* ambreen Butt-Hussain *

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PRAISE FOR THE UNLOVABLE ALINA BUTT

"A heartwarming story of a misfit with no confidence who rises above it all...Filled with empathy, heart and humor, this book made me laugh and cry at moments. A compelling read that had me hooked to the end. Alina Butt is a very lovable and memorable character. She stays with you long after you finish the last page and close the book." —Shirin Shamsi, author of *The Moon from Dehradun: A Story of Partition*

"Hilarious and poignant. New immigrants will identify with Alina's problems of fitting in...Alina's journey, from being a scared girl lacking confidence to owning her heritage and being kind to everyone no matter what, is inspiring and heartwarming....

Alina Butt is anything but(t) unlovable!" —Mahtab Narsimhan, award-winning author of *The Tiffin*

"Finding a new author is like finding a new friend. I'm sure you're going to find Alina and Ambreen—to be quite lovable!"

—Eric Walters, author of the Governor General's Literary Award-winning The King of Jam Sandwiches



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Summary: In this novel for middle readers, eleven-year-old Alina has moved to a new school again, but this time she is determined to reinvent herself.

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To Ammi and Daddy, because I know it was all for us. And to my husband, Salman, for loving a Butt.





Chapter One



"Okay, get into line, everyone! Alphabetical order!" sang Ms. Pheasant, a bright smile on her face.

I knew it had been too good to be true. It was my third day at Greenhill Middle School, and up until that moment I had kept my secret safe. I had successfully been able to hide my true identity.

Assemblies in England really sucked. Back in Pakistan, we never had to line up in a particular order. We could stand wherever we wanted. As long as we were "as silent as a lizard on the wall." That was what my teacher would say. Instead of spiders, there were lizards lurking around everywhere.

Those are just a few of the *many* things that are different here.

We moved to England three years ago, and this is already my fourth time being the new kid. You would think I'd be a pro at the whole thing by now, but nope, not even close. I'm still as awkward as ever. One thing I have learned, though, is that revealing my name leads to a year of constant mockery. Which is why I'd decided I was not going to let that happen again. Sixth grade was going to be different. No matter what.

"Let's go, class! Choppity-chop-chop!" Any instruction Ms. Pheasant gave in her soft voice sounded like a song. My eyes followed her footsteps as she walked around the room, her long ponytail and flowery dress swishing as she moved.

A feeling of dread filled my entire body. All the kids around me started racing to line up.

What was the rush? We all knew our spots.

My heart pounded as I quietly sneaked to the front of the line. I stood there nervously with my head down, trying to breathe as little as possible, pretending I was invisible.

Ah. I should've known better. For some people the front of the line was too prized a place to let go of without a fight.

"That's not your spot!" Adam Atkins shouted, wedging himself ahead of me. "Go back to your own spot!"

Oh no. I knew what was coming.

I started to prepare myself, scrunching up my face and squinting my eyes as if someone was about to hit me, hard.

"*Your* last name is *Butt*. Go back to your spot"—Adam leaned in and whispered the last word, the one I had been dreading—"*butthead*."

There it was, like a slap in the face.

No. Sixth grade was supposed to be different. I had already come too far. I was not going to give up without a fight.

"Oh...um...n-no...my last name is a-actually Anwar. Alina Anwar."

I couldn't even look at him as I said it. I'm not a very good liar. Some would say that's a good thing, but it's a skill that would come in pretty handy in moments like these. Anwar is my dad's first name and my middle name. I know. Weird. But I thought it might work.

It didn't.

Adam kept going, getting louder by the second, his greeny-gold hawk eyes hooked onto their prey—me. The other kids started snickering and whispering. Now I felt all eyes on me. So much for being invisible. I was the total opposite, more like a fluorescent alien—and not the cool kind a kid might want to befriend, but a weird, ugly one that they'd just stare at from a distance. I could feel my ears burning. Beads of sweat formed on my nose.

Ms. Pheasant walked up calmly and whispered to us both, "Alina will stand in the front."

Adam started to protest. "But she's ly-"

"Alina will stand in the front," she said again more firmly. She smiled and then winked at me.

