

“Powerful...a must-read for everyone.”
—ADIBA JAIGIRDAR, AUTHOR OF *THE HENNA WARS*

LAILA SABREEN



**YOU
TRULY
ASSUMED**

“Powerful...a must-read for everyone.”
—ADIBA JAIGIRDAR, AUTHOR OF *THE HENNA WARS*

LAILA SABREEN



**YOU
TRULY
ASSUMED**

Laila Sabreen is a writer of young adult contemporary fiction. Raised in the Washington, DC, area, she currently attends Emory University and majors in English and sociology. Her love of writing began as a love of reading when she fell in love with the Angelina Ballerina series. When she isn't writing, she can be found working on essays, creating playlists that are way too long, and watching *This Is Us*.

Praise for *You Truly Assumed*

“I reached the ending with tears in my eyes—tears cued not by sadness but hope and elation.”

—S. K. Ali, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Proudest Blue* and *Love from A to Z*

“A powerful story about friendship and community, showcasing the Black Muslim representation I wish I had growing up.”

—Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Ace of Spades*

“A book that can only be described as feeling like sitting in a sunbeam in a hushed place of worship: being lit from the inside out, being seen, being validated, on all levels but particularly cultural and communal.”

—Karuna Riazi, author of *The Gauntlet*

You Truly Assumed

Laila Sabreen



For Mom and our weekly library trips that started it all.

This book contains instances of racism, anti-Muslim hate, and online harassment.

Contents

[Sabriya](#)

[Zakat](#)

[Farah](#)

[Sabriya](#)

[Entry #1](#)

[Zakat](#)

[Farah](#)

[Sabriya](#)

[I Guess We're Doing the Damn Thing](#)

[Zakat](#)

[Farah](#)

[Sabriya](#)

[Updates and Introductions!!](#)

[Zakat](#)

[Farah](#)

[Politics of Prose](#)

[Sabriya](#)

[Zakat](#)

[Farah](#)

[Why Dreams Die](#)

[Sabriya](#)

[Zakat](#)

[Farah](#)

[Yikes on Bikes](#)

[Sabriya](#)

[Zakat](#)

[Farah](#)

[Finding Infinity in the Great Unknown](#)

[Sabriya](#)

[Zakat](#)

[Farah](#)

[Sabriya](#)

[Zakat](#)

[Farah](#)

[We're Back!!!](#)

[Hi, Kat here:](#)

[Hi, hey, hello! It's Rose.](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

SABRIYA

ABINGTON, VIRGINIA

Whoever told me perfection was overrated straight up lied. All the mistakes I may have already made run through my head as I lower my leg from *arabesque* and transition into a *plié* and my outstretched arms curve into first position. The faint, barely there taps of my pointe shoes grazing across the polished wood floors gets swept up in the music as I set my feet to prepare for the turning combination. My eyes meet Morgan's as I glance at myself in the mirror, and she winks at me quickly. I fight the urge to grin back, trying not to do anything extra to stick out more.

The tempo rises, and I tear my eyes from the mirror and fix them on a fold in the curtain to use to spot. My eyes slide back toward the mirror, seeking my reflection, but the music crescendos before I can pick apart the imperfections staring back at me. I push off the floor and *pirouette*, locating the specific fold in the black curtain with each revolution. A sense of power settles in my bones, and I revel in the feeling of control that determines my movements.

The music dips, and the last notes of the song vibrate through the studio as we hold our final positions. My breathing slows, and the Allah charm on my necklace rises and falls in time with my heartbeats. I fight to hold back my grin. My technique may not have been 100 percent perfect, but I still bodied the combo. If I dance like this at the audition tomorrow, I'll be set.

"That's all for today, dancers," my teacher says, turning off the music. "Morgan, you're still sticking out in the ending." Her eyes dart between Morgan and me as realization slowly dawns on her. "Actually, my apologies, that comment is for Sabriya. Morgan, you're blending in better, but I need you and Sabriya to listen more closely to the music so that you both can get the timing."

