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Like a Boss

**SARAH MLYNOWSKI AND
HENA KHAN**

Illustrations by Jen Bricking



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To our readers, the future leaders of the world.

We can't wait.

—S.M. & H.K.



* 1 *

Hold the Glitter

Dear Emma,

This isn't junk mail!

I know that: 1) You don't know who I am, and 2) if you're like my grandmother, who I call Dadi, you probably think this is some kind of scam.

But I promise . . . it's not a scam. Or junk mail.

My name is Maya Amir, and I live in Washington, DC. And before I say more, don't put on the bracelet yet. Please! Read to the end of this letter first. You will thank me later.

You're probably even more confused now, huh?

I think the best way to explain is to just tell you everything that happened to me. And then you'll understand. But

seriously, take that bracelet off if you're already wearing it! I mean it!

It all started on Friday, which is my favorite day of the week. Every Friday, my family does movie night at home and we order takeout from our favorite Thai place.

Not that my older sister and brother EVER let me pick the movie—I'm the youngest, and I don't get a lot of say—but it's still super fun.

Most importantly, *this* Friday was the first day of club meetings after school. Which meant I would finally, FINALLY get to be in the environmental club with my best friend, Hazel Garcia.

It was 2:45 p.m., and I could barely pay attention in class. I had wanted to be in the environmental club for *years*, but it was only for fifth graders. Now that I was in the fifth grade, this was my chance to share some of my big ideas for helping the planet.

My teacher, Ms. Sokolov, was reviewing a social studies worksheet about constitutional power and the branches of government. I half-listened, waiting for the final bell to ring.

“Laws are voted on by Congress in the Capitol Building, right here in our very own backyard,” Ms. Sokolov said.

The teachers at my school, Summit Elementary, love to

brag about the fact that we're close to all the famous national monuments here in DC. Although we're not *that* close. You can catch a glimpse of the dome of the Capitol out the window, but only if you really crane your neck.

The bell rang and I jumped out of my seat.

"Your short story assignment is due on Monday!" Ms. Sokolov called while we all rushed to pack up our things. "And as you leave, you can each choose one of the cupcakes Leo's mom dropped off. Happy birthday, Leo!"

Leo Rosenblatt turned bright red. He's quiet and doesn't like being the center of attention.

But, yay, cupcakes!

Hazel and I stepped up to the teacher's desk and checked out the options.

Chocolate-chocolate. Vanilla-chocolate. Red velvet. Vanilla with purple icing. Which one did I want? My stomach grumbled. So many choices . . .

I'm not great at choosing. I'm always worried I'm going to pick the wrong thing.

Hazel grabbed a red velvet cupcake and licked off a chunk of the icing. "Yum. My favorite. Take one, Maya! There's only one red velvet left."

Um . . . um . . . but did I really want red velvet?

Another girl in our class, Maddie Northrup, stepped up and picked the last red velvet cupcake from the box while I was still deciding.

Darn it.

Hmm. The chocolate-chocolate one looked good, but what if it was too chocolatey? The vanilla one looked good, too, but what if its purple icing stained my lips?

I picked the vanilla one with chocolate icing, then immediately regretted it. What a boring choice. But it was too late to change my mind.

“Ready?” Hazel asked, still licking her icing. She was wearing a T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers, which looked a whole lot like my outfit, except her T-shirt said *Supergirl* on it, and mine said *Shenandoah National Park*. We’ve always dressed a lot alike, although we don’t look anything alike. I’ve got brown skin, dark brown eyes, and dark, thick, wavy hair that comes to my shoulders. Hazel has long, light brown hair and light brown eyes. Plus, I’m at least three inches taller than my bestie and I’ve got purple-framed glasses. Purple is my favorite color.

I really should have taken the cupcake with the purple icing. Purple lips would have been cool.

“Ready,” I repeated as I followed Hazel out the door.



Hazel was also excited about the club. Maybe not as excited as I was, but she is really into science. Last year, we got an honorable mention in the science fair for our very cool yet very disgusting project on mold. It was my idea—I have a lot of ideas, actually—and Hazel liked that one the best.

Today, I had a ton of ideas for the environmental club. I'd written them all down in my new biodegradable notebook that I was bringing to the meeting. I couldn't wait!

