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The Secret Lives of the Amir Sisters

Written by Nadia Hussain
with Ayisha Malik

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The Secret Lives of the Amir Sisters

Nadiya Hussain
with Ayisha Malik



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES



This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

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I would like to dedicate this book to my Baba.
For putting up with my teenage angst and telling me
‘One day you will actually like me young lady’.
As much as it pains me to admit it, you were right,
and I do actually quite like you now.

CHAPTER ONE

Fatima

It's going to be fine. I wiped the palms of my hands on my trousers that crinkled from the sweat. Before I realised it my hand lunged towards my bedside drawer, shuffling around to try and find my stash. *How could I have run out?* Going downstairs wasn't an option given that I heard Mum on the phone with Jay. That's the first time he's called in two months. Every time after a conversation with him there's always this odd kind of quiet that's filled with trivial stuff like, *Did you get the toilet paper?* And *Let's re-arrange the family album.* Mum can never quite look any of us in the eye, while Dad goes into the garden to inspect the flowers. I took a deep breath and went to open the window in my room. Just as I'd predicted, there he was, standing with his hands on his hips, staring at his begonias.

I glanced at the next-door neighbours and quickly looked away. Marnie was out, sunbathing, stark naked. My eyes hovered towards her again. Amazing, isn't it? She hasn't a care in the world about who's looking at her and what others might think. What about all the insects in the grass? What if they decided to make a detour right up her ... *ugh*. Still, that is what you call *being sure of yourself*. Her whole family's like that. Naked, but sure of themselves. Dad scratched his head and bowed it so low it looked like he might've dropped

off to sleep. I wanted to go down and talk to him about his flowerbed, but I hate leaving my room – the comfort of its four walls and dim light. I turned around and reached into my drawer again, just to double-check its contents, and right there at the bottom I felt the steely tube; crumpled, but there was hope. Lifting it out, I saw that my tube of Primula cheese had been squeezed to within an inch of its life. I unscrewed the lid and pushed into the top – a meagre bit of cheese poked out of the nose and back in again. Just then I heard Mum rapping at the kitchen window.

'Jay's Abba. Come inside,' she said to Dad.

I watched Dad peer in at her, confused. Not because she referred to him as Jay's dad – we're Bangladeshi, after all, and there are some traditions you can't let go of; like calling your partner by your eldest child's name. Except in this case – even though *I'm* the eldest – it's Jay's name because he's their only son. It doesn't bother me though – not really.

'Come inside,' Mum repeated to Dad.

I guess she saw that Marnie was out too. There was nothing for it; I had to go down eventually, anyway, considering what day it was. So, I made my way down the stairs and into the kitchen.

'Don't be nervous,' said Mum as I sat down at the table.

'I'm not,' I said, trying to smile without wanting to be sick everywhere.

She blew over me after having muttered a prayer.

'Have you said your prayers?' she asked.

'Yes,' I lied.

She patted my head and put a plate of biscuits in front of me, before going to make tea for Dad. He looked towards Mum, standing at the kitchen hob, and then over his shoulder. Reaching into his pocket, he handed me some money, putting his finger to his lips. I forgot about my nerves for a minute as

I mouthed ‘Thank you’ and tucked the money into my jeans pocket. I don’t know why he hides the fact that he gives me money for all my driving lessons from Mum – but it’s become our little secret.

‘Remember,’ he said, clearing his throat. ‘You look into the rear-view mirror every few seconds, they will pass you.’

‘That’s what you said last time, Abba,’ said Mae, who’d wandered in, holding her phone’s camera towards us. ‘It’s time for some new advice. For my video, thanks.’

‘Switch that off and help me make the dinner,’ said Mum to her. ‘Farah is coming later.’

Mae rolled her eyes. ‘Or maybe you should get a new driving instructor,’ she said. ‘Because he’s obvs not doing something right.’

Dad scratched his jet-black hair. I wish he’d let it go grey like normal dads do. No-one actually believes his hair is that black.

‘No,’ he said. ‘You know how long it took to find a Bengali instructor? Lucky he is just in the next town.’

But Mae had already stopped listening and was tapping something on her phone.

‘Don’t worry, Abba – I’ll remember to check all the mirrors,’ I replied before turning to Mum. ‘Is Farah coming alone?’

‘Yes, she’s not staying long,’ said Mum.