I fight not to let my posture loosen, giving a little nod. I glance at Morgan, and she gives me a barely perceptible shrug. Even though it's not surprising anymore that our teacher mixes us up when giving feedback, it still stings. Whenever I think I did well enough to avoid critique, whatever comments

Morgan gets dished usually end up on my plate and vice versa.

“Don’t forget, auditions for the preprofessional summer intensive are tomorrow!”

“Thank you!” the class says, and I force my wobbly legs to curtsy without collapsing. Then I grab onto the ballet barre and lean down to untie my pointe shoe ribbons and put on my slides before leaving the studio. I flop down on one of the benches in the hallway that connects the studios, grab my water bottle, and chug it. Once my heart doesn’t feel like it’s still dancing, I take off my wrap-skirt and use it to wipe away the sweat beading on my forehead.

Some of the parents give me sympathetic smiles, but I brush them off. I don’t need sympathy. Being this exhausted means I’m doing something right. Even if being one of only two Black dancers in the advanced pointe class means I’m always doing something wrong. I riffle through my dance bag, looking for my MetroCard and a pair of sweats to slip on over my leotard and tights. Aliyah, one of the handful of Black dancers in the pre-pointe class, waves at me from where she sits, and I grin and wave back. Aliyah’s been at the studio basically as long as me, so I’ve seen her grow up here. I like to think that Morgan and I do our best to look out for the younger Black dancers because, as classes advance, the environment becomes more hostile and there are fewer and fewer of us.

“Bri, you were on fire today,” Morgan says, sitting down on the bench next to me.

“I could’ve been better. My turnout could’ve been greater in that turning combo and—”

Morgan gives me a look, and I roll my eyes, her message clear. Besides being my best friend, Morgan is one of the reasons that I’ve made it this far in ballet. Being the only Black ballerinas in our level, we always have each other’s backs.

“Sure, okay, maybe it was good. But if I want to convince the judges at the audition tomorrow that I deserve a spot in the ABT intensive, I need to be great.”

The summer intensive at the American Ballet Theatre has been the dream that I’ve been trying to reach all year. Last summer, I wasn’t selected, so this year I need to prove myself at the audition. I have to.

“And you’re going to be great,” Morgan says as she throws her sweatpants on over her tights. “But the intensive isn’t the end-all be-all. It’s summer break now, so you should chill a bit, moe. You’ve been working hard in and

out of the studio all year.”

“I’m jih chill,” I say.

Even though the beginning of June brings the end of the school year, it also brings the chance to spend more time at the studio. If I’m going to nail the audition and get selected for the ABT intensive, I can’t let up just because I’m now homework free. Morgan’s right that the intensive isn’t the end-all be-all, but if I’m going to pursue ballet professionally, then this is a step I need to take now. It’ll help me figure out whether pursuing ballet professionally is something I should even consider, and with college apps coming up I need to figure out by the end of the summer if I want to prioritize ballet and go to a college with a strong dance program.

Someone sits down next to me, and I glance at them out of the corner of my eye before shifting closer to Morgan.

“Besides,” I say. “We both know that you’ll be here just as much as me during the break.”

Everyone seems to stop talking as soon as I finish the sentence, and I look over my shoulder at the rest of the people in the sitting area. I bite the inside of my cheek, unsure if I was too loud. Even though there are a few Black littles and their parents in the sitting area, Morgan and I definitely stick out.

“Can someone please turn on the news?” one of the parents asks the person behind the sign-in desk where the TV is mounted on the wall. Their voice rises at the end of the question, panic tinging their words, and they stand up and move closer to the blank-screen TV as the receptionist tries to find the remote. I look at Morgan, and she raises her eyebrows, silently telling me that she doesn’t know what their deal is either.

“Does that TV even work?” Morgan asks me. “I’ve only seen it on once in all my years of dancing here.”