Hazel and I walked into Ms. Maxwell's science room. Ms. Maxwell is the club's sponsor. There were eight other kids there.

“Hi, everyone, welcome to the environmental club!” Ms. Maxwell said in her cheery way. She had her curly hair pulled into a messy bun on top of her head, and she twirled a pencil between her fingers as she talked. “I know you’re all here because you care about the future of our planet, and the ways we can ensure it’s a nice place to live for a long time.”

Everyone murmured their agreement. Hazel and I took our seats and I quietly nibbled on my cupcake, feeling hopeful. This was going to be great.

“First off, we need to elect a club president,” Ms. Maxwell continued. “Who would like to nominate themselves for the role?”

Oh, wow. President? I didn’t realize there were presidents of clubs! Being the president would mean I’d definitely get to share all my ideas with the group.

I could be president.

Could I?

Maybe?

Hazel turned to me.

“You should do it, Maya!” she whispered.

“Me?” I mumbled with my mouth full. Nervous excitement

sent a shiver through me. I'd never been in charge of anything before. "What about you?" I asked Hazel.

"I'd be great, too. One of us should definitely be president!" Hazel said. "Who knows more about the environment than we do?"

Hazel had a point.

Not to brag, but I do know a lot about the environment, mostly because Dadi has taught me so much. My grandmother used to head an environmental protection organization in Pakistan before she moved in with us here in DC. And now Dadi and I do cool projects together, like our indoor hydroponic garden. We started off small, but slowly our garden took over half the storage room. You should see the stuff Dadi and I grow together—everything from cilantro to hot peppers.

And then I got Hazel interested in the environment, too, by showing her how it all connected to science, which Hazel loves.

"Anyone?" Ms. Maxwell asked, looking around the room.

My heart pounded. *Should I raise my hand?*

I imagined going home and telling my family that I was

president of the environmental club. They'd be so surprised!
And Dadi would burst with pride.

Although . . . Hazel was better at making decisions than I was. In fact, she usually made decisions for me.

Should I let Hazel do it instead? I wondered.

But I had all these new ideas, written in my notebook!

But what if nobody liked my ideas?

I didn't know what to do.

Hazel looked at me with her eyebrows raised, and I shrugged, still debating whether or not to nominate myself.

Ms. Maxwell clicked her pen. "Okay, well, if there isn't anyone interested, I will just—"

"I'll do it," Hazel said. "I'll be president."

She will?

"Great!" Ms. Maxwell said. "Anyone else want to put in their name? We could vote."

Even though I kind of wanted to raise my hand, I was frozen. How could I run against Hazel?

I couldn't. That had to be against the best friend rules.

Right?

I glanced at Hazel, who looked nervous and bit her lip while we waited to see if anyone else nominated themselves.

The way she squeezed my arm in excitement made it clear to me: I couldn't run against her.

"If there are no other candidates, then you are our president, Hazel Garcia. Congratulations!" Ms. Maxwell handed Hazel a folder. "I'll be at my desk grading papers if you need me, but you should all get started and discuss your plans for the club."

Hazel grinned at me, and then stood up and faced the group, blushing a little.

I swallowed my disappointment. *It's fine*, I thought. *I can still contribute as a regular member, if not the leader. And anyway, I'm sure Hazel will listen to all my ideas, so I'll still make a difference.*

"Hi, everyone," Hazel said. "I think the first thing we need to do is make this club bigger and better than ever before. We could use more members, right?"

I was sort of surprised that was Hazel's first priority, but I supposed bringing in more members couldn't hurt. Everyone nodded.

"So . . ." Hazel paused for dramatic effect. "Let's advertise all over the school."

"Why don't we put up lots of posters in the hallway?" a

girl named Cassandra suggested. “And make flyers to hand out to students.”

“Good thinking!” Hazel said, beaming.

What? I stared at Hazel as hard as I could, but she was focused on Cassandra.

“We can decorate the posters and flyers with paint and glitter,” Cassandra continued, and Hazel nodded.

“Isn’t using all that paper, you know, bad for the environ—” I started to say.