Of course she wasn’t. She’d be going home to her husband. I imagined her greeting him as he walked through the door. Or maybe she’d be in the bathroom and he’d call out to her? I do like it when the two of them come over sometimes, though. It’s like watching TV but in real life. Only, every time they leave I’m left with this hollow feeling inside, because it *is* real life – just someone else’s. I picked up a biscuit to go with the squeazy cheese Mum had just put on the table for me, but it

was snatched from my hands. Mae, of course. She handed me a carrot stick instead while eyeing a bottle of olive oil.

‘Mum, that isn’t organic,’ she said.

‘Mae,’ said Dad. ‘We didn’t have organic in our day and we are fine and healthy.’

‘Yeah, right,’ she retorted.

A car horn beeped outside. I gulped as my mum and dad both looked at me. *Everyone takes their driving test*, I tried to reason with myself. *What is there to be nervous about? So what if, at the age of thirty, I’ve failed before? And the time before that? And so many times before that?* My heart felt too big for my chest. I took the tube of cheese as I got up and made my way to the front door.

‘Say bismillah before you begin,’ Mum shouted out.

Bismillah. In the name of God. What was the point in telling Mum that I’d tried that before each driving test and it’s not exactly worked so far.

‘I will,’ I called out.

I steeled myself as I put my hand on the front door handle. *You can do this.* Because whatever happens you don’t just give up on a thing, do you? Opening the door, I saw my instructor’s red Nissan Micra parked outside our home. Ashraf lowered his head, dark hair flopping over his eyes, and waved at me. I took another deep breath before setting foot outside the door.

*

‘You shouldn’t get so nervous,’ he said as I steered the car into a parking spot outside the test centre after I’d had my lesson.

I tried to swallow the lump in my throat as I looked up at the brown building. *I can’t fail again.*

‘Okay,’ I said.

‘Don’t just say okay. Mean it,’ he replied, softening his tone. ‘You drove well.’

‘Okay.’

‘Fatima, the problem isn’t whether you can do this or not – the problem is you *believing* you can do it.’

I stared at the steering wheel because he was right, of course. But it was all such an embarrassment. Which thirty-year-old woman struggles this much with a driving test? It’s just that I *know* if I can do this, I’ll be able to get my life in order. I’d be free. *Independent* – not have to rely on someone to drop me off or pick me up for my next hand-modelling shoot. I looked at my hands – my source of income.

‘And don’t feel sorry for yourself,’ he added.

I looked at him. ‘I’m not feeling sorry for myself.’

‘Okay, okay,’ he replied, putting his hands up, the cuff of his electric-blue shirt riding up. ‘Just checking.’

I took a deep breath and got a whiff of Ash’s aftershave. Maybe I was feeling sorry for myself.

‘How’s Sam?’ I asked, glancing at the clock and wanting to forget that my test was in under fifteen minutes.

‘Teenage girls will be teenage girls,’ he replied. ‘But she’s a good girl, really. Just hiding it well. Really well. Either that or she’ll take after her mum,’ he added.

I tried to give him a reassuring smile. ‘No. She’s half you too,’ I replied.

‘I’m not sure that counts for much. But at least my son’s tamer. He might be two years her junior but he’s also about ten years wiser.’

‘He does sound it,’ I replied, remembering all the stories I’d heard about him.

It’s so weird to think that Ashraf has two teenage children when he’s not more than five, maybe six or seven, years older than me. It’d be rude to ask.

‘She probably regrets things,’ I said.

He smiled and brushed something off his black jeans. Mae would have something to say about a man who wears black jeans. ‘*So uncool.*’ I wish I had been as sure of myself at that age; to be able to say what you think out loud. I wish I was that sure of myself *now*. My little Mae, who’s able to say what she wants and still manage not to offend anyone.

‘If my ex-wife regrets leaving, then her getting married to another man is a huge mistake,’ he said.

‘Oh. I didn’t know. Sorry.’

‘Don’t be. He’s giving her a detached house and an expensive car – all the things I couldn’t. Or didn’t. Either way, it doesn’t matter.’

How did we even get talking about his wife? If you have a driving instructor for long enough you’ll probably end up knowing more about their life than you do your own brother or sister’s. At least, that’s how I feel. I remember when I started my lessons he’d only just left her. She did sound like a bit of a shrew; not that Ash would say as much, but why would you come all the way from Bangladesh to England to marry a man, only to get permanent stay here, then make his life so miserable that he’s forced to leave you?