Adam scowled, crossed his arms and stomped in line behind me.

Phew. That was a relief. I was so lucky to have Ms. Pheasant as my teacher. At least that was one good thing about this place.

Ms. Pheasant smiled down the half-decent line that had finally formed. "Thank you, everyone. Now, before you head into the gym, I want to let you know about auditions for the school play. This year we're doing *Cinderella*! The sign-up sheet is posted outside."

Everyone broke into excited chatter. The line that had taken so long to form started to fall apart. As Ms. Pheasant raised her arms to motion kids back into formation, she looked down at me and whispered, "Don't forget to sign up!"

Who, me? No way. No, no, no. She doesn't know me yet. Otherwise she would never suggest such a thing. She doesn't know I have a hard time talking to just one person, let alone a whole hall full of people.

There was no way I could be in the play. Even if I had always loved the story of Cinderella, watched the movie a bazillion times and secretly dreamed a fairy godmother would come and transform *me* into a princess. Maybe I could be a rock or a tree. But definitely not a role where I had to speak.

Don't even think about it, Alina. Squish that dream. Squish it. It doesn't exist.



As we walked quietly to the assembly, like a row of perfectly lined-up ants, I thought about our school uniforms. On top each of us wore a white collared shirt, a bright-blue tie and a matching blue cardigan. Gray bottoms—skirts for the girls and pants for the boys. And while all the other girls wore cute, frilly, ankle-length white socks, I had to wear super-itchy tights.

Initially my mom had tried to convince me to wear pants instead of a skirt. We're Muslims, and my mom is the most devout in our family, so I knew she didn't like the idea of me going to school with my bare legs being exposed to "the world." But she'd tried to make it sound like it was for other reasons.

"You will look so decent and smart, Alina," she said. "And the pants will keep you warm. You say yourself it is always so cold here, even in the spring!"

"I'll look like a *boy*, Ammi!"

After what had felt like hours of arguing, we'd finally compromised and settled on the itchy tights.



I snapped out of my memory fog when I heard Adam whispering to the boy behind him.

"Imagine Butthead as Cinderella."

"Ewww!" said the other boy.

"She'd be the *butt* of all jokes!" Adam snorted. "Get it? The *butt*? Ha!" I kept my eyes focused on the floor, trying hard not to let the tears come.

I may have been at the front of the line, but I knew I had failed.

My cover had been blown.



Chapter Two



My dad pulled into the school parking lot in our rusty red car. He greeted me with his usual big smile and chirpy "Assalamu alaikum!" That's an Arabic greeting that basically means "peace be upon you."

"How was school today?" he asked.

Somehow he was always in a good mood.

"Fine," I said, not returning the smile. I closed my eyes and slumped my head back, thankful that the weekend was here. I tried hard not to imagine what I'd have to face next week now that my secret was out.

My dad was getting used to my monotonous replies. He had been dealing with them for the past few days now, and I had no plans of giving him anything better. After all, he was the reason for all this. The lifelong curse that was my last name. The move. Everything.

I didn't say another word for the whole ride home.

We pulled up to our shop, King's Fruit Market. That's what it was called when we bought it. We live on top of it

in a tiny apartment. Not long after we moved in, everyone on our street started calling my dad "the king." So since my dad was now the king, I guess that made our house the castle...and me the princess?

I sure didn't feel like it though. I just felt like a butt.

I rushed past the rows of colorful baskets of fruits and vegetables lined up outside and throughout our shop. I had to weave around customers carefully inspecting a single mango from the dozens of boxes or searching for just the right bunch of cilantro. I kept my head down to avoid making eye contact with anyone. I really wasn't in the mood to talk.

I ran upstairs, threw my bag down, rushed into the bathroom and slammed the door behind me. The tears instantly started streaming down my face. They had been waiting for me to be alone. I turned on the tap to drown out my sniffling. But my mom, with her sixth sense, somehow knew something was up.

She knocked on the door. "Alina! What's wrong? You didn't even take your lunch bag out! Come quickly! Your food will get cold!"

Ahhh! What's the hurry?

I had literally just gotten home and my mom already expected me to have taken out my lunch bag, put away my uniform and probably even finished my homework.

