

This book is dedicated to my mother, Neeta Sharma.
Thank you for buying me my first copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, showing me that laughter is the best kind of medicine, and teaching me that kitchen dancing is the only dancing I need. This is what I've been working on instead of getting married and giving you grandchildren.
I think you'll like it.

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MY
SO-CALLED
BOLLYWOOD
LIFE

NISHA
SHARMA

stripes

Three years ago...

MY SO-CALLED BOLLYWOOD LIFE: A BLOG ABOUT THE HINDI-LANGUAGE FILM INDUSTRY

Hello, blogging world! I'm starting high school this fall, where I'll be studying film, and I wanted to document the Bollywood movies that I'll be watching over the next four years. I'll be reviewing both old and new movies, but I'll focus on the New Bollywood era, which is the late '80s through the early 2000s. I love that period in Bollywood cinema.

Anyway.

Each blog entry will be a separate movie review, and because my best friend, Bridget, says she has a hard time keeping track of all the movies I talk about, I'll be translating the titles into English. I know, I know, they shouldn't be translated, but I doubt Bridget will pick up the language until an app offers it for free. (Hey, Bridget ... if I can learn three languages, you can pick up freaking Hindi, dude.)

Reviews are totally my opinion, yada yada yada.

I can't WAIT to share my love of drama with all you guys. I don't have any drama in my own life, so this is the perfect way to get my fix.

From Winnie Mehta's Bollywood Review Blog:

QUEEN

★★★★★

Kangana Ranaut's blockbuster included all the elements needed to create a money-making masterpiece: a strong woman, a stupid man and tons of girl power.

According to Google, a grave was supposed to be six feet deep, but Winnie Mehta didn't want to put that much effort into digging. Besides, it wasn't as if she was dumping an actual body or anything.

She stopped and surveyed the burial site she'd chosen in the woods behind her house. After dragging three boxes and a shovel up the hiking path, Winnie had already built up a layer of sweat, but she had a lot to do before she could go home.

As she marked the hole, her phone began vibrating in her pocket. She sent the call to voice mail when she saw

her best friend's face flash across the screen. That was Bridget's seventh call in the last hour. Winnie wanted—no, *needed*—this moment, in which she stuck it to her stupid destiny, the wasted years she believed in true love, and, most importantly, to Raj, her cheating ex who'd hooked up with someone else while she was away at film camp. There was nothing Bridget could say that would change her mind.

It had been two months since Winnie had told Raj they needed a “break,” which wasn't the same thing as a “breakup.” And even if they had broken up, a relationship blossoming from a childhood romance that became official when they were fourteen deserved more than three weeks of mourning before one party moved on to someone else. Even celebrities waited longer than that.

The thought caused her hands to tighten on her shovel. She rolled her shoulders, and with a warrior's grunt, she started digging.

Stupid love story, stupid prophecy, stupid everything, she thought as she scooped up heaps of thick black soil. Since she was a kid, her family's astrologer had predicted that Winnie's soul mate would meet three unique criteria: his name would start with an R, he'd give her a silver bracelet

as a sign of his love and he'd cross paths with Winnie before her eighteenth birthday.

Identifying Raj as the man of her dreams wasn't too far-fetched, since they went to the same school and had grown up in the same community. Not to mention, he'd pulled out all the stops to get her to notice him when they were freshmen. For Winnie, accepting her destiny as truth and believing that her high-school boyfriend was her soul mate for life was as easy as rattling off the top ten grossing Bollywood films per decade.

But then Raj changed. A lot. Three years later he wasn't her hipster in shining armor anymore. He'd traded in his collection of graphic T-shirts for polos and his love of movie nights for the tennis team and STEM club.

She felt her chest constrict and her heart pound from the exercise and from remembering that moment when Raj had told her he wanted to go to school in Boston instead of New York. He'd followed that truth bomb by asking her to give up her dreams and move to Boston too.

"Winnie! Winnie, are you out here?" Bridget's voice echoed through the rustling trees and the sound of chirping birds. "I saw the drag marks from your car and across your backyard."

“Shit,” she muttered. She started digging a little faster, tossing dirt in every direction.

“Okay, this is nuts,” Bridget yelled. “Where the hell are you?”

Winnie tried to block the sounds of branches snapping as she continued to create her movie grave. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Bridget step into the clearing. Her blond hair was tied in a high ponytail, and her shorts and tank top were streaked with dirt, as if she’d wrestled her way through the rain forest instead of a small wooded area in Princeton, New Jersey.

“Oh. My. God,” Bridget said as she pointed to the boxes. “Are those Raj’s movies? You can’t be serious! I get that I should’ve told you before you got back from camp this morning. It’s just that I wanted to talk to you about this whole thing in person. I know it’s a huge betrayal—”

“That’s one way to put it.”

“And you’re probably pissed—”

Winnie froze. “Probably pissed’? Are you freakin’ kidding me?” She tossed the shovel to the ground and faced her friend. “No, I’d probably be pissed if I got a B in film class this year. I’d probably be pissed if I gained ten pounds and couldn’t fit into my prom dress. I’m

murderous right now because my boyfriend broke up with me online while basically announcing that he cheated! Did you know that he even wrote a Facebook post? My parents and their friends are the only ones who check Facebook. It's humiliating when your mother tells you that she saw the news on her feed. There are more people throwing me a pity party than extras in the movie *Gandhi*."

Bridget put up her hands in surrender. "I totally didn't know he was going to do that, but to be fair I did warn you that he was hanging out with Jenny Dickens."

The second she heard Jenny's name, Winnie hocked a loogie. Well, she tried, but she ended up choking and coughing on her own spit.

"What the hell was that?"

"I can't hear that man-stealing backstabber's name without spitting," Winnie said, pressing a fist to her chest. "It's a demonstration of how I feel about her."

Bridget snorted. "What movie did you see that one in?"

"It's not funny, Bridget! Damn it, it wasn't supposed to end like this." To her horror, tears started to fill her eyes.

