

Sara

Cooking is painful. Sitting at the back of an afterschool cooking club I didn't sign up for is even worse. And listening to a bunch of whiny white kids complain about the cooking club is actually excruciating.

Especially because my mom is the teacher.

I look at the clock on the wall. Three thirty p.m. This is going to be a long afternoon.

"Now, class, please settle down and join me at the table," Mama calls politely, her hijab slightly askew, sweat shining on her forehead.

I cringe. I can't help it. Her Pakistani accent is thick, even though she's lived in the United States for almost three decades.

The kids in Mama's class giggle and look at their phones, their bored fingers swiping the screens. They're a small group, twelve middle-schoolers. There are only two boys, even though the flyer Mama spent so much time on specifically said everyone was welcome. A few are veterans, seventh- and eighth-graders who did cooking club with the original teacher, Chef Elaine. From the way they keep throwing suspicious looks at Mama, it's clear they don't think anyone can replace their teacher, especially not some foreign lady in a hijab.

I stifle a sigh. Everyone stands in pairs in Poplar Springs Middle School's kitchen classroom, where I'll be taking FACS—Family and Consumer Science—later this year. I hang back from the group, near the giant metal appliances. There's an open kitchen with neatly stacked pots and pans where the FACS teacher, Mrs. Kluckowski, does demonstrations. But there are also six cooking stations for kids, each with its own stovetop, oven, and sink. A metal island on wheels stands in the middle of the room. Mama waves and points, finally convincing everyone to gather around. Supplies for the club's first recipe are piled on the island: a brown bag labeled ZEBRA BASMATI RICE, a bucket full of onions and potatoes, a bunch of wilting cilantro, and a few bright tomatoes.

Thank God I'm not part of this stupid club, I think as I stretch out my legs on the floor and lean against the wall. It's an inconspicuous spot at the back of the kitchen, near the metal refrigerator. I make a small pile of my things on the floor: backpack, sketchbook, a can of still-cold Coke. It's not as if I'm trying to disappear, but I won't exactly be upset if these junior chefs don't notice me. Like that would ever happen.

Poplar Springs is a small suburb in central Maryland, halfway between Baltimore and Washington, D.C. Some residents can trace their families back generations; others are transient, moving every time they get a new job. There are a handful of brown people. Most of the Muslim kids go to an Islamic school called Iqra Academy, thirty minutes away.

Not all, though; there are two eighth-grade girls I know from the mosque. I sometimes see them laughing in the hallways, but they just nod at me. There's also Ahsan Kapadia in sixth grade, but we don't share any classes. Like me, he's quiet and keeps to himself. Like me, he was at Iqra until middle school.

I sigh again as I think about my school. At least, it was my school until this fall. My best friend, Rabia, who I've known since preschool, doesn't understand why I left. To be honest, neither do I. It was one of those decisions eleven-year-old girls don't get to make on their own.

Like which afterschool clubs to be present at, apparently.

I've already gotten narrow-eyed looks from the other kids. I think a couple of them are sixth-graders too, new to Poplar Springs Middle, like me. I feel their questions hanging in the air like heavy steam. I bet they're dying to ask who I am, if the lady in the headscarf is my mom or my aunt. As if all Muslims know each other.

Then there's Mrs. Kluckowski, short and barrel-chested, wearing a brown blouse and a plaid skirt that reaches almost down to her puffy ankles. Frizzy hair frames her frowning face. She stands near me at the back of the room, writing in a small notebook. Finally, she gives Mama a stern look and walks away.

No worries. I'm a master at ignoring people. You have to be when your parents get dirty looks at the mall and somebody shouts, "Go back home!" a couple of times a year. You definitely have to be when not even one of your close friends from elementary school is in this new, very large middle school. I think of Baba's favorite quote from that eighties show he loves, *The A-Team*: "Pity the fools." And if that doesn't work, ignore them.

Unfortunately, ignoring is difficult right now. "Class, let's get started," Mama practically shouts. Her accent is more pronounced, with the *T*'s and *R*'s harder, so I can tell she's getting annoyed. She holds up a wooden spatula. "Can anyone tell me the correct name for this utensil?"

"What's she saying?" A tiny girl with freckles and a thin, dark ponytail whispers so loud that everyone starts giggling again.

I feel a frown digging into my forehead. These girls really are the height of disrespect. If Rabia were here, she'd walk right up to them, hands on hips, long braid swishing like a whip from under her hijab, and tell them to knock it off. I feel a little sorry for Mama. She's chewing her lip, ruining that pink lipstick she put on at the last minute. She looks as if she's about to drop the spatula and run away.

I'm not about to rescue her. Mama literally dragged me to this detestable cooking club because she thinks I'm not old enough to stay home alone.

“I’m in sixth grade, Mama,” I’d protested. “I’m old enough to stay alone for an hour without burning the house down.”

To be honest, I’d wanted to shout at her, but thought better of it. It would’ve been rude, and Pakistani parents like mine don’t care much for their kids’ impolite American ways.

“We never talked back to our parents, not even once!” Baba likes to say in his proudest voice.

I don’t think that’s anything to brag about, but clearly he does, so I always try to be respectful. Yet how have I been rewarded? Here I am, sitting on the graying floor of this freezing metal kitchen, listening to a bunch of complaints from girls who don’t know how to boil an egg.