While my dad always appears to be in a state of bliss, as if he's just returned from an island vacation, my mom runs around like she's the prime minister, with a million things to do and a billion things to tell us. I guess they balance each other out.

"I'm coming...give me a second, Ammi."

"What's for dinner?" I heard my sister yell.

"Daal chawal," my mom replied.

"Oh yay! I love it!" my little brother chimed in.

Nooooo! I hate lentils with rice. It's my least favorite food. I would rather starve. Can this day get any worse?

We always had dinner together as a family—our "quality time," my dad calls it.

I sulked as my mom plopped a spoonful of yellow daal on top of my rice.

"Chew slowly, Fahad Butt!" my mom reminded my brother. He was scoffing down his food as if he had a train to catch. But when my mom uses our full names, we know we could soon be in big trouble. Fadi started chewing in slow motion.

"Pass the salad please," my dad said.

Salad in our house doesn't look like the ones I see Ms. Pheasant eating at her desk, a mix of lettuce and all kinds of different vegetables. Ours is just cucumbers. With some black pepper sprinkled on top. You would never think we were sitting on top of a fruit and vegetable shop.

My sister started talking about every single detail of her day. Clearly hers had gone a lot better than mine. That's nothing new.

Nadia always has a much easier time making friends in school. So far I have barely managed to say three words to the girl who sits next to me in class. Somehow Nadia instantly becomes the popular girl wherever we go. I guess being pretty helps. Or maybe it's her confidence. She wouldn't think twice about putting her name down on that play sign-up sheet.

She's three years older than me, but everyone always says we look like twins. I don't get that. Sure, we both have the same color of hair and eyes, and we both have freckles sprinkled all over our faces like confetti. But she has a perfect, dimpled smile and a cute little nose. And, most important, she knows how to talk to people without being awkward or weird.

I guess, according to my report cards, I am pretty smart. But my brown eyes are kind of like a goldfish's, and my nose is big and a bit droopy. I've been trying to fix it by holding it up with my finger for long periods of time. This technique hasn't worked yet. But if it does, that could be groundbreaking.

And then there's my hair. I've always wanted bangs, but my mom won't let me get them. At the salon we went to just before school started, the hairdresser said my forehead is too small for a fringe (that's what they call bangs here). At least, I think that's what she said. Her accent was a bit hard to understand. She and my mom basically communicated in sign language for a good ten minutes, and then she just ended up doing what her heart desired with my hair.

"You do not worry," she said. "No worry here, please."

When she was done she looked very pleased and said, "Heh? You like? You like?"

I stroked my frizzy hair slowly, which was now chopped bluntly right up to my ears. Of course, still no fringe.

My mom always tells me to be polite to my elders. So I gulped and tried to smile.

"Yes, thank you," I whispered.

So now I have a bob cut. And not a very flattering one. My solution is to always take out a few strands of hair from the middle of my head and let them fall casually next to my cheek. It's my substitute fringe.

To top off my look, my front teeth stick out like a rabbit's every time I smile. Yeah, so that's me.



As Nadia babbled on about her day, Fadi played with the crumbs on his plate with one hand, and his toy car with the other. Any stranger who sees my brother and me together knows immediately that we're related. He's just a smaller, more spaced-out version of me. He is in kindergarten in my new school. I don't think he's had any luck making friends either—he's only five and hardly knows any English. He'll pick it up fast though. It didn't take me long.

We usually speak Urdu at home, but I hadn't expected Fadi would yell "Assalamu alaikum, Alina Appa!" every time he saw me at school. I'd wave quickly, because I didn't want him to think I was ignoring him, but I would start walking away a little faster. I didn't need to give people another reason to notice me.

* * ** *

After we had finished cleaning up, my mom came to my room to ask me again what was wrong. I hadn't said much at dinner.

"Something must have happened. Just tell me, beta."

It was too hard keeping it all in. I burst. "Why do we have this name?" I yelled. "Everyone at school always makes fun of me!"

I don't know why I bothered to say anything. As usual, because this was not the first time I'd brought this up, my mom looked offended. "So what? That is your name! Being a Butt is something you should be proud of! In Pakistan people love this name!"