"Oh crap," Bridget said, and scrambled forward. The second Winnie felt her friend's tight hug, a sob broke through her throat. Then another followed, and another,

until she couldn't stop.

Bridget held her while she cried for the first time since she'd realized her love story was finally over. Memories circled in her mind like vultures. First kiss, themed dates, Bollywood marathons, film festivals, passionate arguments over movies. She knew that Raj believed in her prophecy because of all the effort that he'd invested in their relationship. Just when she'd started thinking that maybe Raj really was the answer to her family astrologer's prediction for a happily-ever-after, he changed. Now their relationship was a short caption in a yearbook. They were the cliché high-school romance.

What a joke.

Winnie pulled away and wiped her face with the hem of her tank top. "I should've known that Pandit Ohmi was wrong," she said, sniffing. "What was I thinking? I was brainwashed. This proves it."

"Just because Raj isn't *the* soul mate doesn't mean that your soul mate doesn't exist," Bridget said. "There are tons of guys out there whose names start with *R* and who'll give you a silver bracelet."

Winnie stepped to the edge of the hole and sat down in the fresh dirt. "You and I both know I'm not going to find

someone else who fits Pandit Ohmi's prediction—not before I'm eighteen, at any rate. The way my parents have crammed it down my throat all these years, it's as if Raj's name is practically written in with the prophecy.”

“Obviously that's not true,” Bridget said as she sat down next to Winnie.

Whoever coined the phrase “truth hurts” was probably a smug jackass, Winnie thought.

“If he was really the guy for me,” she said between sniffles, “then we should've been able to work past this, right? Like a growing pain. We were great for the first two years, but junior year was so hard, and I needed some space, some time to breathe and think about what he wanted from me. So, like an idiot, I spent the summer thinking, and he spent the summer forgetting. It sucks, but we're too different now to work things out. Cheating puts the last nail in our relationship's coffin ... which is why I'm digging a grave.” She motioned to the shallow hole at her feet. “To bury my coffin.”

“If you know you two aren't going to work anymore, then why are you so mad at him for hooking up with Jenny? You should be happy that it's over.”

“Because I stayed faithful,” Winnie said as she dug her

sneakered toe into the dirt. Her heart ached a little as she said the words. “He moved on to someone else without a second thought. Plus, he wasn’t honest. We were friends before we dated, Bridge. I thought maybe we could go back to that if things didn’t work out. But now? I’ve lost a friend too.”

“Well, screw him,” Bridget said. “He sucks.”

Winnie wiped her nose. “I can confidently say that soul mates are for the movies.”

“I don’t know why you trusted the whole prophecy thing,” she said. “We’re talking about a prediction a psychic made.”

“He’s not a psychic. He’s an astrologer. A priest. A pandit.”

Bridget stood up and walked over to one of the boxes piled high with DVDs. She kicked the side of it, and the contents rattled. “Sounds like a psychic to the blonde here.”

“He’s pretty accurate, Bridge. He reads charts based on star alignments that were in the sky when someone was born. It’s a religious thing. Or is it a cultural thing? Either way, it’s something important.”

“That you don’t believe in anymore,” she said.

Winnie winced. “Yeah, I guess not.” But a part of her wished that it was still true. Maybe a part of her still

wanted it to happen. But to what end? She was going to be disappointed if she kept hoping that Raj would change back into the guy she remembered.

“Forget about the prophecy and how much it sucks that you believed it,” Bridget said. “Eat ice cream and pizza and watch your favorite movies. We’ll get frappes and binge on some new show. You know, the normal coping things.”

Winnie stood and brushed the dirt off the seat of her pants. “I’ve never been dumped before. This blows.”

“Welcome to my life.”

Winnie should’ve never ignored Bridget’s calls. She needed her bestie more than she needed revenge. “Thanks for being my best freaking friend for life, Bridge.”

“You know I’m here. Ugh, I hate that you don’t get all red and blotchy-eyed. I can’t even tell that you’ve been crying.”

Winnie laughed for the first time all day and squeezed Bridget in a death grip. “I hate that your hair doesn’t get frizzy in the humidity.”

“Touché,” Bridget said. “Come on, let’s get these back to Raj.”

“Um, no.” Winnie pulled away and circled the hole she’d started. “I dug my grave. I now have to live with it. Besides, it’s not really his stuff. It’s just whatever I bought for him

during the time we were together. I never realized how many movies I gave him until I was taking them out of his house.”

Bridget picked up one of the external hard drives. She waved it in front of Winnie’s face. “You did not buy him this.”

“No, that’s actually mine that he was borrowing. It’s been tainted by his cheating hands, so I’m burying it too.”

“Wow, you actually mean that. Okay, I know where you’re coming from, but you’re going to end up screwing yourself over. Can’t you put this in a post online and delete it later? You have to face facts. Everyone at school loves Raj, even if he’s the one who broke up with you.”

“I don’t get how I could possibly be the bad guy,” Winnie grumbled.

“Duh. He’s the film nerd who became captain of the tennis team and won a mathlete competition on the same day he worked the film festival. He’s the golden boy who’s taking the STEM track and the arts track. He’s one of the few double-track students in our history that everyone loves.”

“I don’t care. I have to do this,” Winnie said. “It’s like I’m burying the hatchet or something. I don’t even know

what a hatchet is, but it applies here.”

“You gave this stuff to him. It belongs to Raj now. If people found out you broke into his house and took his things after you were the one who asked for space, it makes you look like the guilty person, not him.”

“If you don’t like what I’m doing, then you can leave. Or you can stay and help me with all of this.” She motioned to the mounds of dirt she’d already displaced. “But I’m warning you, I may bury my copy of *Pride and Prejudice* that I loaned to Raj last summer.”

Bridget froze. “Which version?”

“BBC.”

She went ashen. “You’d bury Colin? You’ve lost your mind! This is blackmail.”

