

FARAH HERON

AUTHOR OF

HOW TO WIN A BREAKUP

REMEMBER
ME
TOMORROW

A NOVEL



**REMEMBER
ME
TOMORROW**

ALSO BY FARAH HERON

The Chai Factor

Accidentally Engaged

Tahira in Bloom

Kamila Knows Best

How to Win a Breakup

Jana Goes Wild

Just Playing House

REMEMBER
ME
TOMORROW

A NOVEL

FARAH HERON

 SKYSCAPE

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This book is for all the people who are thriving in places where other people think they don't belong.

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ONE

For me, this story starts the day I realize I don't need my best friend anymore and move out of our shared university dorm room. But really, it started *before* that day. And also, *after* that day. I just don't know it yet.

"Aleeza, stop. You can't move out. We *need* to live here together all year," Mia, the aforementioned former *best friend forever*, says.

I snort at her using the words *need to*. Because she's wrong. I simply don't *need* Mia anymore.

As one of the only nonwhite kids in my hometown, years ago I developed a theory that there are two ways to survive socially when you're different. One—be like everyone else. In other words, make sure that my skin color is the only difference between me and my classmates. But I always knew that strategy would never work for me. Because I've always been . . . well, odd. Which was fine when I was a little kid living in Toronto, because being a weird Brown kid was pretty common in the city. But not in Alderville, the tiny town that my parents moved us to when I was seven. I realized then for the first time that my strangeness—not adorkable quiriness but uncool nerdiness—could be a problem for me.

Case in point. Many kids in my Alderville elementary school were into horses, or sometimes goats or sheep. (Which, fair. It's farm country.) And of course, lots of kids were into cats and dogs. But me? I was into octopuses. Obsessed with them, actually. Ever since I saw an enormous one in an aquarium when I was four, I've been fascinated by their big heads, nine brains, and unreal problem-solving skills.

Which brings me to the other weird thing about me. While other girls were into romances and fantasy books, I like old—like, practically ancient—mystery books. My mom's a librarian, and she always ordered Nancy Drew and other whodunit books for me, and I *inhaled* them. Movies too. I love old Agatha Christie films. I used to fanaticize that Alfred Hitchcock was my long-lost uncle.

Anyway, since being the weird, Brown new kid was making me a bit of a social pariah in Alderville, I put all my energy into my second strategy to survive—find a white friend as weird as I am.

Mia became that ride-or-die weird friend that all Brown girls living in small towns need. We became tight after noticing we were both obsessed with this kid-detective graphic novel series. Soon we were borrowing each other's books and movies. Mom started ordering Mia's favorites for the library—still mysteries, but Mia liked thrillers instead of classic whodunits. We had weekly movie nights in my living room dressed up as characters from whatever old movie we were watching. We daydreamed about opening a detective agency in New York City one day.

I thought our friendship was genuine. I honestly thought we'd be friends forever.

It took six months of higher education for me to realize that I didn't know a thing.

"Aleeza, seriously," Mia says again when I ignore her. "Stop packing."

I glance at her once, and keep shoving items into the box. I can't believe I was so dazzled to have a best friend who was popular and well liked and who loved all the same stuff as me (except octopuses), that I failed to notice Mia wasn't actually a very good friend at all. Because over and over, pretty much since the day we met, Mia has been pushing me aside whenever

anyone she deems “cooler” is around.

And today is the absolute last time I’m putting up with it. After Mia once again ditched me for her boyfriend, Lance (or specifically, Lance’s sister this time), I am not accepting her apologies and promises. This time I am walking away.

Apparently fed up with my packing, Mia comes toward me in our dorm living room. She takes a bright-orange octopus stuffy out of my box and throws it across the room. It lands legs up on the floor near the tiny sofa. “Tentacle Ted belongs in this room, remember?”

Of course I remember. And I knew she would claim custody of the orange stuffy we bought at a county fair near Alderville the day we found out we’d be rooming together, just like I knew she wouldn’t let me leave without a fight. Because Mia hates feeling like the villain. She hates feeling like she’s losing. It screws up her perfect mental image of herself. But I also know that despite her vow to stop standing me up and letting her boyfriend and his family get in our way *again*, Mia will eventually cave to one of their demands at my expense.

“I’m taking Ted,” I say. “I bought him with *my* dollars. And octopuses are *my thing*, not yours.” I cross the room to get poor Ted, brushing the dust from the cheap gray industrial carpeting off him.

“We said that Ted would be our first jointly owned dorm room accessory,” Mia says, practically pouting.