"Well, we're not *in* Pakistan!"

I felt like I had to remind my mom of this fact during every important discussion.

"Other kids should not be making fun. You should just tell them that this is the name you have been given, just like they have been given theirs. It does not make sense to laugh at something like this," she said.

"*Really*?" I said. She didn't seem to understand the seriousness of my situation. "How would you react if someone came to *your* school in Pakistan and said, 'Hi, my name is Sara *Pithi*'?"

She burst out laughing. *Pithi* is a very crude way of saying *butt* in Urdu.

My mom took my hand and looked me right in the eye. "Alina, beta," she said, still smiling, "everything about you is what makes you *you*. Never be ashamed of who you are. You must learn to love your name and own it with pride. And when you do, everyone around you will love it too."

I was not sure I believed that.

Who could ever love a butt?



Chapter Three



"When you come back home, you'll be saying, 'How do you do, old chap?' and 'Blimey, I just love it in England!'" My aunt tried to put on a British accent, doing her best impression of the future me.

She hugged me tightly as she said goodbye.

As we drove off, I popped my head out the window, waving to my family as they stood outside the white gate of my dada jaan's house. We had spent so many hot afternoons walking with my grandfather around his neighborhood, convincing him to buy us snacks from the street carts parked at every corner. And now we were leaving it all behind. I kept waving until all I could see were tiny specks in the distance...

The light from the sun shining into our room woke me up. I rolled over to see Nadia digging her face into the blanket, probably trying to make her dream last a little bit longer. I put my pillow on top of my face in an attempt to do the same. *Take me back. Take me back*, I told my brain. That last memory of my childhood in Pakistan kept appearing in my dreams over and over again. It was the ninth of October, 1997. My final goodbye to my family. I always want it to end differently—maybe the car turns around, maybe my parents change their mind. But it never does. We always leave. That time seems so far away now, and kind of blurry, just like those specks in the distance I waved to, but the memories always keep my heart warm.

I plopped the pillow onto the floor and sighed. It wasn't working. I couldn't get back into the dream. It was gone, and I was stuck here. But at least I wasn't alone.

"Nadia. Nadia! Get up."

My sister slowly opened her eyes, squinting to avoid the blinding light. We hadn't gotten curtains for our room yet, so it was really hard to sleep in for too long. But at least we finally had proper beds. Nadia and I have always shared a room. We'd spent the first three years in England sleeping on just the single mattresses placed on the bare floors of our various apartments. Thankfully we'd come a long way since then. We had actual bed frames now.

"You okay, Beans?" Nadia mumbled.

Only she calls me that.

"I had that dream again. The one where we're saying bye to everyone."

I could tell by her face that she meant something else. And I also knew she wasn't going to give up.

"Come on, tell me what happened."

All it took was that little nudge, and everything that had happened the day before started pouring out of me like word vomit.

"...and everyone will laugh and they all probably hate me, and my plan has failed already and I can't even sign up for the play..." I finally stopped to take a deep breath. A few tears rolled down my cheek.

"Who says you can't?" asked Nadia.

I stared at her blankly.

Well, no one, I thought. But I was pretty sure it was an unwritten rule somewhere that people like me don't sign up for stuff like that.

"What's the worst that could happen?" Nadia continued. "You already have no friends, so you really have nothing to lose."

"Shut up!" I cried, even though I was laughing now.

"But it's true, right? You think too much, Alina," she added.

But isn't thinking a good thing? I like to think. I think thinking always helps me. Except when it makes me sad. Or scared. Or angry. Okay, maybe sometimes it doesn't help me.

My sister wasn't finished. "Sometimes you just gotta do things, Beans. Just jump in the water. It feels cold at first, but then it always warms up."

Easy for her to say.

Not quite ready to face the day yet, Nadia and I snuggled up in our duvets and spent an hour or so giggling and telling each other funny stories from the happy times in Pakistan. I missed being surrounded by cousins, playing in the rain, jumping on our grandfather's bed, racing on our big balconies with the neighbors on the other side of our narrow street. I still didn't understand why my parents had wanted to leave all that behind and move to a place where we hardly knew anyone. We sure hadn't asked them to. They'd just decided, without even consulting the people it would affect the most!