“And it works. Listen, I’m not exactly enjoying this new criminal lifestyle. I know taking Raj’s movies wasn’t my best moment, but doing this matters to me. I’ll have to deal with the consequences later, but right now, I’m going to dig.”

Bridget’s face morphed from anger to panic and finally resolve. Winnie felt a shining silver lining appear on her rain cloud.

“Fine. You win.” She waited a beat before pointing to

Winnie's bare wrist. "On one condition. Did you get rid of the bracelet?"

Winnie ignored the feel of the jewelry in her pocket. She knew it wasn't right to keep it, but she needed some more time before she buried that final piece of her past. If she told Bridget her reasoning, her best friend wouldn't understand. So she kept both the truth and the bracelet tucked away. "Yeah, it's gone already."

"Good. I didn't say it when he gave it to you, but I never really liked that thing. Totally not your style." Bridget sighed before she gestured. "But that still leaves this stuff to deal with. How did you get it all?"

"Raj gave me the code to the garage a year ago or so. His family was at temple, so the timing was great. Their schedule is always the same on weekends."

"What about Raj?"

Winnie pulled up his profile on her phone. Bridget leaned in, eyes squinting.

"With my girl to get ice cream. Jenny is as sweet as her favorite kind: strawberries and cream.' Ugh, barf!"

"I know, right? That has to be the most disgusting flavor ever."

"I'm surprised she could taste anything with all that

lipstick getting in the way,” Bridget said. “Who would’ve thought Raj would date someone like Jenny after you? Especially since he looks like the poster boy for an Ivy League these days. All old money.”

Winnie’s stomach twisted when she read the post again. “Who cares? His sappy update was definitely useful. I was in and out of the house in five minutes.”

“Winnie!”

“What? I told you. Not one of my best moments.”

“Fine. If I’m blackmailed into doing this, let’s get it over with. Best friends help each other bury the body, right?”

“Right,” Winnie said with a grin. Some of the pain she was feeling dimmed as Bridget stepped up next to her and grabbed the shovel.

They took turns digging until the hole was at least three feet deep. Then, with some huffing and puffing, they dragged the boxes filled with DVDs, Blu-rays, and external hard drives to the edge of their amateur grave.

Winnie looked down at the contents of her loot. On top of the pile sat the 2007 ten-year-anniversary collector’s edition of the movie *Dil To Pagal Hai*, the infamous film that had an eerie similarity to her horoscope. Winnie had purchased a copy for Raj when they first started dating.

She ran her finger over the faces on the cover. Shah Rukh Khan, the hero of the movie, sporting a massive mullet, had his arms around the heroine's waist as she curved against him in her shiny black unitard with matching sweatbands. As far as Bollywood flicks went, it was a classic late-nineties love triangle.

The part of the story Winnie had always loved was when the hero recognized the heroine as his mystery woman from the sound of her bracelet jingling as she walked away. The bracelet in the movie was nothing like the one Raj had given her, though. Maybe that should've been a clue that Raj was wrong for her.

Winnie threw the DVD into the hole and flinched when she saw the bright neon, jewel-toned cover lying against the stark brown dirt. Seeing one of their favorite movies like that was harder than she expected.

"Come on," Bridget said softly. "Keep going. It'll get easier."

Winnie resumed tossing the contents, silently saying goodbye to the memory associated with each movie. No more dates, no more dances, no more future together at the same college in New York. She'd just have to do it all alone.

When they finished filling the hole, Bridget wrapped

an arm around Winnie's shoulders and squeezed. "We're good, right?"

"I really don't know," Winnie said after a moment. The whole experience had been a bit cathartic, but like any good movie there was still a lot of plot left to work through. "Now that I'm done, I should probably start thinking about Monday. I don't know how we're going to be co-presidents of the film club if Raj makes things awkward."

Bridget rubbed her arm. "Don't worry about that now. Enjoy your moment of revenge. It'll all be a bad dream when you're studying at NYU. You'll be rocking in film school while Raj will still be mourning the loss of the stuff that you bought him. No pictures because you don't want evidence, but definitely commit this to memory."

"To memory, huh?"

"Yup, this is the end of something, right?" She motioned to the hole, to the empty boxes and the shovel. "The end of something is like a shooting star. Gone in a second."

"Okay," Winnie said with a whoosh of air. "Okay, I can remember this." Winnie cupped her hands in front of her eyes in the shape of a heart. She saw only images of famous actors and actresses, movie titles, and taglines in a blur of

color. She jerked her hands apart, tearing the makeshift heart in two. She was able to see the full picture now: the displaced dirt and the poor condition of the movies. Things were always clearer in panorama.

“Got any last words?” Bridget said.

“Yeah. Yeah, I do. *Fin*. After all, this is the end, right? So... *Fin*.”

Winnie picked up the shovel.

WHAT'S YOUR RAASHEE? /
WHAT'S YOUR HOROSCOPE?

★★★★★

It's a new era in Bollywood. Astrologer priests no longer dress in lungis and work in isolation. It's the 21st century and sometimes astrologers can look like you and me.

Winnie cracked open her bedroom door and listened for the sounds of her parents settling down in the living room. When she heard the opening music of *Indian Idol* starting, she knew that they'd be preoccupied long enough for her to have a private conversation.

She settled on the center of her bed with her laptop and clicked on the v-chat icon so she could connect with the username she'd gotten from her grandmother. Even though it was early morning in India, twelve hours ahead, Winnie hoped the famous Pandit Ohmi would take her video conference call. She'd never spoken to the priest directly, but she figured that since her mother talked to

him every two months or so, he wouldn't mind talking to her too.

She straightened her shoulders and yanked up the neckline of her shirt to cover any exposed cleavage. While she waited for the feed to load, she wondered if he'd be offended because she wasn't dressed like she was going to temple. Her head wasn't covered, and her arms and legs were bare. Winnie's parents hadn't prepared her for this sort of thing, and she'd never been around to watch her mother talk to Pandit Ohmi. She should've checked online. After her conversation, she'd blog about it so other people could know what to wear when telling off an Indian priest/astrologer.