“Since I’m moving out because of *your* actions, I’m entitled to keep the cephalopod that I paid for.” I toss him back into the box.

Mia and I dreamed about moving to Toronto for school for years. I thought she would be better here, since we’d be making new friends together. She was always ahead of me—born and raised in Alderville, she knew all our friends first. But now that we’ve actually moved to the city, Mia is even worse than she was back home. She’s like two different people. In our room, Mia and I talk about movies and books, and she seems to love my octopuses. Outside our dorm room, Mia ignores me. She’s unreliable. She does whatever Lance or any of his friends want. In my opinion, she’s trying way too hard to fit in with her new boyfriend’s friends.

“You can’t move out!” Mia says. “You’re supposed to be my roommate all year!” She looks genuinely upset, but I know that’s only because we’re alone. If someone else were here—especially Lance or any of his crew—she’d be mocking me for my attachment to octopuses.

“Tell your precious Taylor to move in,” I say. “I’m already gone.” I’m not sure where my new bravery is coming from, but I am loving it right now. I hold up the university pass hanging around my neck. “This card won’t open the building door anymore. My ResConnect profile is already updated. I am no longer your roommate.” ResConnect is the campus residence app. I put in the room change request only hours ago, and I’m lucky they had a spot for me.

Mia shakes her head, her wavy brown hair falling out of its messy bun. She’s always been pretty—her light-brown hair and big blue eyes give her a kind of girl-next-door vibe. She’s dressed almost the same as me right now, in jeans and a sweatshirt. Hers has a Roots logo on it, while mine, of course, has an octopus.

“You’re being stupid, Aleeza!” she says in the same voice she uses to yell at her dog. “You are not giving up years of friendship over a YouTube series!” She tries to snatch my favorite coffee mug—the one with a tentacle for a handle—but I beat her to it.

It’s honestly a little bit surprising just how badly she’s taking this. But I guess it makes sense—she’s not used to me having a spine. I’ve been her doormat for years, but we’re in the city now and I can make new friends. I don’t need Mia anymore.

“No, Mia, *you* are throwing away years of friendship over a YouTube series! You’re the one who replaced me with your boyfriend’s sister!”

I pick up the top sheet of our campus newspaper to wrap the mug in. I’m a first-year journalism student and I wrote a film review in this edition, but it isn’t on the front page. “We planned our *TCU Mysteries* web series for months,” I say, not looking at my former friend. “We did market research, had a logo made, and bought a camera. One episode in and you want to replace me with your boyfriend’s sister?”

“I don’t want to replace you! I’m *adding* Taylor to the web series because she has a huge social presence; this will be great for our reach. We could be huge! I thought you needed to do this for your media project?”

I blink. Yes, the web series was supposed to be my major project for my media class, but not all YouTube series are equal. Our series, *TCU Mysteries*, was supposed to be about mysteries associated with our school, Toronto City University. The first episode was about a student found dead in her apartment on Easter in the fifties, and we just started the research on our second episode, about this wealthy alumni who donated a ton of money to the school, then mysteriously drowned a few weeks later. But Taylor wants to change the entire focus of the series to be about skincare and makeup instead. I like a good face mask as much as the next person, but Mia *knows* my future goal is a career as an investigative journalist, not a beauty editor. My media project is supposed to align with my journalism career goals.

I look down, the picture in the newspaper catching my eye. It’s that second-year student who disappeared off the face of the earth a few months ago. I wave the paper at Mia. “We were going to do an episode on this missing student! A TCU mystery that’s literally happening right now! Maybe we could have found him!”

“There are already eight student podcasts about that missing guy,” Mia says. “I know you’re, like, *obsessed* with him, but I heard he was a huge asshole. He’s not worth finding. And, he’s been missing so long, he’s totally dead. Just like our mystery web series is dead! Skincare is hot now! Taylor says we can leverage off her existing TikTok brand, and we’ll have a hundred thousand subscribers in a month!”

I really don’t want to have this discussion. If I let it go on too long, Mia will win. She always wins. This is a pattern, and patterns become cycles until someone breaks them, and I am in the mood to break things. But not this mug. I wrap the octopus mug in the newspaper.

Mia is finally silent, so I fold the flaps of the box closed, then put on my boots, parka, hat, and mittens. After I’m fully suited up to brave the snowy March weather, I look around the small living room of the apartment-style dorm room Mia and I have shared since September. The sturdy wood furniture that is surprisingly comfortable. The K-pop posters we framed. This building, West Hall, is considered the best residence in our downtown university, and Mia and I cheered when we found out we got a room here. And now I’m willingly leaving it behind, just like I’m leaving behind my best friend of more than a decade. With a duffel bag hanging off each shoulder, a knapsack on my back, and the box in my arms, I leave the room without another word.

