts. And when I spotted a boy holding a door open for a teacher, I felt like I'd died and gone to grammar school.

'Trust me: the word you're looking for is "awesome",' Sarabi said – the second person to describe Mr Dunthorpe that way.

'Actually it's "porn star",' interrupted a boy, casually slipping arms around us. The stench of BO and Lynx were toxic.

Sarabi brushed him off with a glare.

'What?' he asked, all innocence. 'Don't pretend like you ain't seen Dunthorpe doin' his ting on the internet!' He thrust his pelvis a few times, sniggered, then spotted someone else to torment, and was off like a bullet. I imagined cartoon clouds of dust trailing him.

'Are all the boys here like that?' I asked, trying to pick Arif out of the steady stream of students.

'Aren't they everywhere?' Sarabi retorted.

'High-five!' I said laughing.

But even as we clapped hands, something told me *Arif* was different. Aside from the fact he looked more sixth form than Year 11 (and let's not forget *drop-dead gorgeous*), he had stuck up for a complete nobody and ended up in detention for his troubles. That was the mark of a true hero.