The slender face of a grandfather-like man filled her screen. A long line of red powder streaked up the middle of his forehead from the center of his bushy eyebrows to what would've been a hairline if he wasn't bald. He peered at her through silver metal-framed glasses that looked like they'd seen better days. The hair sticking out of his nostrils flared.

"Is that the young Vaneeta Mehta?" he asked in Hindi. "Yes, it must be you. But yet it is not Vaneeta. Winnie is what you go by. Your grandmother has called you that since you were in diapers, nah?"

“Whoa.” Maybe she looked more like her grandmother and mother than she thought. They did share the same wide-set eyes and thickly arched eyebrows that were whipped into shape thanks to frequent trips to a threading salon.

When his forehead wrinkled, Winnie cleared her throat and responded in the same language. “Yes, I am Winnie. I hope I am not interrupted, but I don’t know if there is a right time I could talk in you. I have request.”

Okay, that sounded weird even to her. She knew she was screwing up her verb tenses again—and maybe some other stuff too—but hopefully he got the gist.

Pandit Ohmi steepled his fingers and nodded. “You can speak in English. I understand that as well as your Hindi.”

Thank the gods, Winnie thought. She could understand the languages that her parents spoke, but actually speaking Hindi and Punjabi was a little trickier.

“Okay, awesome. Uh, thanks for answering my call. I wanted to talk to you about the janampatri reading you did for my mother when I was a baby.”

“Oh ho,” he said, clucking his tongue after a pause. “So sorry about the death of your young romance.”

“My mother already got to you? Great,” she said, and

dropped her head into her hands.

“She’s concerned for you. And no, I haven’t spoken to her yet. Your face has a story written onto it that I read very quickly.”

Winnie heard a few clicks as he leaned in closer to examine something on his computer monitor. “Ah, here is your family file. Mm-hmm, it looks here like your love story has changed in the last year, but your overall celestial alignment hasn’t altered. Your star chart provides the same prophecy it did seventeen and a half years ago, except now you have already met your love.”

“No way. How can Raj still be the one when it doesn’t ... I don’t know, *feel* like he’s the right guy anymore?”

“Who says it’s still Raj?”

Winnie sighed. “But, Panditji, it can’t be anyone else. Trust me, I know. Raj is the only one who fits your profile, and he has changed in the past year.”

“We all change. That is what growing up is all about.”

“Not like this. Okay, let me set the scene. His dad is an engineer who registered this patent and made a ton of money. Raj now wants to be an engineer too. It’s like he never wanted to be a film critic like me, even though we’ve been talking about that for our entire lives, and...” She

trailed off when she realized what she was saying. Pandit Ohmi was the root of her problem, and if she gave him too many details about her life, then he could use them against her by creating another dumb prophecy for her mother to harass her about. Shifting on the bed, she pushed her long hair over her shoulders. “Never mind. Basically, Raj isn’t for me.”

He shook his finger at the screen, and the gold ring on it glinted. “I think I understand. Your and your parents’ star charts are the most beautiful I’ve ever read. You’re afraid that if it comes true, you’ll be disappointed because it’s a choice you didn’t make. But wouldn’t you be equally disappointed if it didn’t come true? Finding a jeevansathi is a gift that many people aren’t fortunate enough to receive.”

Jeevansathi. Life partner. Soul mate. She looked over at her dresser and saw the promise of Raj’s silver bracelet. *Keep cool*, she thought. *Keep it cool*. He might be super accurate, but he was wrong about this. He was wrong about her.

“Listen, I know you did this huge awesome prediction for my folks before they first got married, but I think you’re wrong this time around. I think that you watched *Dil To*

Pagal Hai one too many times and maybe superimposed that Bollywood plotline onto me and thought, hey, this is totally plausible. I appreciate the peace of mind you give to my mother, but please don't talk to her about my soul-mate story deal anymore. I'd like for my folks to eventually get over it, you know?"

"Vaneeta, you want to study the arts?"

Shouldn't he have known that already? And how was that relevant at all? She bit back her snark and answered him anyway. "Sort of, yeah. Movies. I want to study them."

"Your father wanted to be in the arts. He didn't do it."

She softened a little bit at the thought of her dad and the way he lit up like a Diwali candle whenever he spoke about movies. "He wanted to do something in the film business, but it didn't work out. Everyone told him that he had to go with his prophecy that *you* predicted based on his star chart."

"Don't you think marrying your mother is a choice he willingly made?"

Winnie's father never said he regretted getting married, but sometimes, when they watched movies together, his face would glow, and then he'd get so sad that even she could feel it, while sitting inches from him on the couch.

Now that Raj was no longer in the picture, Winnie could see that if she hadn't loved film more than she loved her boyfriend, she could've ended up in the same situation. The thought made her sweat.

"He loved my mom."

Pandit Ohmi grinned and waved a hand at the camera as if shooing her off. "Yes, and he still loves movies. You'll make him very proud with whatever you do, but I hope it's because you get a happily-ever-after by choice or by chance. Your astrological chart shows that there are a lot of pitfalls in the next few months that can prevent that from happening, but I am confident that you will find your way."

"Wait, pitfalls?" Her mind raced with everything that could go wrong. Everyone at school could turn on her for crushing Raj's heart, even though he was the one who cheated. The film festival could be a horror show. If they made enough money at the fundraiser dance to even have a festival.

Or worse. She might not get into NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. She'd be stuck going to a local school where she had to be a theater major and commute from home instead of dorming.

Nope. Not happening.

“Don’t tell me—I’m not interested.” Winnie scrubbed her hands over her face. She couldn’t get herself wrapped up in Pandit Ohmi’s storytelling. She needed to do her thing and ignore the Hindu stuff.

Pandit Ohmi laughed. “Sometimes ignorance truly is bliss.”

