





## To my mum, for teaching me to meditate

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## RADHIKA SANGHANI





## + Chapter 1

Sabina Patel sat on her own in the far corner of the dining hall. In her old school, they'd just called it the canteen, and she used to sit right in the middle of its plastic brightness with her best friends – Harry and Ria – talking non-stop as they shared their packed lunches. Soft white-bread sandwiches from Harry's mum, complicated South Indian food from Ria's dad and whatever new health-food recipe that Sabina's mum had decided to make for dinner the night before. Always eaten in that order, because life – or at least their lunch break – was too short to save the best for last.

But things were very different now that Sabina was at Marlstone Girls' School with its wood-panelled halls and high ceilings. Not only was there absolutely no white bread in sight – the freshly-baked counter only sold sourdough – but Sabina seemed to be the only person who brought packed lunch



(the students who ordered in pizza with their parents' credit cards didn't count). Seeing as she was also just one of five girls of colour in her year – and the only Indian girl – it meant that Sabina stood out a mile off. Especially when she had curry in her lunchbox. It was the complete opposite of her old school, where most people had been from diverse backgrounds, meaning everyone was so different that in the end, nobody stood out at all. But that wasn't the worst thing about MG. The worst was that there was no Harry and there was no Ria.

Sabina had spent the entire summer arguing with her mum about the new school, even making a four-minute video to prove that staying at Hackney High was the most conducive option to her having a successful future. But Sabina's mum had been resolute in her decision: they were moving to a village an entire hour away from London. It would be a brilliant opportunity for the both of them. Her mum was going to achieve her dream of opening a beauty salon (apparently villages had cheaper rent than London) and Sabina would be going to the exclusive girls' grammar school nearby, because there was finally an opening.

It didn't matter to her mum that this meant Sabina would turn up to a brand-new school for the start of Year Eight – a whole year after everyone had already made their friendship groups – or that they'd have to leave the city they'd always lived in for some weird *village*. Sabina had googled it and it didn't even have a train station! Or a Nando's! But all Sabina's



mum cared about was that the new school had an amazing academic record. She was hoping that this would make up for the fact that Sabina came from a single-parent household – something she worried would hold her daughter back, no matter how much Sabina's video had tried to convince her otherwise

It was why Sabina was now sitting alone in MG's overly fancy dining hall, trying to video call Harry and Ria. Exactly like she'd done every single day since she arrived an entire month ago.

She'd always known it would be bad to go to a new school without her best friends – but she hadn't thought it would be this bad. Back at Hackney High, she hadn't been in the most popular crew, but she'd had her best friends, she'd never been picked last for PE, and if Harry and Ria were off sick, she always had other people she could have lunch with. Even though Sabina had been against moving to MG, when her mum had said it was definitely happening, she'd kind of just assumed the same thing would happen there. Part of her a very tiny part that even Harry and Ria didn't know about had secretly hoped that she might even become popular. The kind of popular where everyone would be desperate to hang out with her and she'd walk down the hallways feeling like a celebrity. After all, she was from London - the actual capital city - surely that would make her cooler than these village girls?



It mortified Sabina now to think of just how wrong and naïve she'd been. Her classmates had wanted to know about her life in London – but not life at Hackney High, or the local skate park near Sabina's house, or the falafel place she loved. They'd stared at Sabina blankly when she'd talked about these things, until she'd eventually trailed off, embarrassed. That was when her new classmates had started reeling off lists of cool restaurants and shops they'd visited in London, wanting to know how often Sabina went to them. When it became evident she hadn't even *heard* of them, they'd lost all interest.

Sabina had spent the rest of her first week at MG awkwardly hovering on the edge of conversations as her classmates chattered rapidly about their summer holidays to places she hadn't known existed. She'd always thought she was quite good at geography, but the Hackney High syllabus hadn't included Caribbean islands. The one time she'd worked up the courage to ask where St Lucia actually *was*, they'd all completely ignored her. Sabina had felt so invisible that she'd decided to just accept her status as an outcast and stop trying. It was less painful that way.

Her mum kept telling her things would change with time, but it had been an entire month and Sabina was *still* "the new girl". If it wasn't for her daily calls to Harry and Ria, she'd have no friends at all.

"Look who it is," said Harry, raising his perfectly arched eyebrow as he and Ria finally answered the group call. "Again."



"I've been waiting ages for you guys to answer," complained Sabina, adjusting her headphones.

"Sorry, we only just got out of double maths with Mr Carter," said Ria with an apologetic smile. "And the canteen was packed, so we had to kick some Year Sevens out of our seats."

Sabina sighed longingly. "I miss the word canteen. I even miss double maths with the world's most boring teacher." Her eyes widened as she saw what her friends were eating. "And I *really* miss your mum's sandwiches, Harry. Is that—"

"Egg mayo," he said, his mouth still full. "Your fave. Soz."