I should have walked away from this friendship a long time ago. Actually, I should have walked away from Mia when an octopus told me to five months ago. Ironically, it was the same night that Mia first met Lance.

Five months earlier—October 29

It was a mistake to wear a mustache to my first ever university party. A *fake* mustache, mind you. True, as a Brown girl, I do grow visible upper-lip hair, but my mom found me a threading aunty in Toronto even before frosh week. Fake or not, though, I am the only girl with a mustache at this party.

Actually, even before gluing the handlebar mustache to my upper lip, I made a mistake by *not* dressing like an octopus like I had for the last few Halloweens. Last year I was Ursula the sea witch, and the year before that Henry the Octopus from *The Wiggles*. But this year, Mia insisted that for our first *university* Halloween, we needed to match each other, and our costumes should be tied to our upcoming YouTube mystery series so we could create content for our socials. She would be Sherlock Holmes, and I would be Watson. My mom mail-ordered me a tweed jacket, a bowler hat, and a very realistic fake mustache, and I assumed Mia did the same.

But the moment I show Mia my Victorian physician costume, I know I miscalculated. Mia's costume isn't accurate to the period at all. Instead, she got a cheap "sexy Sherlock" costume, complete with fishnets and a skirt short enough to make a Victorian faint.

I suppose her costume does what she actually wants it to do, because seconds after we walk into the campus pub, she catches the attention of some dude wearing a bad Spider-Man costume without a mask. He admires Mia's legs and makes fun of my mustache in the same breath. Mia laughs her fake, flirty giggle, and the dude orders her and all his friends (but not me) tequila shots. I head to the bar alone, yanking the bowler off my head. I didn't bother to put any product in my shoulder-length, curly hair since I figured it would be stuffed into a hat all night, and now frizzy strands fall into my eyes. I brush them away and keep walking. I can get my own damn tequila.

I order a shot from the mad scientist tending bar. I have to show my ID, of course. I'm nineteen—legal to drink here—but I look younger, even with the mustache. When I get my shot, I take a tiny sip instead of drinking it all at once. It tastes like turpentine.

"My dear Watson, is it? How do you do?" a deep voice next to me says.

I turn to see an octopus. Literally, an *octopus* is standing next to me at the bar. I frown. Is tequila supposed to cause hallucinations? I look closer, and it's not actually an octopus, but a guy wearing a cheap Party City Cthulhu mask. He's also got on a black T-shirt and jeans.

"How do you know I'm Watson?" I ask.

"The tweed," he says.

I frown, which makes my mustache tickle my cheeks. "Lots of characters wear tweed."

"True." He rubs his hands on his tentacle beard as if he's thinking. "Are you supposed to be Mr. Bean?"

I snort. The guy nods toward my drink. "What are you drinking?"

"Tequila." For some reason I don't want this octopus-man to think I'm as lame as I actually am, so I drink the rest of my shot in one gulp. It burns going down. I suppress a cough.

The octopus-person stares at me. I can't read his expression because of the mask, so I can't tell if he's impressed or laughing at me.

"Are you alone?" he asks. I wonder if he's trying to pick me up. Maybe he has a thing for mustached Victorian doctors?

I nod. "My friend ditched me for a superhero." I glance over to Mia, who has her arm

around Spider-Man's waist while she talks to sexy Wednesday Addams.

The bartender takes my empty shot glass and asks me if I want another. I look at the list of drinks taped to the bar top.

"I'll have a Witch's Brew." I give the bartender a ten-dollar bill, and he hands me a can of blackberry vodka cooler.

"I'll take the same," Cthulhu guy says, giving the bartender money. The bartender hands him a can. The guy lifts the bottom of his latex mask to take a long sip of his drink. I can't make out what his face looks like from this distance. In fact, I doubt he's trying to pick me up, or he'd be standing closer. He pulls his mask back over his chin even before he puts his can down.

"Are you in hiding or something?" I ask.

He laughs again. "It's Halloween, the only time of the year I can wear a Lovecraftian mask and be normal."

Him using the word *Lovecraftian* proves he's *not* normal. He may even be as dorky as I am. "Honestly, I think *normal* is overrated," I say. "I wish I could wear a tweed jacket all year."

"Why can't you?"

