

Author of *Barakah Beats*

MALEEHA SIDDIQUI

ANY WAY YOU LOOK



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YOU LOOK**

Also by Maleeha Siddiqui

Barakah Beats

Bhai for Now

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For my sisters: Nawal, Nida, Aiman,
Suha, and Safa

MSNSAN(TA) forever <3

CHAPTER 1

I know that look on the pink-hijabed lady's face. She's falling in love, but she doesn't know it yet.

I've been spying on auntie here for the last fifteen minutes, pretending like I don't notice when her gaze first lands on the shimmering white-gold dress draping our mannequin, how she lightly touches the fabric and admires the fancy beadwork on the skirts. Even when she turns to browse other booths set up around the hotel's grand ballroom, she keeps stealing glances over at our dress like it's calling her name.

Come on, come on, I think, the tip of my tongue sticking out of one corner of my mouth hungrily as my eyes follow her around the room. You know you want it. Can't resist forever, lady.

But she moves on, drifting to the other side of the hall. The spell was probably broken by another seller dangling their shiny product in front of her face. It's the summer exhibition, after all. The biggest one of the year. Everyone's looking for a good deal. The turnout at these events is always amazing, which makes for free advertising and tons of exposure for small businesses like my mom's, so they're super important.

I'm manning our booth while my sister checks out the hall and Amma tracks down my little brother, Kashif. He bailed on us a while ago. He's probably playing with all the other nine-year-old kids forced to be here. Since no one else looks like they're going to come up to me for now, I kick my sandals up on the footstool underneath our table and go back to watching my favorite TikTok costume designer re-create another Disney Princess gown. She always adds her own little spin to it. The fabric she's working with is so stretchy and sparkly! I fantasize about making a desi princess dress with that material. Something that Sania Maskatiya or Farah Talib Aziz—two of my favorite Pakistani fashion designers—or Jasmine Fares, my modest fashion icon, would approve of. I've always been into the fancier stuff. Before I know it, my head fills with shapes, patterns, fabrics, and color

combinations—burgundy and rose gold, baby blue and tea pink, cherry red and teal. I wish I were back home or in the shop. Whenever inspiration hits me like this, I need to be able to get all my ideas down, to sketch the dress swirling around in my head on Amma's tablet.

But instead, I'm here. I guess I should feel lucky Amma let me come to the exhibition at all, even though it's a Saturday and there's only one week of sixth grade left before summer break. School's a big deal for Amma, and she's not okay with me getting distracted until classes are done for real.

“How much for that one?”

I almost fall out of my chair in surprise, but I catch myself just in time. The pink-hijab lady—she's back! And what do you know, she's pointing at the white-gold dress displayed at the end of our table.

“It costs, uh—” Ack, I don't know! Heart racing, I search the crowded room for Amma and my older sister, Kulsoom, but they're nowhere in sight. *Stay calm, Ainy. Don't scare the customer away!*

Because even though I hate this part, making lots of sales is how Amma makes money. She can make a lot more in this one weekend than she can in a couple of weeks! And with Abu gone to Pakistan to help my dadi,

who was diagnosed with cancer, Amma's business is our only source of income. And I can't talk Amma into letting me work for her this summer if the store shuts down, so . . .

I paste on my best smile for the woman. "That one?" I ask sweetly. "It's beautiful, right? One of a kind!"

The woman—she's South Asian, Pakistani like me, or maybe Bangladeshi—looks me up and down in my sparkling silver-and-turquoise shalwar kameez. I'm wearing matching earrings and a long necklace, tied together with some light mascara and a swipe of lip gloss. My short hair is pushed back with a thick headband, and it's showing off more of my face, which, over the last several months, has been losing its usual roundness and making my big, dark eyes pop. The lady's probably wondering if it'd be weird to haggle with a twelve-year-old. She better not start with me, because there's no way—

"Seven hundred," someone says. I breathe a sigh of relief. Kulsoom—I call her Bajjo—appears with her best friend, Amarah, in tow and sets down a bowl of chaat in her empty chair. My sister is all business in makeup and a light-blue blazer, her printed headscarf pinned expertly to drape across one shoulder in a style that I've tried to copy

more than a hundred times but can never seem to get right. Bajjo's whole outfit is giving vibes of Melanie Elturk, the trendy CEO of the biggest hijab fashion brand in the world, Haute Hijab. Bajjo's the perfect straight A student, debate and Model UN member, active community volunteer, and all-around super girl. Plus, she's the greatest big sister in the world and my role model.

One day, I want to wear the hijab full-time like her, too. I've been taking baby steps, going to the masjid with her more often to test the waters since it's pretty much required to wear a hijab when we're there. If Bajjo can do it, I can do it. I just need to up my game to her level of awesome.

The pink-hijab auntie gasps at the price and puts a hand over her heart. "Dollars?!" she exclaims.

Bajjo wipes her mouth with a napkin before turning back to face the woman. "It's very fancy. Perfect for any formal event," Bajjo offers without missing a beat. I cheer her on inside.

"But that's still so expensive!"