"Is that Katniss on the table behind you?" asked Ria. "I still can't believe your school has its own cat – that's so cool!"

Sabina couldn't help smiling. Katniss Evermean was the best thing about MG. She belonged to the headteacher Mr Grant – who had a house next door to the school – and wandered around MG like she owned it. Which she basically did. She was as sassy, spoiled and mean as her name suggested, but it just made everyone love her more. Sabina was slightly in awe of her – this cat had levels of confidence she could only aspire to.

"Who are the girls feeding her?" asked Harry, squinting at the screen. "They've got *style*."

Sabina turned to see the silky black cat with green eyes sprawled out on a table while two girls with perfect make-up and shiny hair hand-fed her sushi, filming the whole thing on



their phones. "The Leeshes, obviously. Remember I told you about them?"

The Leeshes were Alicia Johnson and Felicia James. Like most of the girls at MG, they had names that ended in "ah". But Alicia and Felicia also happened to be the most popular, pretty and privileged girls in Year Eight. They went everywhere together, had the same haircut (Alicia was blond and Felicia was brunette), and both accessorized their navy school uniform with identical overpriced trainers, gold jewellery and acrylic nails – even though anybody else would have got detention for flouting the dress code. They even had the same nickname, calling each other "Leesh", which was why the whole school knew them as the "Leeshes". Though Sabina privately thought of them as the "Leeches" because they were always stuck to each other's sides.

The only apparent difference between the Leeches was that Felicia was in an on-off relationship with Alexis, the best lacrosse player in the year – a weird posh sport that Sabina hated but the entire of MG was obsessed with. While Alicia had a constant stream of boyfriends from Marlstone Boys' School next door. When it came to romance – as with everything else in their lives – the Leeches were always winning.

"Who could forget the *Leeches*?" cried Harry. "Not when they look like that! They're even more perfect than you described!"

"Why are they hanging with Katniss?" asked Ria. "I thought you and her had a special bond. It was so cute when she licked peanut butter off your fingers on your first day!"

"I thought so too," admitted Sabina. "Till I realized she'll hang with anyone who feeds her. And seeing as the Leeches always have the best food, obviously they get Katniss priority. Katniss is amazing, but she's not mine – *everyone* wants to be friends with her."

"Awkward that the cat's more popular than you," said Harry, accurately reading Sabina's thoughts.

"Harry!" admonished Ria. "Have you...made any friends at all yet?"

Sabina shook her head sadly. "Nope. And I'm starting to lose hope I ever will."

"Just give it some time, Sabs," said Ria encouragingly. "Honestly, I can't believe people aren't lining up to be your friend already! I mean, you're really funny. And you're smart! Though you aren't great at physics... But you're generous! Unless it comes to sharing dessert. I still can't believe you made us use a *ruler* to divide your birthday cake."

"That was generous of me!" protested Sabina. "I could have given myself an extra big birthday slice! And I'm not that bad at physics!"

"Ria's right," interrupted Harry. "Just be yourself, and they'll all come running. If they don't, they're the problem, not you."



If only it was that easy. Sabina could be herself with Harry and Ria because they'd been best friends for as long as she could remember. It wasn't so easy with the girls at MG – they were all so different to her with their credit cards and expensive clothes. She already felt like such an alien around them that the thought of being her true self felt completely impossible. Besides, it wasn't like anybody even spoke to her, so she had no idea how she'd ever get the chance to try.

"In fact," continued Harry, "I'm going to end this call right now so you can start the heartbreaking but essential process of replacing us."

"You can't just hang up on her!" hissed Ria. "She's eating alone!"

"And she'll be eating alone for ever if she doesn't make some new friends," retorted Harry. "Which is not going to happen if she keeps video calling us every lunch break!"

"Could you both please stop talking about me like I'm not right here?" asked Sabina. "It's not helping the whole selfconfidence thing."

"Sorry, Sabs. It's only because we love you!" said Ria.

"Exactly," said Harry. "So we're going to love you and leave you. Maybe someone will come say hi to you when we're gone? Update us later. Byeeee!"

"Wait, I—" But the call cut off before Sabina could finish her sentence. She sighed, looking down at her phone. The screensaver was a selfie of her, Harry and Ria from their last school trip to Hackney City Farm. They were all baring their teeth like the goats they'd just seen because Harry had demanded they channel their inner bovids. The photo made Sabina laugh every time she saw it – they were not natural bovids – but right now it was also making her realize she didn't *want* to replace her friends. All she wanted was for things to go back to the way they were.

"He-eeeyy! Cute glasses!" A sing-song voice cut through Sabina's thoughts. She looked up, startled, to see the Leeches beaming at her. Katniss was sitting by their feet, licking her paws and completely ignoring Sabina, even though she'd given her a chunk of tuna the day before.