I glance at Mia, who is laughing and talking to her new friends like she's known them for years. What would it be like to be so comfortable with new people? "You ever feel like the whole world is spinning five steps ahead of you?" I ask. "And by the time you catch up with them, they've already moved on?"

I turn back to the guy who's maybe trying to pick me up. I'm sure I've scared him off. No one wants philosophical introspection at a party like this. But again, with that mask on, I have no idea what he's thinking. He's still staring at me, which is disconcerting—those latex tentacles almost glow in the dim lights of the bar. Even with a few feet between us, I can smell him. Clean laundry detergent and a hint of . . . cinnamon? He has broad shoulders and strong arms.

He finally speaks again. "Three things, Watson. One, your life is going to get so much better once you step away from the people holding you back, because real friends don't forget friends when things don't go as planned. Two, I have a very strong suspicion that it's not *you* who has to catch up with the world, but the world that needs to catch up with you."

The Cthulhu man has a nice voice. And for some reason he's making the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Suspiciously, I narrow my eyes. "Are you flirting with me?"

"Are you drunk?"

"No," I lie. That tequila went straight to my head. "What's the third thing?"

"I'd like to try and catch up with you. Do you want to dance?"

The song playing is "Save Your Tears" by The Weeknd, and maybe it's an omen. I *should* be saving my tears. I could be dancing with this mysterious octopus instead of whining about my friend ditching me for Spider-Man.

I smile, then take a big gulp of my drink. "Sure, but keep your tentacles to yourself, okay?" I peel the mustache off my upper lip, taking all the natural hair I had there off too. Well, at least I don't need to see my threading aunty this month.

He laughs. "Agreed, my dear Watson. I'll keep you safe if you promise to keep me safe too."

I nod. "Deal."

TWO

My new residence, East House, is on the other side of campus, and walking there with three bags and a box is hellish. Actually, doing anything in Toronto winter is hellish, and this year has been particularly bad. Cold. Icy. Treacherous. I push through blistering wind and blowing snow on the narrow path snaking through campus, cursing past Aleeza for not agreeing with the campus-housing guy who suggested I wait and move out on the weekend because of the snowstorm. But once I made the decision to move, I knew I needed to leave Mia as soon as possible.

When I put in the request for a midyear room change, the guy in the office immediately warned me he probably wouldn't find me a vacant room, as a month into second term is a weird time to move. But I had a gut feeling that there would be something for me. The room he found wasn't anything to celebrate, though. East House is the oldest, smallest, and least desirable residence at school, and the room was described as . . . modest. But it would be fine. I would deal. This would be my fresh start.

"Do you need help?" a voice behind me asks.

I turn and see a person about my height wearing a gray wool hat, an enormous blue parka with the hood up, and an orange scarf pulled up over her nose. Her voice sounds familiar, but beneath all the winter gear, I can't see her face.

"Oh, it's fine. I got it." I smile, but then remember she can't see me under my scarf either. I turn down the less-maintained path that leads to East House.

I can barely see thanks to the blowing snow, and I can't feel my cheeks even with my scarf on by the time I get there. The muddy-brown building is old. Even . . . crumbling. It was originally an early 1900s mansion that the university converted into residences in the nineties. I frown as I stand in front of the main entrance. I have no clue how to scan my card to open the door with all this stuff in my hands.

"Now will you accept some help?" I hear from behind me. I turn. It's the girl in the blue parka from earlier. She sounds friendly and amused.

I nod. "Yeah. My card is around my neck. I'm just moving in." I don't want her to think I'm breaking in. With all my possessions. During a snowstorm.

"I got it. I live here too." She takes her pass from her pocket and taps it on the card reader. After opening the door, she takes the box from me. With my hands now free, I push my scarf off my face as I walk into the residence.

The entrance opens to a lobby common area with a few couches. Very few of the mansion's original features remain here, only white walls and gray industrial carpet. To the right of the front door is the mailroom, with a bulletin board absolutely packed with small pieces of paper, flyers, and even artwork. I have no idea how it's still attached to the wall with the weight of all that crap on it.

"Where are you heading?" the girl asks.

"Um . . . second floor?"

She turns back to look at me, and I can see her eyes still look amused. "You're moving to the second floor? That's only professor offices."

"Oh . . . it's supposed to be room 225."