“Thanks for the tip, but all I’m asking is that you stop telling Mom about the prophecy.”

“Take care of yourself, Vaneeta Mehta. Say hello to your parents for me.”

Winnie closed the v-chat window. She shouldn’t care.

Before she could get up and get ready for bed, her phone vibrated.

“Hi, Nani,” she said when she answered.

Her grandmother’s nose filled the screen. “Hi, beta,” she shouted. The Hindi word for “child”.

“Nani, first, you’re calling from Long Island, not India. I can hear you just fine. Second, the phone is too close.”

Nani pulled the phone away. Her shining face was creased with very few wrinkles for a woman in her late sixties. Her hair was streaked with orange from the henna she used to dye the few gray strands, and she wore what looked like a velvet tracksuit.

“Is this better?” she said, still yelling.

Winnie grinned. “It’s fine. I miss you.”

Nani lifted a copper tumbler to her lips before responding. “I miss my baby too. Why don’t you call me more?”

“I talked to you last week.”

“Too long ago,” she said in Hindi. She switched to Punjabi and added, “What is happening in your life? How is this boy, Raj?”

Switching between languages was common practice for Winnie, but she almost always spoke English with her parents. Probably because they tended to make fun of her accent. But with her grandmother she could say whatever she wanted in whatever language she wanted to use while she butchered her grammar. Nani was her safe space. Always.

“Raj and I are not one with each other,” Winnie said in broken Punjabi. She then explained what had happened and how she’d asked Pandit Ohmi to stop with the prophecy talk. Nani listened, humming occasionally in agreement, until Winnie finished.

“I know you don’t like to hear it, but maybe Pandit Ohmi is right. Your destiny hasn’t changed, and Raj will

stop being a bewakoof idiot boy.”

Winnie held the phone above her head. “I don’t know, Nani. I’m thinking I should focus on this film festival that my club is hosting. I’m still mad about the way Raj broke things off, but it’s time to look toward my future. I’m done with romance.”

Nani snorted. “You’re Indian! We live for romance. And when there is romance, there is passion. Where is your sense of passion right now, beta? Without both romance and passion, you’ll be as boring as Raj’s mother.”

“Nani!”

“What? I’ve met her. She’s boring.”

Winnie laughed. “I may love rom-coms, Nani, and I’m definitely passionate about film school, but I’m also aware that star charts aren’t the answer to everything.”

“And yet those star charts led me to your nana and connected your parents.”

“Luck. There is also such a thing as luck.”

Nani narrowed her eyes. “You sound like you are trying to convince yourself of something you don’t believe. I think I need to come there and smack some sense into you.”

“You should! It’s been so long since you’ve visited. What are you drinking, by the way? Mango lassi?”

Nani looked down at her cup and then up at the screen. “Oh, look at the time. I better go. Bye, beta. Love you!”

Winnie laughed. “Love you too, Nani.” She hung up and flopped on the bed. Even her grandmother, her staunchest supporter, couldn’t see things her way. Or maybe she was having a hard time convincing other people that her star chart was wrong because she couldn’t really convince herself.

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In her dream, Winnie ran through the fields in a pink gown with lace sleeves. Her hair was crowned with fake white flowers and a long lace veil. She could smell the sunshine and feel the spongy grass under her feet as she traveled up the gentle slope of a hill.

Winnie knew that someone was waiting for her at the top. Anticipation pumped through her, which only spurred her to quicken her pace. The train of her dress trailed behind her, and the jewel-encrusted sandals were fashionable yet functional enough for heroine field-running.

In the distance, mountains rolled into a blue sea. She scanned the horizon, and that’s when she saw him. He wore black pants, a black billowing shirt, a cape, a wide-

brimmed hat, and a Zorro mask.

He spun, arms outstretched.

“Shah Rukh Khan from Baazigar?” Winnie said, jaw dropping. “Is that you?” Her voice traveled over the green fields and across the cliffs.

King Khan, the superstar of Bollywood superstars, tore off the mask and lifted an eyebrow in his signature look.

“Why, yes, señorita, it is I.”

Winnie shoved her billowing hair from her face. “You quoted one of your movies! Not Baazigar, but still one of your movies. This is the best dream of my life.”

Shah Rukh Khan swaggered toward her. “I’ve come to deliver a message to you to relieve your doubt.”

“My doubt of what?”

“Of destiny,” he said. “Because those who fight destiny, who fight what’s written in the stars, always end up having the hardest struggle.”

When she reached his side, he gripped her hand and twirled her in a circle. Her veil floated around her shoulders.

“Well, I don’t like my destiny anymore,” she said when she stopped spinning. “I can change it if I want to. It’s the twenty-first century, Shah Rukh. Not everything is about love anymore. Look at the film industry.”

“You’re right,” he said, and lowered her into a dip. “So are you ready to struggle?”

She was just imagining things because of what Pandit Ohmi said to her that night. None of this was real. But since she was dancing with Shah Rukh Khan and she had nothing to lose, she asked, “You got any advice?”

He pulled her up and in Hindi said, “In life, if you want to become, achieve, or win something, then listen to your heart. If your heart doesn’t say something to you, then close your eyes and take the names of your mother and father like a mantra. Then watch. You’ll achieve everything, and whatever was difficult will become easy. Victory will be yours.”

“Now you’re quoting Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham! That’s the most noncommittal advice ever, Shah Rukh,” she said. Since he was in her dream, she figured she had the right to call him by his first names. “The title of the movie is non-committal too. Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sadness? Come on.”

“It works,” he said with another laugh.

“And I’m assuming, since you’re a parent and all, that you’re telling me to listen to my folks. But this is my dream, and I do what I want!”

“You always have, dost.”

Friend.

He let go of her hand and started backing away toward the cliff, and fog began rolling in. Winnie waved at the fog, trying to keep him in sight, but Shah Rukh Khan’s image faded as he slipped into the cloud. The only lingering part of him was his voice.