“And we could have a big party to kick off the year!” Hazel interrupted me. “Maybe we could get Leo to join the club, so his mom could donate some more of those cupcakes, because they’re the best I’ve ever tried.”

“What about trying something like composting, or—” I said, a little louder.

But nobody, including Hazel, was listening to me. They were all pumped about the party idea and started discussing their favorite cupcake flavors and what kind of glitter to use for the posters. It was like I wasn’t even there anymore, and my stomach started churning. This was definitely *not* the club I’d been waiting to join for the past two years.

I mean, I love parties and cupcakes—who doesn’t? But not for the environmental club! We were supposed to do

things like stop waste, and plant trees, and make a difference. And besides, glitter is a microplastic and totally a pollutant!

“We’ll talk about it more next week,” Hazel said. “Also, Fridays are meant for relaxing, so if it’s okay with Ms. Maxwell, let’s have our regular meetings on Mondays. Ms. Maxwell?”

“Hmm?” Ms. Maxwell asked, looking up from her papers.

“Can we move this meeting to Mondays?”

“Sure,” Ms. Maxwell replied.

That was the only suggestion from Hazel that made sense to me. But I didn’t know if I wanted to come back on Monday. I didn’t know if I still wanted to be *part* of this club. And I kind of felt like all of a sudden I didn’t know Hazel anymore.

“That was awesome, wasn’t it?” Hazel asked me as we left the room together. She looked so pleased that I didn’t know what to say to her.

“It was”—horrible! upsetting!—“*interesting*,” I said with a weak smile. And then I thought to myself, *I guess things can’t get worse.*

I was wrong.

Fifteen minutes after Hazel got picked up, I was still sitting on the bench outside school, waiting for my older sister,

Natasha. She's in high school, and she picks me up if I don't take the school bus home. But she was so late today. Ugh!

I finally went to the main office and called her.

Natasha has her own phone. I do not.

"Maya?" Natasha answered. "Where are you?"

"I had my club meeting after school. Aren't you supposed to get me?"

Silence.

"Oh my gosh, Maya. I forgot! Dadi needed me to get some stuff from the desi store and . . . I'll be there as fast as I can!"

When Natasha finally pulled up in our green minivan, I was literally the last person other than the custodian still at school. And I was furious.

"I can't believe you forgot me," I sulked on the ride home.

"I'm sorry!" my sister said again. "You should have reminded me this morning."

"I've been talking about my club meeting for weeks," I grumbled.

"I don't remember . . . What club is it?"

"Never mind," I said as I tried to shake off my frustration. I didn't want to talk about the club, or how the meeting had been a disaster, anyway.

At least I had movie night to look forward to. I just hoped my brother, Omar, wouldn't pull the same prank on me that he had last week: He switched the candies in the boxes, so when I opened my favorite, sour gummies, I got stale raisins instead.

Yes. Stale raisins.

Omar's obsessed with this YouTube show where a group of friends play practical jokes on each other and other people. It's pretty funny, except that it inspires Omar to prank our whole family. The other day, he placed black steel wool in the shape of a spider on our dad's pillow, because Baba gets freaked out by anything that crawls. And it worked! Pranks are really big with all the seventh-grade boys this year, apparently.

When Natasha and I got home, we found Dadi in the kitchen. She was wearing a stained Eiffel Tower apron over her flowing shalwar kameez, stirring a giant pot of chicken korma on the stove, and shouting orders at my parents and Omar, who were busy cleaning in the living room.

My grandmother is barely five feet tall, if you count the white-hair-streaked bun on top of her head, but when she speaks, people listen. And even though she usually mixes Urdu into her English, my siblings and I understand her

perfectly. She's been living with us for as long as I can remember.

"What's going on?" I asked Dadi.

"Your auntie and Sabrina will be here in two hours," Dadi said. "There's so much to do!"

I frowned. This was the first I was hearing about this visit. My mom's cousin and her daughter live in Pittsburgh.

"Why are they coming?" I asked.

"Sabrina is touring colleges in the area," Natasha explained.

"They'll be staying in your room, Maya," Dadi told me. "So you'll be moving into my room with me."

"They will? I will?" I asked. "No one told me!"

"Of course we did," Natasha said, shaking her head. "Didn't we?"