The expression in the girl's eyes changes immediately, and all her friendliness drains away. She takes a step backward, as if I just told her I have lice.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

She shakes her head and walks toward a set of stairs across from the mailroom. After resting the box on a stair, she pushes her scarf down and looks at me. That's when I realize I do know this person. It's Gracie Song from my politics seminar. I think she's also in my Introduction to Journalism lecture. I'm pretty sure she's a first-year journalism student like me, but I've never spoken to her. "Room 225 is on the third floor," she says.

I shake my head. "That makes no sense."

Gracie shrugs and starts climbing the steps with my box.

Ugh. Meeting people is awkward. I don't know what to say. But I don't have Mia anymore, so I need to make an effort. "Um, thanks for taking my box," I say as I climb behind her.

"No worries."

"You live here too?" I ask. Dumb. She already told me she lives here.

I see the back of her head nod. I've never spoken to her before, but I've seen Gracie Song around enough to know that she's normally chatty. Social. But right now she seems like she'd rather be stuck on this staircase with a dead skunk instead of me.

My heart beats heavily. I have no idea why Gracie doesn't like me now when a few moments ago she asked if I needed help.

"What floor are you on?" I ask.

"Same as you." She still sounds pissed off.

Why does it bother her so much that we'll be living on the same floor?

When we get to the third floor, she turns right and sets the box down. She points to the first door. "That's you," she says. "The bathroom's down the hall." She disappears in the same direction, walking past my room.

Okay. That was weird.

I look at the door in question, and yes, the number 225 is on it. I unlock the door and drag my things into what will be my room for the rest of my first year of university.

Modest is an understatement. The room is *small*. There's a shallow closet on one side of the door and a window on the left wall. The furniture is old and looks more run-down than what I had in West Hall. There are two twin beds, two desks with wood chairs, and two small dressers. Why are there two of everything? The housing guy told me it was a single room. With all the furniture, it's incredibly cramped, especially compared to the apartment-style room Mia and I had in West Hall. I have no idea how anyone could share a room this small. If a person slept on each bed, they could hold hands.

But there's no sign of a roommate. Both mattresses are bare, and there's nothing on either desk. Alone, I could make this room work. Put up some posters and tapestries. Some octopuses. Make it my own.

I drop my box and bags on the floor and search for sheets to make up the beds. I'll use the bed near the window for sitting on, and sleep on the other one. After making both beds, I toss Tentacle Ted on the bed by the window and start putting my clothes away. Eventually, I run out of space in one of the small dressers. I have a lot of bulky sweatshirts, so I'll need to use both dressers.

But when I open the bottom drawer of the second dresser, it's not empty. I try the other

drawers, and they're full too. A stack of black T-shirts (men's size medium), jeans, and a drawer full of boxer briefs. This room is supposed to be empty. Maybe I *do* have a roommate? But this looks like a male-identifying person's stuff. The dorms at the school are coed, but individual rooms are not.

The top drawer has some mail in it. I hate to snoop—but I need to know who, or what, I'm dealing with here.

The top letter is from the school registrar and is addressed to *Jay Hoque*.

My breath hitches. I know that name. Jay Hoque is the *missing* guy. The one who Mia thinks is most definitely *dead*. That's why Gracie looked at me like I was moving into a ghost's room. I am.

At that moment, my phone buzzes with a message. When I check it, I see that it's from the roommate-chatting feature on ResConnect. It's probably Mia begging me to come back. I open the app, intending to tell her I'm not her roommate anymore.

But it's not Mia.

Jay: Hey I just got notice you're my new roommate. Don't get too comfortable. I'll be fighting this. They told me I'd be alone all year.

I stare at the phone, blinking. So . . . Jay is back? How did I miss that the guy finally turned up? Maybe that's what that newspaper article is about?

I don't write back. What am I supposed to say? *Yay, you're not dead?*

This means I've been assigned to a room with a person already living in it. A male person. And the school won't allow a female student to live with a male one, especially in such a tiny room. The housing guy said there's nothing else in the school. I'm going to be sent back to Mia's room.

Ugh. There goes my chance for a fresh start.

THREE

Unfortunately, the university housing office is in West Hall, the building I just moved out of. With wind stinging my face, I trudge back there, cursing the storm. The whole campus looks deserted. It's creepy with the blowing snow and wind whipping the tree branches around. It feels like the end of the world.

My heart is pounding when I get to West Hall. I go straight to the first-floor offices, still not really believing that this is happening. I mean, what are the chances? Not only is the *only* empty room in the entire university not really empty after all, but it's Jay's room. Jay Hoque.