‘What matters is your test,’ he added. ‘Did your mum tell you to say your prayers?’

I nodded.

‘And your dad told you to check your mirrors?’

‘Yes.’

‘And Mae ...?’

‘Gave me carrots.’

‘Good – so everything as usual then.’

I laughed. He must think my family is crazy. They do sound it when I talk about them. Funny that I always feel fonder of them when I tell him about the latest drama in the Amir

household. My hands had stopped sweating and when he said it was time to go I didn't want to reach into my bag for some Primula cheese.

Because we should always remember: *what doesn't kill us, only makes us stronger.*

CHAPTER TWO

Mae

‘What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. That’s my sister, Fatti’s, motto every time she fails her driving test, which would be – not even exaggerating – for the *fifteenth* time now. That’s right. *Fifteen*. It’s kind of a rich thing to say when she walked into the house, with cheese all over her chin. Remember, guys: saturated fat does not make you stronger. Just looking at the gooey substance smeared on her face made me want to take a shot of wheatgrass. Anyway, ciao for now. More on the trials and tribulations of a millennial living in a Wyvernage later.’

I came out of Snapchat and stopped jogging on the spot for my warm-down after my run. Checking my Fitbit as I walked into the house, I called up to Dad from the passage.

‘Bet that run would’ve taken care of your headache, Dad.’

Headache – *yeah, right*. I walked back into the kitchen because where else would Fatti be? ‘Look what I made,’ I said, carefully placing the phone upright so the video captured me opening the fridge.

Fatti looked at the celery salad in disgust, scrunching up the pudgy nose she hates so much, even though I think it’s cute in its own way. But, hey, I’m the youngest in the family – what do I know?

‘Is that camera on again?’ asked Fatti. ‘Where’d Mum put the prawns?’

Of course the camera was on again. What would it take for my family to realise that this wasn't some hobby now – it was *work*. I'd have the best GCSE media project in the year. No other student had eleven thousand subscribers on their YouTube channel. I stepped in front of our huge silver fridge. 'It's a scientific fact that celery can speed up your metabolism,' I said, putting the bowl down in front of her.

'Don't worry, Fatti,' said the mothership who'd walked in. She adjusted the drape of her sari and glared at me, which meant I should move out of the way or I might have a slipper thrown at my face. 'You will pass the test next time.'

And she handed her the prawns, which I guess brought a bit of balance to the synthetic cheese in a tube.

'Mae, can't you eat like a normal girl?' said Mum, looking at my salad. 'Don't you want your amma's delicious curries?'

No, thanks. I'd rather not have a heart attack, but of course I didn't say that because it would've been rude. I stepped back and zoomed the camera in on Mum who put her hand on Fatti's cheek. I had to shirk off this weird feeling I got – as if I'm missing out on something. I tried to remember the last time Mum put her hand on my cheek. I couldn't. Just then the front door opened and slammed shut again. Farah tumbled in with about seven shopping bags as Fatti went to help her. There was a look on Farah's face, which I wanted to capture, but I couldn't zoom in close enough – what was it? Like sadness, but it disappeared too quickly, because as soon as Mum came into view Farah put on a smile.

'I see Mae's busy with her high-school assignment,' said Farah, raising an eyebrow. 'Perhaps put the camera down for a moment and help with the bags?'

I rolled my eyes. The thing is, I don't mean to, but it kind of just happens. Apparently it's called having an attitude problem. Whatever.

'Is ...' Farah cleared her throat. 'Is Bubblee here?'

Farah's movements slowed down as Mum told her: 'She's so busy in London. She said she can't make it this weekend either.' Mum's sigh was audible.

'All she'd do is smear mud all over the carpet and call it art. Ugh,' I said, repulsed at the chocolate digestives that Farah put on the breakfast table. 'Do you know obesity is one of the top killers in the UK?'

'Tst,' said Mum to me as she continued: 'If Bubblee comes I might be able to show her some boys. She is so beautiful – maybe someone will marry her before she opens her mouth. And then at least *she* will give me grandchildren.'

Mum glanced at Farah not so discreetly, waiting to catch her eye, just so she could give her an aggrieved look. Because that's how Mum rolls.

'You haven't heard that for five minutes, have you?' I said to Farah.