The Leeches had *never* spoken to Sabina – at least, not since she'd revealed that she hadn't ever shopped in Selfridges. But as she smiled back at them, self-consciously adjusting her plastic tortoiseshell glasses, she wondered if Harry was right and all it took for her to make new friends was to get off the phone to her old ones?

"What's the new girl's name again?" Alicia loud-whispered to Felicia.

Or maybe not.

"Wait, I have it here somewhere," said Felicia, scrolling through her phone. "Oh! Sabrina! Hey, girl!"

"Such a cute name," said Alicia. "So, Sabrina, I wanted to personally tell you I'm running for form prefect, and I'd *love* your vote."

"All the info is here," said Felicia, pressing a flier into Sabina's hand. "But basically, we're focusing on improving recycling, and making the canteen vegan. You're vegan, right, Sabrina?"

"Uh..." Sabina blinked, dazed. This was the longest conversation she'd had with a single person at MG to date – the nurse who'd made her fill out a health form didn't count – and it was with the *Leeches*. The only problem was they were calling her by the wrong name. "I'm not. But also my na—"

"It's, like, way better for the planet," said Felicia. "You should totally consider it. Anyway – vote for Leesh and we'll make MG a better place!"

"Thanks for your vote, Sabrina!" said Alicia, spinning on her heel and automatically linking arms with Felicia, giving Sabina a presidential wave. "Come on, Katniss, let's go for dessert! There's vegan ice cream!" Katniss followed the Leeches without looking back at Sabina.

She stared after the Leeches in angst, knowing if she didn't say anything now, she'd have to spend the rest of her school life being called by the wrong name. She wished Harry and Ria were there to do it for her. But then she glanced down at her phone screensaver and felt a surge of empowerment. She'd do it for herself and make her friends proud!

"Wait!" she cried out. Her voice came out way louder than she expected, and the Leeches turned in surprise. Even Katniss looked affronted. "Um, sorry, it's just that my name's not actually Sabrina," she said haltingly. "It's Sabina. Without the R."

Felicia blinked at her. "Why?"

"Uh...l'm sorry, what?" replied Sabina in confusion.

"Why is there no R in your name?" asked Felicia slowly.

Sabina stared from Felicia's expectant brown eyes to Alicia's matching hazel ones. She'd never had to *explain* her name before – it was just her name! But the Leeches were clearly waiting for an answer, so she tried to supply one. "That's...the way my mum chose it?"

"I totally respect that," said Alicia. "But I think Sabrina sounds cuter, so you don't mind if we call you that, do you?"

Felicia nodded. "I'm never going to remember to drop the R anyway. It's too confusing."

"I mean..." Sabina tried to think of a way to say she very much did mind.

But the Leeches just looped their arms together and beamed at her. "See you later, Sabrina!"

Sabina stared after them, wondering if she'd hallucinated that entire conversation. She couldn't believe that after she'd worked up the courage to correct the Leeches, they were still calling her by the wrong name! Shaking her head, she pulled out her phone to call Harry and Ria again as she walked to maths – they needed to know every sentence of that interaction before she forgot it – and was so engrossed that she didn't notice the girl striding towards her.



"Owww!" yelled Sabina, as she crashed into her.

"You really shouldn't use your phone in the corridor," said a serious voice. It was Faye Collins. The smartest girl in their year and the only other girl of colour in Sabina's form.

"Sorry!" said Sabina, nursing her bruised arm. "Forget dangerous driving – clearly dangerous walking is worse!"

"I doubt it," said Faye, her brown eyes serious. She was black with long braids, glasses similar to Sabina's, and pretty silver hoop earrings in her ears. "The speed of a car would lead to much more damage on impact."

Sabina blinked, wondering why nobody in this school responded like a normal person. But Faye carried on, unperturbed. "I saw you speaking to the Leeshes earlier so I want to say that before you vote for Alicia, you should consider voting for me instead. Her policies aren't based on clear research. Veganism is better for the environment, yes, but what about the fact that the canteen's vegan food comes in plastic? Also, why don't we give our school's leftover food to those in need? These are things I care about – as well as improving diversity."

"You said canteen!" cried Sabina.

Faye looked at her like she was deranged.

"Sorry, it's just...that's what we said in my old school."

"Ri-ight. Well, if you want more info on my policies, you can visit my website – fayecollinsforformprefect.com." She looked down at the piece of paper Sabina was holding.

"Fliers aren't great for the environment."

"Oh, sorry."

"You apologize way too much," remarked Faye. "Anyway, see you around."

Sabina waved awkwardly in response. She couldn't believe she'd spoken to not one, but *three* of her classmates! As much as it annoyed her to admit it, Harry was right. Not being on the phone to her old friends had given her a chance to make new ones. And okay, the Leeches weren't calling her by her actual name, and Faye thought she said sorry too much, but this was still a solid start. If she carried on at this rate, she might have an actual human being to have lunch with by the end of term!