I didn't know Jay Hoque, but I'd seen him around campus a lot before he disappeared. In the student center, in dining halls, even at campus events. I'm pretty sure I even crashed into him in the library once. Actually, before he disappeared, it felt like I saw Jay *everywhere*, and when I mentioned that to Mia, she claimed I was obsessed with him or something. She even said it was just like me to lust after an unattainable guy, which was ridiculous. I wasn't *lusting* after him; it was just hard not to notice Jay.

I'm sorry for what happened to him and all, but the dude *exuded* bad-boy vibes. If this were a teen movie, he'd be either the stoner or the mysterious guy no one knows who somehow ends up with the head cheerleader. He'd be Bender if this were *The Breakfast Club*. Patrick in *10 Things I Hate About You*. Or Logan, if this were the best TV show ever, *Veronica Mars*.

And now I've seen the guy's underwear. I have no idea how I'll be able to face him on campus.

The guy who assigned me to East House is still in the housing office. I march up to his desk and put my hands on my hips, hoping a power stance will give me some confidence. "You gave me a room that has someone living in it."

The guy looks up from his computer and frowns at me like he has no idea who I am.

I exhale. "Aleeza Kassam. I was here this morning. You gave me a room in East House, but there's a guy's stuff in it. It's against school policy to room me with a male student, isn't it?"

The housing guy shakes his head. "No, that room is empty." He does something on his computer, not even looking at me. "The previous resident isn't coming back."

"You should tell him that. He told me on ResConnect not to get too comfortable because he's not supposed to have a roommate."

The housing guy suddenly freezes. His face goes a little whiter than it already was. "What did you say?"

"He messaged me in ResConnect," I say. "The residence app?" Considering this guy works at campus housing, he should know about ResConnect, shouldn't he?

The guy still looks incredibly confused. "We've had this conversation before, haven't we?"

"Yeah, earlier today when you assigned me the room. But you told me it was empty."

"No, I mean about the room being taken."

I raise a brow. "It's Jay Hoque's room. The guy in second year who went missing? He just messaged me on ResConnect."

The housing guy shakes his head. "He's not returning to the school. This morning the registrar informed us that he's been unenrolled. That's why the room was available today. Maybe

ResConnect hasn't updated your room assignment, and it was your former roommate messaging you. Let me check the system."

I wait for him to do his thing, but I know he's wrong. It wasn't Mia. The message clearly said it was from someone named Jay. After a few seconds, he looks up at me. "The system's fine. You are the only assigned resident to East House 225. Could've been a glitch—a leftover message from when he was in the room."

I pull out my phone and open the app. "I'll show you." When the chat opens, it's empty. No messages at all. Definitely not one from Jay Hoque. I frown. "I swear, the message was here."

"You're a first-year student, right?" the housing guy asks.

I nod.

"Moving away from home can be a challenging transition, and—"

"What does that have to do with the message on ResConnect?"

"You've had some recent interpersonal struggles too. Plus, talk of the missing student has affected many on campus."

I raise a brow, incredulous. "You think I'm making this up?"

His expression doesn't change. "The university has resources you can take advantage of. Individual counseling, plus support groups. I urge you to connect with the student life—"

"I'm not delusional. I *swear* there was a message from Jay here."

The guy shakes his head and points to his screen. "Jay Hoque hasn't been seen in months. I apologize for his things being left in the room. His mother hasn't returned calls to pick it up. But it's not possible that he messaged you in the app. Even if he's back, no one else is assigned to room 225 in the system, so no one can message you on ResConnect. The room-chat function only allows people assigned to the same room to communicate." He turns his monitor so I can see the room 225 information on his screen. "See? You're the only one in the room. It's a single room. Eliza Kassam."

I roll my eyes. "It's pronounced *A-lee-za*. Just like it's spelled." He doesn't say anything to that. "If it's a single room," I ask, "why are there two beds and two dressers?"

He turns his screen back to face him. "It used to be a double, but a few rooms in East House were redesignated as singles in September due to their size. If you want, I can have operations remove the extra furniture. Most students opt to keep it for storage."

This is ridiculous. I *saw* that message. But the housing guy is right about one thing . . . I *am* stressed. The whole Mia situation could be messing me up more than I realize.

"What do I do with his things?" I ask. "Can't someone come get it?"

He shrugs. "I'll put in a call, but campus security is a little short-staffed right now. Maybe you can box up his personal effects until we reach the next of kin?"

Personal effects. Next of kin. Just like Mia, the school is assuming the guy is dead. His poor mother.

"This can't be the only empty room in the whole school, can it? I don't mind a roommate. As long as it's a . . . you know. Girl."