“I honestly thought it was just for decoration.” I glance around the studio again, feeling unsettled by the silence. “Why is everyone on their phones?”

“I don’t know. The studio is never this quiet.” Morgan pulls out her phone, all of the messages that she missed during rehearsal popping up. “Holy—”

A scream interrupts her, filling the studio, and I jerk at the suddenness. The shrill tone makes me tense up, and the person next to me breaks into sobs. One of the dancers in my class, Lydia, runs down the hallway yelling that someone bombed a metro station near the Capitol. Her voice sounds far away, and her words bounce off the shield of disbelief that surrounds me.

I chuckle. “She’s joking, right, Morgan?”

Morgan doesn't say anything, her body rigid, and Lydia turns to look at me, her eyes wide. Lydia shakes her head, and I freeze, reality swallowing my laughs.

"You're joking," I repeat in a whisper. "Right?"

Lydia says something, but a burst of frenzied chatter drowns out her words. My heart starts to race as I search through my bag to find my phone so that I can call Dad. Parents grab their children's hands, and people run up and down the hallway, colliding and ricocheting off one another. I can make out someone saying, "It's going to be okay. It's going to be okay. It's going to be okay," and I cling to that as I grab my phone.

"What happened?" a voice behind me shouts.

"There was a terrorist attack at Union Station," Lydia answers.

No no no no no. That's Mom's stop.

Morgan nudges me and holds out her phone, and my stomach lurches as she scrolls through the hashtag that's sprung up, the words hitting me like a bucket of ice-cold water. My hands start to shake, and I take a deep breath, trying not to drown in the rising tide of claustrophobia. I need to find Dad. My phone buzzes every time I type in the wrong password, the numbers spinning together. Goose bumps replace the perspiration on my arms, and a shiver runs through me. One missed call from Dad.

Please pick up. Please pick up. Please, Allah, let him pick up.

"Sabriya?"

"Dad? Where are you? Are you okay?"

"I'm almost at the studio. Everything near the White House and the Capitol is shut down. Constitution Avenue and Independence Avenue are completely blocked off. Stay inside until I tell you to come out, okay?"

"Okay." I pause. "Are we in danger?"

"What did you say, Sabriya? I can't hear you."

"Is the DMV in danger?" I ask over the chaos in the studio.

"I don't know. No one has all the details yet. There's been a bombing, but right now the origins are unconfirmed."

I take a deep breath, forcing out the words. "They haven't said anything about the attacker's religion?"

"Not to my knowledge," Dad says. "Things are still very much up in the air, and I'm sure more information will be released to the public soon."

I take a deep breath, trying not to throw up. "Right."

"Stay there. Everything is going to be okay."

I hang up, my eyes stinging with tears. People start to leave the studio, speaking in hushed whispers. I wrap my arms around myself and rock back and forth, trying to let the rhythm calm me.

How could this have happened? Why? The questions pinball back and forth, and the tension starts to build into a headache. I curl my fingers into fists and dig my nails into my palms, the pain muting the shakes. I'm safe. Everything's going to be okay. I'm safe. In the furthest corner of my mind, I can see my plans for the summer crumble. They too will be collateral damage of the terrorist attack.

My phone buzzes, and I look down, hoping it's Dad. It's not. It's a news update. I skim the short article, and my stomach drops when I read the name of the person who authorities believe is behind the attack. Hakeem Waters. The first name is a pretty common Arabic name, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they're Muslim. I send a silent plea that they aren't because if it turns out that they are, then the consequences of their actions will be put on Muslims across the country.

I swipe out of the news update and open Twitter, and anger burns my throat as I scroll through the trending hashtag #DCBombing. Besides the suspect's name, no other concrete information has been released, and yet people are already taking opinions as fact, pointing a finger at an entire religion. The Allah charm on my necklace weighs heavily below the hollow of my neck, and I run my finger over the silver like a prayer. "There needs to be a Muslim registry," one comment reads, and I close out of Twitter. I know from experience that reading too many of those comments will make my necklace feel as if it's choking me.