“Remember, Winnie Mehta, fighting fate never works. I’ve made a career out of proving just how powerful destiny can be.”

*

Winnie jerked up in bed. She could feel the dampness at her hairline and on her neck.

“Holy baby Shah Rukh Khan,” she whispered. What was she supposed to make of *that*?

She powered up her laptop, which was sitting on the pillow next to her, and rubbed her eyes, trying to clear her vision. After a few clicks, she squinted at the screen to make out the last few movies she’d streamed.

“Come on, where are you?” she said into the dark. She knew it had been years since she’d watched *Baazigar*, but she had to have seen *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* recently.

When she couldn't find the movie in her active playlist, she checked her archives.

She hadn't watched it in ages, either.

So why had she dreamed about it?

There was only one way to find out. She clicked on the movie title and put in her earbuds. With a yawn, she settled in against her pillows, hoping that rewatching the film could help her make sense of what she'd just dreamed.

STUDENT OF THE YEAR

★★★★★

High-school hallways are always shot in the same way. Groups of people whispering and huddled in corners. Oddly enough, the only thing different from real life is the background music that follows the heroine around like a rain cloud.

The Princeton Academy for the Arts and Sciences was a selective institution that thrived on excellence in acting, dance, music and film as well as STEM programs. At any given moment, someone could burst into song in the cafeteria, jeté down the hallway or pull out an AP Physics textbook.

Winnie squeezed through a group of cute-bots wearing leotards and UGGs before she reached her locker. Since the first bell, she had forced herself to be polite, sometimes flippant, sometimes funny about the whole Raj thing. No one thought for a second how much her pride, or even her

heart, was hurting. Now she needed a moment to chill, so she concentrated on the collage of her favorite Bollywood actors centered inside her locker door that she'd put together that morning. Her senior year class schedule was pasted above the collage and a list of upcoming Bollywood and art-house movies were below, followed by her blog review calendar. At the bottom were key film-club event dates she'd scheduled at the end of her junior year with the faculty advisor, Ms. Jackson.

She ran her hand over a random sticky note that had the name of a local movie theater, a date, and the words *'80s movie night* along with *Say Anything* circled in red pen. Bridget's obsession with eighties movies rivaled her love for Jane Austen, and seeing something other than a Shah Rukh Khan blockbuster was always a great distraction.

Winnie was exhausted from her sleepless night, but the first meeting for film club was in half an hour, and because Raj had changed to STEM classes, Winnie still hadn't gotten a chance to talk to him. She'd sent him a text with film-club-related questions in second period, but he'd yet to respond.

She was working through potential scenarios on how the first meeting would go, tossing books in her bag, when

someone tapped her on the shoulder. Winnie jumped and muffled a shriek.

“Whoa,” Bridget said, pointing at her face. “Put that fake smile away. It’s creepy.”

“Bridge. You have no idea how happy I am to see you,” she said, pressing a hand to her thudding heart. “People are *still* talking about my breakup! You’d think that something like this wouldn’t be a big deal.”

“Well, scandal, especially between film-club presidents, needs some discussion time.”

Winnie rolled her eyes. “Even Rebecca Peterson stopped me today.”

“Isn’t she the one who always put out your Bunsen burner in Gen Chem because of her mouth breathing?”

“That’s the one.”

“Apparently, she tells people that it’s helpful when she plays the sax. I bet her mouth blows up like a blowfish when she sucks in air and holds her breath, sort of like Miles Davis. Was it Miles Davis who played the sax? I should text my mom. She’ll know.”

“Focus, Bridge.”

“Yeah, okay. What did she say?”

“She asked what was going on. I told her it was all true

and that Jenny ‘Dick-in’ even tattooed Raj’s name on her body in Sanskrit characters, the same way that Chase Evans tattooed Rebecca’s name over his heart.”

Bridget grinned and shoved Winnie’s shoulder. “Poor Chase! Sax-y Rebecca is going to be all over him now.”

“I felt bad, but honestly, what am I supposed to say? That I asked for a break first? I doubt people want to hear about my head trip. Like, I’m not sure if I’m mad about the way the breakup happened or about no longer having a boyfriend. I’m definitely hurting because I’m not going to have my soul mate prophecy like my parents, but was it stupid of me to believe in star charts in the first place? And Raj’s fan club is going to tar and feather me if I admit that Raj isn’t the same guy that I started dating years ago, and that I’m not sure I even like the person he is now. I feel none of that big blockbuster, drama-style grief, either. It’s all confusing. I’m in the middle of an ocean, like Tom Hanks’s volleyball.”

“Speaking of Raj, have you talked to him?”

“No!” Winnie said, slamming her locker door. They started walking toward the auditorium. “Can you believe it? I’ve known him since I was six freaking years old and I saw him every day for three of the past eleven years.

Because of his new schedule, it's as if we don't even go to the same school. Do you think he's angry I took my stuff? He should at least say something to me about it, right? Or at least about the bracelet he bought me."

"I doubt he'll mention it. He always let you do the confronting. At least you don't have to worry about film club, since you and Ms. Jackson have already set the calendar. She'll have your back about the festival too. All you have to do is think about how you're going to look when everyone sees you together onstage."

They were halfway to their destination when Winnie saw a familiar face. Henry Donald Richardson V, his shoulders hunched, his skinny arms held tight to his side, kicked his locker before opening it. Winnie noticed that his TARDIS T-shirt had seen better days and his black-painted nails matched the exact shade of his black shoulder-length hair.

"Hi, Henry," Bridget called out. "Looking good."

He fumbled with his bag and dropped it. "Hi." He flushed when Bridget wiggled her fingers at him.

Winnie shot Bridget a questioning look before she asked Henry, "Heading to the meeting?"

"Nope. Raj can suck a mother ship. I'm leaving film club."

“What?” Winnie choked out. “Why? We need you and your techies!”

“Not according to Raj. Dude said he’d handle all the tech stuff himself along with his new mathlete freaks because I told him he was acting like a prick these days.”