She pursed her lips as she turned to Fatti. 'Well. How'd the test go?' she said, a hopeful look on her face.

Fatti shook her head. 'But it's okay. What doesn't kill you—'

'—Yeah, yeah,' I said, catching Fatti staring at Farah's wedding ring. 'We know.'

Mum slapped me across the back of the head. I swear I have a bald patch because of her. I got my phone and tapped on the Twitter icon:

Some people have alopecia, others suffer from male-pattern baldness – I have a mother who likes to hit me across the head #Abrasiveparents #Hairloss #Aintfair #Meh #Whatever

Fatti walked out of the kitchen as I saw Farah's eyes settle on our sister's widening arse. I mean, *hello*, why doesn't anyone say anything to her? I'm the only one who cares enough about

her arteries to make a celery salad, and then I'm the one everyone shouts at for being 'insensitive'. Yeah, well, when she's in hospital because she needs a bypass at the age of thirty-five, then we'll talk about who's been insensitive.

'Mum, you really need to stop buying all that cheese in a tube,' said Farah.

Mum, as usual, opted for selective hearing and asked Farah whether she got more prawns. Fatti likes to mash them up and mix it with the cheese. If that doesn't make you vom, I don't know what will.

'Here,' said Farah, handing an envelope to Mum. 'Five hundred.'

Mum quietly took it and slid it into her drawer. More money. From Jay, the prodigal son. Why our brother doesn't give it to Mum and Dad directly, I don't know. I decided that no-one cares about what I have to say and took the bowl of salad upstairs to Dad.

'Come in,' he said as I entered Mum and Dad's room.

He was lying on the bottom bunk, scratching at the wood panel above him, but sat up, craning his head forward so he didn't hit it against the bunk's panel.

'How's the headache?' I asked.

'Hmm? *Oh*, yes,' he replied, putting his hand on his head. 'Better.'

Of course it was.

'Mum was on top last night then?' I said, settling down next to him, holding on to the bowl of salad.

He looked at me, momentarily taken aback. 'Oh. Yes. On top,' he replied. His eyes settled on the salad.

'I guess you don't want it either,' I asked.

They say youth is energy. Like, you should be grateful for it and stuff. But youth to me feels like wading through a mass of crap, wishing someone would give you direction because

you can't see (because there's crap in your eyes, obv). Dad's top lip twitched – his eyes still on the salad.

'Yes, yes. I'll have it,' he said, picking up a celery stick and crunching into it. It took him about five minutes to swallow the thing.

We sat in silence for a few minutes. Then Dad said: 'How is school?'

'Yeah, cool,' I replied.

He scratched his chin. 'And, er ... this video,' he said, looking at my phone with concentration. 'You are filming things?'

'*Correcto-mundo.*'

He looked at me, confused.

'It just means, yes, Abba.'

'Ah, good, good,' he replied.

'My teacher said I've got talent,' I told him.

'That's very good.'

I waited for him to ask me some more questions: like, what kind of talent, and what will you do with it when you leave high school? That kind of thing.

After a bit more silence, he asked: 'You like those smoothies, don't you?'

'Only the homemade ones, because you can't trust what supermarkets put in stuff.'

'But we buy everything from supermarkets.'

'Yeah, but they've got all those e-numbers and stuff.'

'E-numbers?'

I nodded. 'It's unhealthy. It's *killing* us.'

'But there is nothing wrong with us,' he replied, looking at his body up and down as if it was an example of supreme health.

It was like trying to explain fashion to Fatti. I gave up.

'You know what is healthy?' he asked.

'What?'

‘YouTube,’ he answered. ‘Very good. For the brain.’

What the hell was my dad going on about?

‘Er, okay.’

He hesitated then said: ‘You said you had sscribers.’

‘Subscribers, Abba.’

‘Oh, yes. That’s what I meant.’

‘And?’

He cleared his throat. ‘Just ... carry on.’

‘Sure, Abba. Thanks.’

We both sat in silence for a few minutes.

‘Oh, I know,’ I exclaimed. ‘I’ll make tofu curry tonight. For dinner.’

Dad nodded, as if there was someone forcing the movements of his head, and patted me on my back. It’s not on the cheek. Not like it is for Fatti, or a hand on the head like it is for Farah; the pinching of the nose like it is for Bubblee. But who really cares?