He looks at his computer screen, shaking his head. "You were lucky to get that one."



I've missed all my classes today, thanks to this mess. And now I'm hungry. East House doesn't

have its own dining hall since it's so small, so I go to the food hall in City Tower next door. The selection there is disappointing. Sigh. That's another thing I gave up—West Hall has the best food in the school. I grab a boring-looking grain bowl to go.

When I finally get back to East House, I check my new mailbox to find it empty, then climb the stairs to the third floor. Gracie Song is in the hallway, talking to another girl. Maybe this is my chance to fix things with her? I'll be living next to Gracie until the end of the term, and awkwardly sneaking past her whenever I see her would be annoying.

"Hi, Gracie! Thanks again for helping me with my box," I say. "Looks like we'll be neighbors!"

She blinks at me. The person she's talking to, a white girl with long brown hair in a ponytail and an expensive winter coat, looks at me with a strange expression. She turns back to Gracie. "Thanks for letting me hide out in your place."

She kisses Gracie briefly on the lips and then walks toward the stairs. As she passes me, she nods toward my door. "What kind of voodoo did you do to get his room? I think it's so tacky. The room is probably cursed—you might want to burn some sage or something." The girl disappears down the stairs.

I look back at Gracie, but she doesn't seem to want to explain what her girlfriend meant. "She seems nice!" I say. I'm probably laying it on too thick.

"Are you really moving into that room?" Gracie asks. She looks irritated.

Okay. Fine. We'll skip the small talk and get right to it. I nod. "It's the only free room in the school. I had to leave my last residence. Roommate issues."

"Do you know whose room it is?"

I nod. "Yeah, the missing guy, Jay. I only discovered that after I moved in. Were . . . are you friends with him?"

Gracie crosses her arms. "No."

Now that she's taken off all her winter gear, I see that Gracie is wearing a very cute red-and-yellow floral dress with a yellow cardigan and red lipstick. Her wavy black hair reaches just past her shoulders, and her bangs fall into her eyes. Gracie is East Asian, with a round face and huge smile. She's not smiling now, though.

"I think you're in my program," I say. "Journalism, first year. I'm Aleeza Kassam."

Gracie's expression softens a tiny bit. "I thought you looked familiar."

I smile. I want to ask her why she was so spooked when she found out I was moving into Jay's room, or why her girlfriend (or hookup?) said I should burn sage, but I'm afraid that will just annoy her again.

"You really didn't know this was Jay's room?" she asks.

"No, why?"

She gives me a look that tells me she doesn't believe me, then uses the key around her neck to open her door. "Welcome to East House," she says before she shuts it behind her.

I exhale and unlock my door. It will take some work, but I'm *determined* to make Gracie my friend this term. This is supposed to be my fresh start. New residence, new Aleeza.

I already know that Mia wouldn't like Gracie. She'd call her *quirky* with that dress-and-glasses combo. She'd say that no one wears red lipstick just for class, and Gracie is trying too hard. But Mia's judgments won't affect who I associate with anymore.

I open the blinds. The room isn't really that bad. With the setting sun shining into it, it's kind of nice. Small, though. I decide to keep the extra furniture. The extra bed can be like a

couch/daybed, and I can definitely use the extra dresser.

After eating dinner while watching an episode of *Only Murders in the Building* on my laptop, I go back to my duffel and continue to unpack. I put away my school supplies, then stack my books on the extra desk. Finally, I take my now-empty box and start packing Jay Hoque's stuff, trying not to think too much about him while I'm doing it.

This whole situation is so weird. That ResConnect message, Gracie's strange reaction to me being in Jay's room. Even Gracie's girlfriend's comment that I did voodoo to get it.

Should I burn sage? I don't usually put any stock in that woo-woo mystical stuff. Tarot, crystals, and burning sage were all the rage in Alderville last year, but I didn't get involved. Those things are all based on pagan traditions or Christianity. My family is Muslim, and even though we don't really practice much, I don't want to screw up any possible afterlife by dipping my toes into something I shouldn't.

What happened to Jay is such a compelling mystery, though. A few weeks ago, I did a tiny bit of research on his disappearance, thinking I'd do an episode on his case. What I remember is that he apparently disappeared from his own room. This room. His ID card logged him coming into the building one night—and then never leaving it. Apparently, an eyewitness saw him in the mailroom on the ground floor. When campus police checked on him the next day, after his mother had said he wasn't returning her calls, he wasn't here.