“No!” Winnie and Bridget said in unison.

“He’s not one of us anymore. I refuse to put up with his crap any longer. You probably know how that feels more than anyone, Winnie. I gotta get home. It’s good seeing you.”

“Hey, if you ever want in, please call me! You and the AV tech-sperts are always welcome.”

Henry walked backward, his arms spread wide. “You guys should get going. If the meeting is about to start, you don’t want Raj to change the film club into one of the science clubs too.”

Winnie watched him leave. “Holy baby Shah Rukh Khan. This is really happening.”

Bridget gripped Winnie’s upper arms and shook. “Keep it together, Mehta. You were doing so well.”

She pulled out of Bridget’s grip. “You think shaking me hard enough to loosen my fillings is going to make me better?” Winnie muttered. She took in a deep yoga-like

breath, and started down the hall again. She hadn't been this nervous even when she got the acceptance letter from NYU film camp.

"Don't think about it," Bridget said. "Just walk in, swinging your hips, with that smile on your face. You'll stun and scare them all."

"I guess. It's the only ammunition I have right now. At least Ms. Jackson knows how much work I put in last year, so hopefully if I start to babble, she'll cover."

They'd almost reached the double doors leading into the auditorium that had been Winnie's favorite place for years until the day she'd asked Raj for the space she needed to think. That was right after he told her he wasn't going to apply to NYU. He wanted to go to a fancy engineering school in Boston and he expected her to go with him.

"You can do this. I know you can," Bridget said, taking Winnie's backpack from her. "You've always been a talker. Even if you're broken up, you'll be able to figure it out."

"Yeah? Okay. Okay, you're right. Bridge? I don't know what I'd do without you. I owe you," Winnie said.

Raj. The film festival. The stupid prophecy. Everyone watching. All of it was running through her head as she flung open the doors to the auditorium and put on her

most brilliant smile for the show.

The members took up the first three rows, facing a lean Indian guy onstage. His hand froze midair.

That's right, she thought. Hello, Raj, I'm back.

She sauntered down the aisle, putting in an extra swing to her swagger. It was do-or-die time. "Am I late?" she said cheerfully. "Sorry about that. Thanks for waiting for me, guys."

Raj stood on the stage, under the spotlight, something he'd grown fond of over the last year. It had been a couple of months, but he looked like he had when she'd last seen him. Even from a distance she could see his gelled hair, tight jeans and designer polo shirt.

If her life was a movie, a strain of horrible violin music would be playing in the background while images of past regrets whirled like a rotating screen around her head.

"Hey, Raj. Hey, everyone!" Her smile froze when she saw Mr. Reece sitting in the front row. She faltered midstride.

"Mr. Reece."

"Ms. Mehta." He stood up, adjusting his tweed jacket over his Captain America T-shirt and pushing at the bridge of his glasses. "Nice of you to finally show up."

“Uh, are you stepping in for Ms. Jackson? Is she sick?”

“In a manner of speaking,” he said. “If you’d been on time, then you would’ve heard when I announced that Ms. Jackson is expecting, and can’t commit to any extracurricular groups this year. That’s why you get me. I know you’re so excited to have one of us science geniuses as your faculty advisor, but as a former stunt double for Wil Wheaton, I do have film experience. Raj asked me this morning if I was interested.”

Winnie’s dread ballooned, but she managed to choke out, “Ms. Jackson didn’t say anything to me. Raj didn’t check with ... great. This is ... great.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Come now, Ms. Mehta. In the three years I’ve had you in my science classes, you’ve never shied from the truth.”

This time she did smile. As teacher and student, they’d had a love-hate relationship. Most of the time, Winnie had tried to love him, while she was sure Mr. Reece hated her. “Did you get my present from camp?”

“I do enjoy a good three-D puzzle of the Death Star. But I don’t know how many times I’ve had to tell you that my acting mentor was in *Star Trek*, not *Star Wars*.”

“It was a joke.”

“Ha ha. As bribes go, you should’ve sent a fruit basket like everyone else.”

“*Bribe* is such a dirty word, Mr. Reece,” Winnie said.

“After all those mandatory classes you and I have been through over the years. I like to think of it as incentive.”

“It didn’t work.”

“I still got an A in physics last year.”

“That’s because I grade on merit, not on taste,” he said. Some people in the audience started laughing.

She ascended the stage and scanned the familiar faces of other board members in their class, the pitying expressions of underclassmen, and the supportive smiles of a few people she was grateful she could count on. She turned to Raj.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey, Winnie.” He tried to smile at her too, and shoved his hands in his front jeans pockets. Winnie felt the tears burn in her throat. *Oh shit*, she thought.

A piercing whistle snapped her out of her spiraling thoughts. Dev Khanna lounged in the back row. His molasses-brown eyes fixed on hers, and for one moment something clicked in her head, like a frame locking into place.

Dev and she had been sharing weird looks since the beginning of freshman year. They'd been on their way to becoming friends—she'd been sure of it—but then he'd stopped talking to her when she started dating Raj, probably since Dev was the only person who hated her now ex.

“Thanks for that, Dev!” she shouted. The sound of laughter had her striking a pose automatically, hoping that no one noticed that her hands were still shaking.

“Your ex looks way better now that you're not with her, Shah!” Dev called.

The auditorium boomed with laughter, and although Winnie's insides were twisted, she kept smiling. Raj, on the other hand, looked like he was about to commit murder.

“Okay, everyone. Settle down,” Mr. Reece said. “We have an agenda to stick to.”

“Why don't you start?” Raj said. He reached into his pocket for his phone. “I was going to read your text anyway if you weren't going to ... show or something. And sorry about Ms. Jackson. I should've known she'd forget to tell you in person. She sent us both an email early this morning.”

“Oh. Well, I should’ve checked my email, I guess.”

She smiled at the audience as brightly as she could. “It’s a new year and we have the calendar of movie showings on the group site. All we have to do is make sure we have the projector and donation box set up at each event.”