My phone buzzes with a text from Dad, and I grab my bag and turn to Morgan.

"Do you need a ride?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "My ride's right around the corner."

I almost start to say that I'll see her tomorrow, but I nod instead. Who knows the next time we'll have ballet.

The silence grates my ears as I head out of the dance studio. Quiet is the last word I'd ever use to describe Wisconsin Avenue, and even though the studio is half an hour from Union Station, I expected there to be nothing short of full-scale pandemonium. But instead there are just a few police cars, lights on but not making any noise. The air smells like smoke, but the sky is clear and blue, so maybe I'm making that up.

Dad unlocks the car door when he sees me, and I slide into the passenger seat.

“Thanks for picking me up,” I say, buckling in.

“As soon as I heard the news, I left work and started making my way over.” Dad begins driving. “A lot of the roads were already shut down. I’ve been trying to call you, but cell service has been down. But I’m here now and you’re safe, and that’s all that matters.”

I hear Dad’s words, but they don’t sink in. Instead, they stick to the numbness coating my skin. I close my eyes and pray.

“Are Mom and Nuri okay?”

“Nuri’s already at home. She got a ride from a classmate’s parent.” Dad swallows. “I haven’t heard from your mom yet.”

“What?!”

“Her school is close to the station, and there have been reports that calls and texts aren’t going through right now since so many people are trying to reach their loved ones. But I’m sure she’ll text us as soon as she can.”

My stomach churns, and I clutch the door handle. “I’m going to throw up.”

Dad looks at me, my pain reflected in his eyes. “Need me to pull over?”

I nod, and he swerves over to the side of the road. I fling open the door, a dizzying warmth spreading through me. My stomach clenches, and I cough up water. No food since I made sure not to eat before ballet class. Dad rubs my shoulder as I wipe my mouth and close the car door, my stomach still clenching.

I look out the window, at the buildings and cars that seem to pass by in slow motion instead of streaming together in a blur like they usually do. Everything moves in slo-mo. I feel as if I’m looking down on me, like my body’s here but my mind is lagging behind, trying to pick up the pieces.

“I never thought something like this would happen here,” I whisper.

Downtown DC has always felt untouchable. Officers with guns line the sidewalk blocks past the White House and the Capitol, and people jog and bike past them all the time without batting an eye. Seeing them on the drive to school every day has become normal since I don’t find them as unsettling as I did when I first started going to school and taking dance classes in the city.

Dad takes my hand and I anchor myself to him.

“Your mom is going to come home. We’ll get through this.”

I look out the window as we turn onto Key Bridge and see the Capitol far

in the distance, and it hits me that in my ten years of living in this area I've never once had to think about what would happen if that building fell. The Potomac River is devoid of canoers, which never happens during the spring and summer. Traffic inches along even though Virginia is only a jog across the bridge.

I grab a plastic bag from the glove compartment in case I need it. Nuri occasionally gets migraines and sometimes needs them, but I've never had to use one before. I grasp the plastic bag as traffic crawls, the jolt from the constant starting and stopping shaking my stomach.

Once we cross the bridge, the traffic breaks and Dad hits the gas a little harder. Twenty minutes later, we arrive in Abington. The familiarity of the neighborhood is a welcoming sight, but our street is devoid of the children that usually ride their bikes and play at the small park across the street. Even outside of DC, people seem to be hiding. Dad pulls into our assigned parking spot in front of the row of townhomes, and my shoulders drop as a fraction of tension leaves my body.

"Come on, Dad," I say, grabbing my dance bag and running up to the front steps.