"Actually, it's a bargain." Amma finally returns, her gold-trimmed abaya fluttering at her heels. Her voice is smooth behind her niqab. "That dress took over a

hundred hours to make. Everything you see here is specially designed and handmade. Nothing's imported."

That's Amma's biggest selling point. Most of the other vendors here have their traditional clothes shipped to them from their home countries because there aren't a lot of options for desi clothes in the US. But Amma took advantage of the gap in the US market. Not everyone has family or knows someone overseas who can ship clothes to them at a moment's notice or has the time and money for such a lengthy process. So, Amma brought the convenience of shopping at Pakistani markets here. Amma's the only one in our community who does what she does. Custom designs for all occasions; tailoring; quality craftsmanship. After years of running the business from home, she finally opened her own storefront a few months ago. I know firsthand how much work it is because I've been falling asleep to the sounds of her sewing machine for as long as I can remember. So, auntie here can buzz off with her it's-so-expensive attitude. The same dress would cost ten times more from anywhere else. And I might be biased, but Amma's definitely got the best inventory in the house.

"*You* made all of these?" the woman asks, and you can't miss the disbelief coloring her words as she stares

at Amma—more specifically, at her niqab. I grin. This lady should get a load of what Amma’s wearing underneath her floor-length abaya right this minute. Amma dresses in the most beautiful abayas, hijabs, and niqabs whenever she goes out. At home, she wears real gold jewelry (what’s left of her inheritance that she didn’t use to open Naseerah’s Almari, that is) and makeup. Amma is always underestimated by people for wearing the niqab—including other Muslims who thought Amma covering her face was “too extreme.” It never gets old seeing how they go from treating her like she’s talentless and drab just because she dresses very modestly in public to shock when they discover she actually has a sense of style.

Amma doesn’t flinch, only nods and stares right back at the woman.

She tsks. “I can give you five hundred for the dress,” she says, fishing for cash in her designer purse.

“Sorry, ma’am, I’m afraid we can’t accept that,” Bajjo says before Amma can respond. She sounds like a professional. Ever since Naseerah’s Almari’s grand opening, Bajjo’s been spending a lot of time helping out. She’s going to be a junior in the fall and has to prepare for the SATs and start thinking about college applications, but Amma’s not worried about *her* grades slipping. Meanwhile, I have

to beg for permission to even set foot inside the store. Apparently, aspiring to be best dressed everywhere I go isn't as impressive as being an academic overachiever.

"Oh no, surely you can do something—?" the lady presses on.

But Bajjo holds firm. "Seven hundred is more than a fair price for that dress, and we won't be taking another cent off. Thank you for your interest, though."

Realizing we aren't budging, the lady turns her nose up and stalks off.

"Cheapskate," Bajjo mutters under her breath when she's gone.

"I could've marked it down by another fifty or a hundred dollars for her . . ." Amma says uncertainly.

"For *that* dress?" Amarah squeals. "No way, Naseerah Auntie! You should be charging at least a thousand dollars for it. And we know most people here can afford it. They just act like they can't to save money."

Amma still looks sad that she lost a customer. I know how much it must hurt, but that auntie really was being unfair.

"Can I look around now?" I ask.

"Sure, Ainy. Thanks for keeping an eye on things,"

Amma says. “Go take a break. I saw Safiya and her mom earlier.”

“We’re coming, too,” Bajjo says. “Amma, you good here?”

“Haan, beta,” Amma says. “I think I can manage by myself. You girls have fun. Don’t worry about Kashif. I found him eating with some friends in the conference center.” She waves us off.

“Thanks for the save,” I tell Bajjo as she, Amarah, and I skirt around our table and enter a maze of dozens of stalls and booths boasting everything from casual to chic shalwar kameez, party and bridal dresses, colorful lehengas, abayas, silky shawls, glittering chudiyan, and shoes—so much stuff it makes me dizzy.

“It was nothing,” Bajjo replies. “You were already doing great.”

“But you handled that auntie like a boss! Not that I’m surprised. You’re good at everything,” I say appreciatively.

Bajjo shrugs and grabs my sleeve to pull me along behind her and Amarah. She knows I’m tempted to stop and gawk at everything. I can’t help it; I thirst after all the shiny things even though I can’t afford most of it.

Amma says I was born loving fashion, just like her.

When I was four, I used to change my outfit three times a day and strut around the house. At six, I was already complaining about having nothing to wear to parties. When I turned eight, Amma taught me how to sew and bought me my first sewing machine kit. I've been obsessed with fashion ever since.

We elbow our way through the herd and into the much quieter, less chaotic lobby to take a breather. A couple of smaller kiosks are selling things like homemade accessories and cosmetics next to the indoor fountain.

While Bajjo and Amarah check out fancy hijabs, I text my best friend, Safiya, to ask where she is.

Safiya: we left, sorry!! :(noor was being fussy

Me: you around later?

Safiya: mama has a bride this afternoon and then we're going out for my aunt's birthday.

Safiya's mom is a beautician and runs a salon out of their basement. The Messaoudis are the kind of people who always have plans. Social to the max degree. But I

guess that's normal when both sides of your ginormous family live nearby.