"No!"

I frowned. My family never tells me anything. It's like they think nothing affects me because I'm the youngest, so there's no need to include me in family business or decisions.

It's super annoying.

"I already got your pajamas for you, but you should take out your clothes for tomorrow from your room," Dadi told

me as my parents walked into the kitchen. Mama was holding a duster, and Baba held the empty recycling bin.

“Why do Auntie and Sabrina have to stay in MY room?” I complained to my parents, even though I knew the answer.

“You’re the youngest, and it’s easiest for you to move,” Mama replied, exactly as I expected.

“What about movie night? Can we still do it?” I asked, somehow still feeling hopeful.

“Not tonight, kiddo,” Baba said, looking a bit disappointed himself.

Dadi shook her head. “It’s okay, we will do it next time! Now go, go and do what I asked. They’ll be here soon!”

I let out a sigh and went into my—for now—room to pick out clothes. Dadi had already vacuumed and made my bed. There was even a vase of fresh-cut flowers on my nightstand for our guests. How nice for them.

“And those are just the schools I’m looking at on the East Coast,” Sabrina said, taking another bite of daal.

The eight of us were sitting around the dining room table, and I kept fidgeting. Sure, I was happy to see my cousin, but she was mostly talking to Natasha, since they’re almost the same age.

Instead of watching a movie and eating my favorite takeout—shrimp pad thai—I had to have boring chicken korma, daal, and aloo gobi (Auntie’s favorite foods), and listen to even more boring college talk.

“Will you have any time for sightseeing?” my mom asked Auntie, who nodded. “Natasha, where do you think we should take them?”

“It depends.” Natasha started to rattle off suggestions a mile a minute, and my mind drifted back to the environmental club meeting. I was still upset with Hazel for stealing the presidency. Although maybe it was my fault for freezing up. But either way—her ideas were terrible.

“Earth to Maya,” Omar said, waving his fork in front of my face.

“What?” I said, snapping out of my thoughts.

“Auntie asked you what your favorite subject is,” Baba said.

“Um, I think it’s science,” I said. “Or history. I really like math, too, but I’m better at science. Or maybe English. I’m not sure.”

Auntie smiled. “Well, it’s good to have lots of interests,” she said while my face warmed from embarrassment. Why couldn’t I decide on something so simple?



“Omar and Natasha,” Dadi said, “please clear the plates while I bring out dessert.”

“What about Maya?” Omar asked. “Why doesn’t she ever have to do anything?”

“I’m still eating,” I pointed out.

“You’re eating slow on purpose,” Omar said.

“She never puts the dishes in the dishwasher properly anyway,” Natasha said.

“Leave her alone,” Dadi said, setting her hand protectively on my shoulder. Sometimes it was good to be the baby of the family. Dadi always looked out for me.

I glared at Omar and swirled the food around on my plate. Everything was all mixed up into a mush, just like my thoughts and feelings. How had this day turned out to be such a disappointing mess?

Dessert was followed by chai for the grown-ups, and more talking. Everyone asked Natasha about her future plans, how she rated all the kabob restaurants in town, and her opinion on some Indian movie. Natasha acts like she knows everything, and somehow everyone in my family believes it.

But the night still wasn’t over. I had to sleep on the old air mattress in Dadi’s room.

I love Dadi.

I do not love the old air mattress.

Especially when, in the middle of the night, I was tossing and turning and . . . *phhhhhhhhhhhhhfffft!* The air mattress gave up on its job and completely deflated.

Dadi doesn't have a carpet in her room, so I was basically sleeping on a wooden floor. Ouch.

And then I heard . . .

CHHHHHHHHHHNNNOOOOOOOOORT.

Whiiiiiiiistle.

CHHHHHHHHHHNNNOOOOOOOOORT.

Whiiiiiiiistle.

I forgot that my grandmother snores. Loudly.

Argh.

As I tossed and turned, and turned and tossed, I stared at the ceiling and muttered to myself, "Worst day ever."

I could see the lights in the hallway flicker through the crack under the door. A burst of cold air passed right through my blanket. Great. Now it was cold in here, too. I flipped back onto my stomach, pulled my pillow over my head, and tried again to fall asleep.

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