Dad unlocks the front door, and as soon as I push it open, Nuri jumps up from the couch. She runs over and throws her arms around me, the waves of her twist-out brushing against my cheek as her chin rests on top of my head. Even though I'm older than her by two years, Nuri inherited both Dad's and Mom's height, leaving none for me. We've recently started being mistaken for twins, and I'm still salty about that.

"Are you okay?" I ask when she pulls away.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she says, biting the inside of her cheek.

"We're going to be okay, Nuri," I say, hoping I sound more confident than I feel.

I wish I had answers to all of the questions she probably has, but those same questions are running through my head. I go over to the living room and turn on the news. Nuri sits down on the couch, her focus locked on the reporter.

"I'm going to go change real quick, but I'll be right back."

Nuri nods, and I head to the kitchen to get some water. A flash of pink catches my eye, and I go over to the counter where Mom's figurine of Black Jesus and Dad's Quran sit to see the somewhat-cheesy daily motivational note she left Nuri and me for today that says: *It doesn't matter what's been*

written in your story so far, it's how you fill the remainder of the pages that counts. I choke out a gasp, my eyes suddenly burning with tears fighting to fall.

Please, Allah. Please let her be okay.

I head upstairs to my room, almost tripping over Nuri's lacrosse stick in the middle of the hallway. I gently kick it into her room before heading into mine. I plug in my phone and turn it facedown. That way, I can hear if Mom calls or texts without getting sucked into doomscrolling. I set my ballet bag next to my desk and look up at the poster of Misty Copeland that hangs above my bed, but it doesn't give me the sense of calm that it usually does.

I pace back and forth across the room, adrenaline and anxiety pushing me forward. Mom has to come home. She just has to. I don't want to have to live in a reality where she doesn't come back. I close my eyes and say another prayer. I didn't realize how much I've taken for granted the privilege of simply being able to come home safely.

I open my planner and stare at it blankly, the items on today's to-do list all blending together. Terrible things happen all the time, but I've never once thought that anyone I loved would ever be affected. I guess I've always thought of my family as being in an untouchable bubble. But I guess I now know that no amount of planning or trying to maintain control can keep anyone, including myself and those I love, untouchable.

I close my planner and put it in my drawer. No amount of planning could've prepared me for this, and for once a detailed to-do list can't help me. My eyes travel across my desk and land on a framed photo of Mom and me that was taken at my first ballet recital. All of the panic and fear that's been suppressed so that Nuri can't see it rises to the surface, and my eyes sting with tears. I press my palms to my eyes, but the tears slip down my cheeks. I heave in gulps of air and try to steady myself against the wave of emotions.

"I've got to be strong for Nuri," I say over and over in my head as I change out of my leotard and tights and throw on a T-shirt and some sweats. Grabbing my phone, I head back downstairs. Dad pulls Nuri and me close as I sit down on the couch next to them. My leg bounces and my thoughts pirouette, but I force myself to focus on the news.

"The police believe that the suspect was an individual named Hakeem Waters who died at the scene," the newscaster reports.

A faint click of the lock sliding cuts through the newscaster's voice, and Nuri and I jump up. We follow Dad to the front of the house, my heart

beating so loud I can hear the blood rushing in my ears. *Please, Allah, let it be her.*

“Mom!” I yell, launching myself at her as she closes the door behind her. “You’re home!”

I feel Nuri wrap her arms around us and then Dad, and I pull away a bit when I feel tears sliding down my cheeks. I loosen my arms from around her, but I keep one hand on her arm to remind myself that she’s here. And she’s safe. And she’s breathing.

“I’m okay, girls. Everything’s fine. It took the police a while to search my building, but it was necessary. I’m sorry that my calls and texts didn’t go through. Cellular service is still spotty. But I’m here and I’m safe.”

I take deep breaths, my heartbeat slowly steadying. I curl my fingers into fists, my nails digging into my palms. It’s okay. She’s okay. I repeat that over and over in my head, trying to get my body to stop shaking.

Mom kisses us each on the forehead. “Why don’t we all sleep in the living room together tonight?”