There was no trace of him. He'd just *vanished*. And no one could figure out how, or why. It's not possible to leave through the room windows—they don't open more than a few inches. The front-door camera showed no sign of him leaving the building.

I suddenly remember that newspaper article I wrapped my octopus mug in. I grab it from the recycling bin.

Just under the headline—Jay Hoque's Final Days—is a picture of him. The caption says it was taken in November, days before his disappearance. I study it, even though I remember exactly what he looked like. Jay had wavy hair in the deepest black imaginable, pale-brown eyes with dark, curly lashes, and a square jaw on a narrow face. I have no idea what his ethnic background was, but he had an olive skin tone—almost faintly Mediterranean, or maybe Middle Eastern. With Jay, it was his mannerisms, his *vibe*, that made him as striking as his looks. He was a combination of aloof, rebellious, and *way too cool* for this place. And honestly? He was kind of hot. He wasn't particularly tall but had broad shoulders and a way of moving that said he didn't care if someone was in his way.

I look closer at the picture. I have seen Jay smile before—when I used to see him around campus. I remember thinking his smile looked too big for his face. But that wide smile is not in this picture. In fact, he's almost scowling. Looking straight at the camera with those haunting pale eyes. Did he know what was going to happen to him?

I skim the article. There isn't any new information in it. Mostly it goes over his last few days on campus, which were pretty normal. The writer interviewed professors in his engineering program and Emma Coffey, his ex-girlfriend (or, from what it sounds like, one of his many ex-girlfriends). Looking at her picture on the second page, I'm not sure I've seen her before. But then again, I am not sure I'd remember her if I had. There is nothing that stands out about her. She looks like any other white Canadian university student with long, honey-colored hair. Emma claims that she and Jay were together for a few months, and she saw him on campus the day before he went missing. She said he probably took off because he was caught dating too many

girls at the same time.

I chuckle to myself. If I were investigating this case, Emma is where I would start—a woman scorned. I've seen enough crime shows to know that either love or money is the motive for most crimes. I also doubt that Jay Hoque, with his devil-may-care attitude, would run away because a girl discovered he was unfaithful. He was a known player, so why would he care?

I shake my head as I toss the paper back into the recycling bin. There's no reason to obsess over the guy because I'm in his old room. I have a tendency to overthink things that don't matter to me, which is actually a great trait for a journalist. But I don't want to get too fixated on Jay Hoque. The whole situation is weirding me out, and I'd like to be able to sleep in his room. *My room.*

After unpacking everything, I head to the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth. It sucks I don't have my own bathroom anymore. No one acknowledges me there, or in the hallway. I may as well be invisible.

Maybe moving was a mistake. At least I knew people in West Hall. I could have lived with Mia and not talked to her. Or maybe we could have worked it out. I hate this feeling of being all alone. I've been feeling it a lot since Mia met Lance. Even for Christmas—we both went home to Alderville, but Mia came back to Toronto early to be with Lance and his friends, and I spent New Year's Eve with my parents.

But I'm not going to fall into despair. This is my chance to start fresh . . . make new friends. Focus on me for a change.

When I get back to my room, my phone buzzes with a notification. It's late—past eleven o'clock. I leave my bathroom caddy on my desk and unlock my phone.

It's ResConnect. Jay Hoque is messaging me again.

Heart racing, I sit on my bed to read his message.

Jay: Why are you still here? Kegan says no one else is assigned to this room, but I just got home and you're on my ResConnect again.

Jay: If this is a prank, it's not working. Stop.

I stare at the message. What. *The hell.* Is going on?

Why is Jay Hoque messaging me? Why is he existing at all? And who the hell is Kegan?

I have to agree with Jay, though, or whoever it is. This is a terrible prank. And in very bad taste, too, because the person the prankster is impersonating is *literally* a missing person. Could it be Mia? Even *she* couldn't be this heartless. Maybe Lance? Or his sister, Taylor? I wouldn't put it past them.

Or maybe lines are crossed in the app, and even though the message says it's from Jay Hoque, it's actually someone else?

Aleeza: Who are you?

Jay: I'm the person who was fucking promised no one would be moving into this room. It's supposed to be a single now.

Aleeza: No, I mean what's your name? What room? I think ResConnect is glitching.

Jay: East House room 225. I'm Jay Hoque. It says your name is Aleeza. Why are you here?

I inhale sharply when I read the name Jay Hoque. This isn't crossed wires. Clearly, it's a prank.

Aleeza: Yes, I'm Aleeza Kassam. First Year Journalism. I had to leave my other room