Whenever I'd asked my mom about it, she always said, "We came here for you three. This is all for you. One day you'll see."

All right, Ammi, I guess we will see.



Still feeling sleepy, I trudged to the dining table. My mom had already laid out our favorite cereals. I picked the most chocolatey one and poured it into my bowl. I felt better with each bite. I guess there were some good things about moving here. In Pakistan I'd never really had cool cereals like these. I'd been allowed maybe one treat in a week, and I'd thought I was lucky for even that. Here, people have something called a pantry—a whole cupboard dedicated to just delicious snacks that you can eat at any time. It's basically paradise. The first time I saw a pantry, in my aunt's house, I decided that having one was going to be a life goal. One day I will have a huge pantry, I promised myself. And then I will never be sad. When we'd first left Pakistan, we had gone to Scotland and lived with my aunt, uncle and four cousins. Eleven people in one house. You can just imagine how that went. Being around family had been nice. It had made the initial blow of the move a little easier. But having so many people living under one roof, not to mention the fact that most of us were meeting each other for the first time, hadn't been easy.

Nadia had had the hardest time settling in, or at least that's what it seemed like anyway. Maybe because she's the oldest, she felt every emotion we did but multiplied by a hundred. She's still like that. If she's sad, pretty much the whole world will know she's sad. No one will know why, but you will know for sure what she's feeling. She's not afraid to show it. And then magnify it by a hundred, like I said. I'm pretty sure that back then she used to cry more than Fadi did, and he was just a baby. She would spend hours begging my parents to take her back home. Clearly it didn't work.

After a few months we'd moved to England and lived in a number of different cities as my parents set out on what felt at that time like a never-ending search to find the perfect place to settle down. This "perfect place" ended up being Walsall, where my dad bought his very own fruit and vegetable shop. Back in Pakistan, where he'd worked in an office and worn a suit and tie, he had never imagined he would be running a store. I had never imagined we would be living on top of one, but here we all are! Walsall is a quaint town with narrow, cobbled roads that always seem wet. Very different from the dusty roads in Pakistan. Our neighborhood is filled with colorful little shops that have apartments above them, just like our own. There are people from all over the world living here, yet everyone seems to know each other. They're all generally pretty friendly, but my dad always warns us to be careful. The area we live in is known to be a rougher part of town. So much for that "perfect place," right?



After breakfast I asked my dad if I could go outside to ride my bike. He has three standard answers to requests like these. "Make sure you come back inside when the sun starts setting," "Only bike around the shop, where I can see you" or, my favorite, "Take your little brother with you." He went with the third option this time.

He seems to think that going out with Fadi, a tiny blob half my size, will help keep me safe.

"Daddy, I think I'm okay to go by myself today?" It sounded like I was asking him rather than telling him.

"Hmm. Are you sure?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes," I said, trying to sound confident.

"Okaay. Just be careful."

I nodded and headed downstairs. Maybe Nadia's fearless energy was slowly starting to make its way over to me. Very slowly. I rode around our neighborhood, being a little extra cautious, gripping my bike handles tighter each time a stranger passed by.

I thought about the sign-up sheet. Nope. Still not ready to put my name on it.

Baby steps, Alina, baby steps. You'll get there. Possibly. Maybe. Okay, no more thinking. Just pedal.

I took a deep breath in and focused on enjoying the feeling of the air whipping through my hair, my fake fringe flying freely in the wind.



Chapter Four



I had never taken my dad's warnings about the "dangers" of our neighborhood too seriously. But that Saturday night I decided to tag along with my mom on her grocery run. She'd passed her driver's test two years ago but had only just started driving by herself. This was a big deal. She was getting pretty comfortable with the driving part of it but often got nervous about parking. She'd usually ask me to roll down my window and make sure the car was within the yellow lines.

On this night my mom seemed to be in a bit of a rush. She didn't even ask me to help with the parking.

"Hurry up, Alina, let's go!"