She’s here. She’s here. She’s here.

ZAKAT

LULLWOOD, GEORGIA

There's something magical about the way art transforms chaos without apology. On the canvas, there's no room to put anyone else's wants before my own and there's no one to please but myself. I adjust my grip on the short stick of charcoal, the tips of my fingers stained black. Light classical music floats in the background, filling the art studio with airiness. No one is ever up in this part of the school this late in the afternoon while school is in, and I loosen my shoulders and focus on the strip of charcoal paper. Next week, when afternoon and evening summer classes start up, people will start to stream into the building. But for now, as people celebrate the end of the school year, I have the art studio all to myself.

I take in the silence of the first few days of summer. During the school year, chatter and laughter would be bouncing off the walls. Lullwood Islamic School for Girls is a haven that I've had the privilege of attending since kindergarten. But as a rising senior, it's beginning to dawn on me that staying in a haven for too long can turn it into a bubble.

I turn my easel a bit so that it fits exactly in the circle that marks my spot. During the art class that ran on the weekends during the school year, the art teacher let us trace a circle around the bottom of the legs of the easel and write our name on the smooth floor to mark our spots in order to make sure each individual's view toward an object didn't change during a project. I remember how thrilling it was to write in Sharpie on the floor, to make a mark, even in such a small way. Though the mark will fade once the floors are scrubbed before school restarts.

My phone buzzes, and I jump, causing the charcoal to streak the paper. I wipe my fingers on my jeans, leaving gray smudges on my thighs, and see five missed calls from Mama.

Shoot.

"Mama?" I ask, answering.

"Zakat, you need to come to the masjid now," Mama says through the phone.

“Alright. Is everything okay?”

Mama pauses. “I’ll tell you when you get here. Please hurry. Love you.”

“Love you too, Mama. I’m on my way now.”

She hangs up, and I unclip the charcoal paper from the easel and slip it into the tan art portfolio that’s inside of my tote bag. I wash my hands, most of the charcoal coming off my fingers, and slide my tote bag over my shoulder. The weirdness of the conversation sticks to me like the residue of the charcoal stick, and I try to shake it off. Mama’s one of those people who loves texting and adding the perfect GIF to a message. She only calls me if she’s worried or it’s an emergency, and I can’t imagine what would be so big that she could only say it in person.

I slip my phone into my pocket and sprint down the hall, my feet sinking into the soft blue carpet. Quranic verses are painted in Arabic and translated into English across the walls in metallic colors. Quotes from powerful Muslim women are taped to every classroom door. The hall smells of lemon, and I wave at one of the cleaning staff members.

A gust of warm air ruffles the ends of my hijab as I step outside. Hopping onto my bike, I pedal in the direction of the masjid. The sun shines bright overhead, wispy cotton-candy-pink clouds lining the sky as it slowly sets. I ride down the smooth gravel path that winds through the woods that give the city its name. Thick, tall pine trees line the sides of the path, and I swerve around fallen pine cones. The air smells like a newly lit scented holiday candle. This ride has been committed to memory better than my times tables. I love Lullwood with all my heart; it’s helped to mold who I am and shape who I want to be. The town has been a shoulder to cry on and the giver of the best hugs. But I’m excited to graduate and expand my horizons. Still, being able to feel completely safe biking through the Atlanta suburbs as a Black hijabi is something that Lullwood has given me and something that I’ll always treasure.

The masjid comes into view, and I skid to a stop. A chain-link fence is wrapped around its perimeter, and it reminds me of the kind of barrier that I’ve seen at playgrounds. The posts of the fence are connected to portable stands held down with sandbags, which gives me a little relief. If the posts aren’t drilled into the ground, then the barrier is probably temporary. The silver fence contrasts against the smooth, marble stone that shines under the sunlight. In all my years living in Lullwood, there’s never been a fence around the masjid before. I ride through the open gate that’s connected to the