I'm upset that I missed her, though. Safiya's five-month-old baby sister, Noor, has taken over their lives. Her parents are always too busy or too tired to drop Safiya off to hang out with me outside of school as much anymore. It's been driving Safiya up the wall.

"Hey, Ainy." Amarah pokes my arm and I look up from my phone at the goofy smile on her face. "Izyaan was asking about you this morning. He wanted to know if you were going to be here."

"He did?" I ask. Amarah and Bajjo giggle at my reaction and my cheeks flame.

Izyaan is Amarah's little brother. We've known their family since forever. Izyaan and I have always been around each other since our big sisters are inseparable, so we became friends by default.

But something . . . changed . . . when middle school started. Izyaan was in my Language Arts class this year, so I saw him every day in addition to on the bus before and after school. At some point this past year I became fascinated by how he'd run his fingers through his black hair. How he slowly inched his way taller than me, how he started wearing

clothes that fit his frame better, how his white teeth flashed against his dark brown skin whenever we ran into each other between classes. One time we were all at a mutual family friend's dawat, and he tried handing me a glass of Fanta (orange soda hits, okay?). I spilled it all over us because I was too distracted by his face. Bajjo and Amarah had a field day. And now that we live in Amarah and Izyaan's basement, they have more reasons to make fun of me.

"You like him," Amarah coos.

"Ssshhh!" I hiss, horrified that the aunties next to us are going to hear them teasing me. Worse, I realize, they're two of Amma's friends—Aaira Auntie and Lubna Auntie. Their heads are pressed together as they compete to talk over each other furiously.

"Still unmarried," Aaira Auntie is saying exasperatedly in Urdu. "Not a single good match. There was one, and the guy was perfect. Handsome, comes from a good family, settled with a respectable job, but he has one condition: He doesn't want a hijabi."

Aaira Auntie shakes her head at the neatly folded scarves on sale like she's at a funeral. "Arey, boys nowadays are like that. *Kiya kar sak tai hai?*" *What can we do?* "Poor girl's parents are stressed. They even asked her to take her hijab off, at least until she's married, so she

can attract good men while she can, but she won't listen. Absolutely refuses to take it off."

"Good for her," Bajjo mutters, but not quietly enough. Aaira Auntie catches sight of us over Lubna Auntie's shoulder and beams. "Oh, asalamualaikum! Kaisi ho, betiyan? Shopping kaise chal rahi hai?" *How are you, dears? How's the shopping going?*

Bajjo and Amarah mumble replies, but that instinct to respect my elders and be a better cheerleader for Amma makes me pipe up. "Good, Auntie! Amma's here, too. You should go check out our table inside. She's got some new pieces."

"Acha? Chalo, let's go see," Lubna Auntie says. "Naseerah always has just what I need." She ushers Aaira Auntie inside the bustling ballroom.

"Nice work, Ainy," says Amarah. "Oh, that one is pretty." She points at the ready-made maroon hijab with black lacework and glittering stars I picked up.

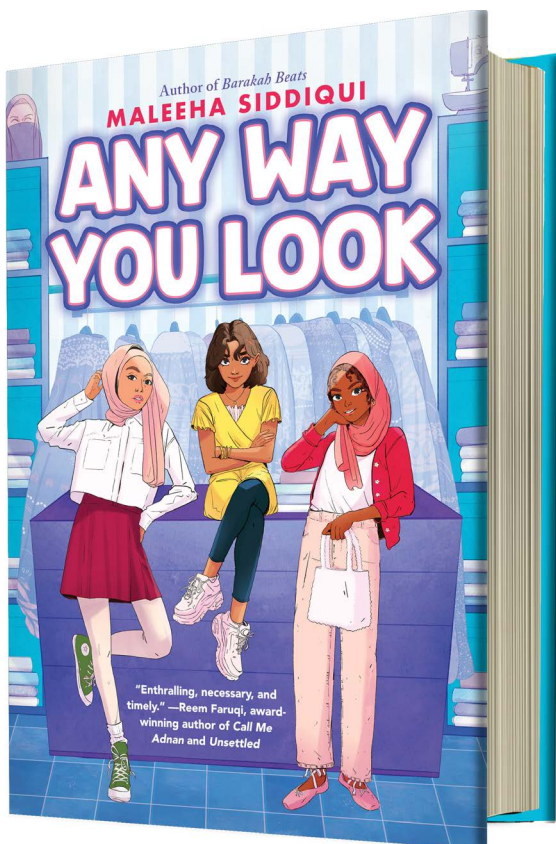
Bajjo frowns. "You sure you're ready for the hijab? Not everyone thinks like Lubna Auntie and Aaira Auntie, but trust me, that's not even half the crap you're gonna have to put up with."

I bunch up my eyebrows. This is the one topic my sister and I can never agree on. Bajjo could be more supportive

and say *Don't listen to them, Ainy* instead of trying to talk me out of it. But that's all she's been doing ever since I told her I want to start wearing the hijab. *You're too little. You don't get it. It's not that easy.*

But I *want* to. And that's enough for me. I don't get why it isn't enough for her.

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