I quickly opened my door and heard a dull bump. *Uh-oh.*

I hadn't realized we were parked so close to the car next to us. I got out and bent down to see how bad it was. Thankfully it was only a tiny scratch. I figured it wouldn't be a big deal. I was wrong. I stood up and locked eyes with the man still sitting in the driver's seat. Without thinking, I smiled. *Ah!* Not a great idea. He opened his door, almost knocking me over, climbed out and then slammed it shut. He didn't even look at the door before storming around the back of our car and toward my mom.

"What have you done?" he yelled. "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

My mom managed a thin whisper. "I'm very sorry, sir."

I wasn't sure he'd even heard her. Wide-eyed, I jerked my head in his direction, trying to signal to her that she needed to say it again. She didn't get my hint. He kept yelling as my mom stood there frozen. People started to stop and stare. After a few minutes that felt more like hours, my mom told me to get back in the car.

Gladly. I wanted to be as far away from this man as I could get. We both rushed into our car and I quickly shut my door, feeling just a little safer as the man turned away as well. *Phew*. It was over.

My mom didn't speak as she pulled out of the parking lot, but I could tell she was still really scared. I was too. I looked back and was shocked to see the man's car close behind. *Oh no.* He was following us!

"Ammi, he's still there."

"Just don't look, Alina."

I could sense the panic in her voice. It was hard not to look. I peeked behind me again.

Yup. Still there.

We got home. My mom pulled into the driveway behind the store and told me to get out quickly and run inside. But before I could, the man swerved up, his brakes screeching. He got out and continued shouting at my mother.

"Why do you come here when you're not going to follow the rules!"

"It was an accident—I apolog—"

"Oh, there's *always* an excuse, isn't there?" A thick piece of the man's gray hair moved back and forth in front of his eyes as he shook his head wildly.

I was too terrified to move. I stared at the purple vein throbbing on his forehead.

"I'm sorry," my mom said again as she tried to push me behind her.

Just then Tony, one of our employees, opened the store door. He immediately went back inside, yelling, "Mr. Butt, Mr. Butt!"

My dad appeared almost instantly. He strode over and stood between us and the man.

"Get away from my family," he said firmly. "Now."

The man didn't budge. He yelled some words I can't repeat, spit shooting out from his mouth.

"Look at what they've done to my car!" he continued, gesturing toward the driver's-side door. "LOOK AT IT!"

I peeked out from behind my dad, squinting to try to see the scratch. It was tiny.

Should I say something? Nadia's words rang in my head. What's the worst that could happen?

I looked up at the man with the wild hair and bloodshot eyes. Nope. A lot could happen. Silence was probably best. I decided to stay hidden from view till it was all over.

"We can pay for the damage," my father said calmly. "But if you do not move back, I will have to call the police."

"You DON'T belong here! GO BACK HOME!" the man screamed in reply. Then he kicked our car door, got into his car and sped away.

I looked at our car and the deep dent his foot had created. Now *that* I could definitely see.

My dad put his arms around my mom's and my shoulders and said, "That man does not decide where our home is. *We* do."

My sister rushed outside. "Tony told me what happened! I can't believe that guy! I should've been there! I would've..." Her voice trailed off.

I looked up at my mom's face and then down at the ground, thinking what my brave sister might have done. Not nothing, like me. Nadia and my dad are the kind of people who can handle situations like these.

Since that day my mom hasn't driven again. I think she holds herself responsible for what happened.

I, on the other hand, who was actually the one to blame for it all, have opened and closed car doors about a thousand times already. It just can't be avoided.

But something in me did change after that day, though.

Usually it's the loud noises coming in through my window, of people pounding on each other's doors and

yelling about money that's owed to them, that keeps me from falling asleep. But that night I kept hearing the man yell, "Go back home!" I tried to imagine that I was lying in my old bed, in my old room. Slowly I started to hear the sounds of a rickshaw clattering outside and the howls of dogs running free.

As I drifted off to sleep, I felt like I was back home again.

But to be honest, I don't really know where home truly is anymore.



Chapter Five



After two days of being away from it all, I was ready to enter the gruesome arena again, better known as the school cafeteria. It's the busiest place in the building, filled with the buzz of a hundred voices, but it's also the place where I usually feel the loneliest.