Winnie went through her talking points, fielding questions from Mr. Reece and making notes on her phone when she had an action item. Raj stood silently at her side, with his legs braced.

“Do you want to add anything?” she said when she finished.

He shook his head. “You’ve got this.”

“Great. The last thing I wanted to talk about is our biggest event. The film festival!”

Cheers erupted in the auditorium. Winnie grinned. “I checked the submission portal, and it looks like students from all over the U.S. are already sending in their shorts. We’ll have sign-ups on the group site for the committees. Now, we usually do things like a car wash, an international bake sale, or a screening, but we are going to try something different this year. The film club is hosting a school dance. It’s in a couple months, so please plan on attending. We need the extra funds for our operating

budget. I'll let you know when I do—”

“Wait,” Mr. Reece said, standing up. “I thought one of you handled the film festival and the other oversaw the club activities.”

“Well, the job has a lot of crossover, so Ms. Jackson assigns co-presidents to take care of both. That way everything is covered and all projects have a backup.”

“But that’s against the rules for student clubs,” Mr. Reece said. “There can only be one president, and all major events have to be led by another member of the club.”

Winnie looked at Raj. “But that’s always how film club has worked. Since we were freshmen.”

Mr. Reece shook his head. “I’m going to have to talk to Ms. Jackson about this, because it sounds like there is an imbalance of workload here. School rules are school rules.”

Winnie felt a sinking sensation in her stomach again. Before Winnie could comment, she saw Bridget waving from the crowd. *Let it go*, she mouthed.

Winnie had to count to five before she responded. “Okay, then, next week we’ll talk about the festival location at Princeton University.”

“That’s fine,” Mr. Reece said. He looked at his

wristwatch. “Since I have to leave for a prior obligation, we can call an end to the meeting. Raj, thanks for the opportunity again. I think this is going to be a great year. Winnie, I appreciate your control on the *Star Trek* jokes.”

“I aim to please.”

“Right. Okay, thanks, everyone. Enjoy the rest of your day.” He gave Winnie a pointed look and then jerked his chin up at Raj as if he was bro-ing it out before he left, using the side aisle of the auditorium. Winnie turned to talk to Raj, but he was already grabbing his bag and bolting without a backward glance.

She sighed as she exited stage left and met Bridget in the aisle.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Bridget whispered. “You had such an awesome vibe going on, like you totally didn’t care that he broke your heart on every social media site that ever existed.”

“Bridget, what the hell *was* that? Raj looked so sad, and then he let me take over. And what’s this whole thing with our new faculty advisor? Mr. Reece has *barely* tolerated me since I had him for homeroom teacher freshman year. He better not split up the festival and the film-club roles, because both have to be on my college application if

I'm getting into NYU."

"Yeah, that's a game changer, isn't it?" Bridget said.

Dev Khanna stepped into Winnie's line of sight. He topped six feet, and he had beautiful dark skin and a lean frame. Something inside Winnie's stomach fluttered.

"What's the deal with Raj, the film-club traitor?" he asked, running a hand through his wavy hair. He locked eyes with Winnie. There was that strange click again. Some things from freshman year hadn't changed after all.

"Wow, right to the chase," Bridget said. "Isn't this the first time you've spoken directly to us in, like, ever? What gives, Tarantino?"

Dev shrugged. "It's the first time you guys aren't attached at the hip to Raj. He's been a tool since high school started. Now you know that too."

Winnie's phone buzzed in her pocket. She'd felt it go off during the meeting but hadn't had a moment to check. When she saw the slew of twenty-one text messages from her mother, she knew that facing the film club was just the beginning of her nightmare.

Dev peeked over her shoulder. "Looks like your mom's caps lock is stuck."

"Oh crap," Bridget said. "Your mom's texting you in

caps? Do you think she found out? I told you it would backfire, Winnie.”

For once, Winnie was speechless.

WINNIE COME HOME RIGHT NOW

YOU ARE NEVER ALLOWED TO LEAVE THE HOUSE AGAIN
WE ARE GOING TO SEND YOU TO BOARDING SCHOOL IN
INDIA

THE NUNS IN INDIA WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU

HOW DARE YOU TRY TO RUIN THE FAMILY
NAME??????????????

IF YOU ARENT HOME IN TEN MINUTES IM CALLING THE
POLICE TO GET YOU AND THEN WE WON'T BAIL YOU
OUT OF JAIL!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

“I feel like I’m missing something,” Dev said.

“You are,” Bridget said. “Winnie’s mom is like a champion texter. She texts her friends all day and her family overseas. She knows very well how to use emojis,

stickers, filters, GIFs, and especially caps lock. If she's texting Winnie in all caps, it means Winnie is dead meat."

"I gotta go," Winnie said. She had five minutes to get home, when it usually took fifteen. She was hoping that the threat of calling the police was subject to Indian Standard Time, which gave her an extra two hours.

She took her backpack from Bridget and slung it over one shoulder. "I'll see you tomorrow," she said, and brushed past Dev. Thinking about him had to wait, getting in touch with Raj had to wait and, most importantly, film club had to wait. Right now, Winnie Mehta had to face the grand high executioner.



Nisha Sharma grew up in northeast Pennsylvania immersed in Bollywood movies, '80s pop culture, and romance novels, so it is no surprise that her first young adult novel, *My So-Called Bollywood Life*, features all three.

The concept for the novel came to Nisha when she moved to New Jersey after law school, and a few years later, she completed *My So-Called Bollywood Life* as part of her MA thesis. Nisha was fortunate enough to receive feedback on film culture in the book from directors and producers such as Susan Cartsonis (Storefront Pictures) and Gurinder Chadha (Bend It Films).

Nisha credits her father for her multiple graduate degrees, and her mother for her love of Shah Rukh Khan and Jane Austen. She lives in New Jersey with her cat, Lizzie Bennett, and her dog, Nancey Drew.

nisha-sharma.com

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