I found an empty seat next to a group of girls and sat there quietly eating the contents of my lunch bag—my mom's biryani. Although her famous biryani gets tons of compliments from all the uncles and aunties that come over to our place, this was not the same crowd. I hastily closed the lid after every bite to keep the smell of the spices trapped in my container. I didn't want to offend the nostrils of all these sophisticated bologna-sandwich eaters. The girls next to me huddled together, talking excitedly. I tried to lean in a little to listen.

Even though I learned English in Pakistan and always got As on my report card, when we moved to England, I could barely make out a sentence. The other kids may as well have been speaking Japanese. They spoke superfast, and their posh British accents made it really hard to understand them. I would sit there dazed, dreamily listening to their voices, not quite getting any of their jokes and, quite often, their insults. I didn't care. I just wanted them to keep talking. I think that's probably why the past three years in all those different schools feel like a blur to me. I'm a lot better now, but I still get lost sometimes.

I cleared my throat, waiting for the right moment to join their conversation. *Just jump in the water, like Nadia said*, I told myself. Trying to push my fear aside, I took a deep breath.

"Oh, so do you like may-oh-knees in your sandwich?" I said to the girl next to me, a little louder than I had intended.

Yes, I know, an odd question to ask. Like I already told you, I'm clearly still learning the art of making conversation.

The girl seemed confused. "Pardon?" she asked, looking me up and down.

I was confused too. I repeated the main word, slower and louder. "May-oh-knees."

She looked at me, blinked and then said, "Oh, *mayonnaise*. Yeah...I guess I like it. What's *that*?" she asked, pointing at my lunch.

Oh no. I had forgotten to close the lid.

"Umm...biryani...it's rice with—"

"K. Weird." Then she turned her back to me and kept talking to the other girls.

Was that weird good or weird bad? Who am I kidding? There's no way weird can be good. Feeling deflated, I closed the container, which I never should've opened to begin with. Along with my mouth.

"My mom said she's going to buy me a new dress if I get the part of Cinderella," I heard the girl say.

I thought about letting them know that I wanted to try out too. I opened my mouth to speak but quickly shut it. They would laugh at the idea, I was sure. They'd just seen that I clearly couldn't even put two sentences together. If they couldn't accept me in their conversation, how could they possibly accept me as the star of their school play? There was no way I could let them in on my secret dream. They would crush it. Nope. Back to pretending to look busy instead.

* * ** *

When I got home I told Nadia about the strange interaction I'd had in the cafeteria.

"I jumped in the water like you told me to, and guess what? Not only was it cold, but there were sharks in it! And I have no interest in being eaten alive!"

She started laughing. "Beans, I told you, you have to *stay* in the water. It gets better! I promise!"

"But what about the extremely evil sharks?"

"Remember that sea-world thing we were watching?" Nadia asked. "What do sharks eat?"

I love marine life. I'd watched tons of documentaries about it. So I knew the answer.

"They eat seals, sea lions and other marine mammals. They usually go for whichever they think is the weakest creature."

"Do they eat humans?"

"Well...not really. Only when they're confused."

"Exactly. Those girls just need to get to know you, and then they won't be confused. They're not going to eat you alive. Because even though you may look like a seal, you're not one."

"Sealie! Sealie sealie!" Fadi sang loudly, stomping around us with a pair of shorts on his head.

I laughed.

"And you're definitely not weak," Nadia added.

Maybe she was right. I could try again.

Nadia's always there for me. Like last year, when she convinced me not to wear a T-shirt with my face on it for picture day. I had thought it would be cool to get a picture with two of my faces instead of just one—isn't that what they call "bang for your buck"? Thankfully that disaster was averted.

Fadi was now slithering on the floor like a snake, his T-shirt riding up, his tubby stomach popping out.

The poor guy was probably going to have an even harder time fitting in than I was. But he didn't seem to care. He was happy in his own little world. Sometimes I wished I could do that. Just be lost in *my* own world. No worries, no cares, no Adam Atkins. Just me, Nadia and, all right, I guess this tiny blob too.

I poked Fadi's tummy with my foot, and he giggled.