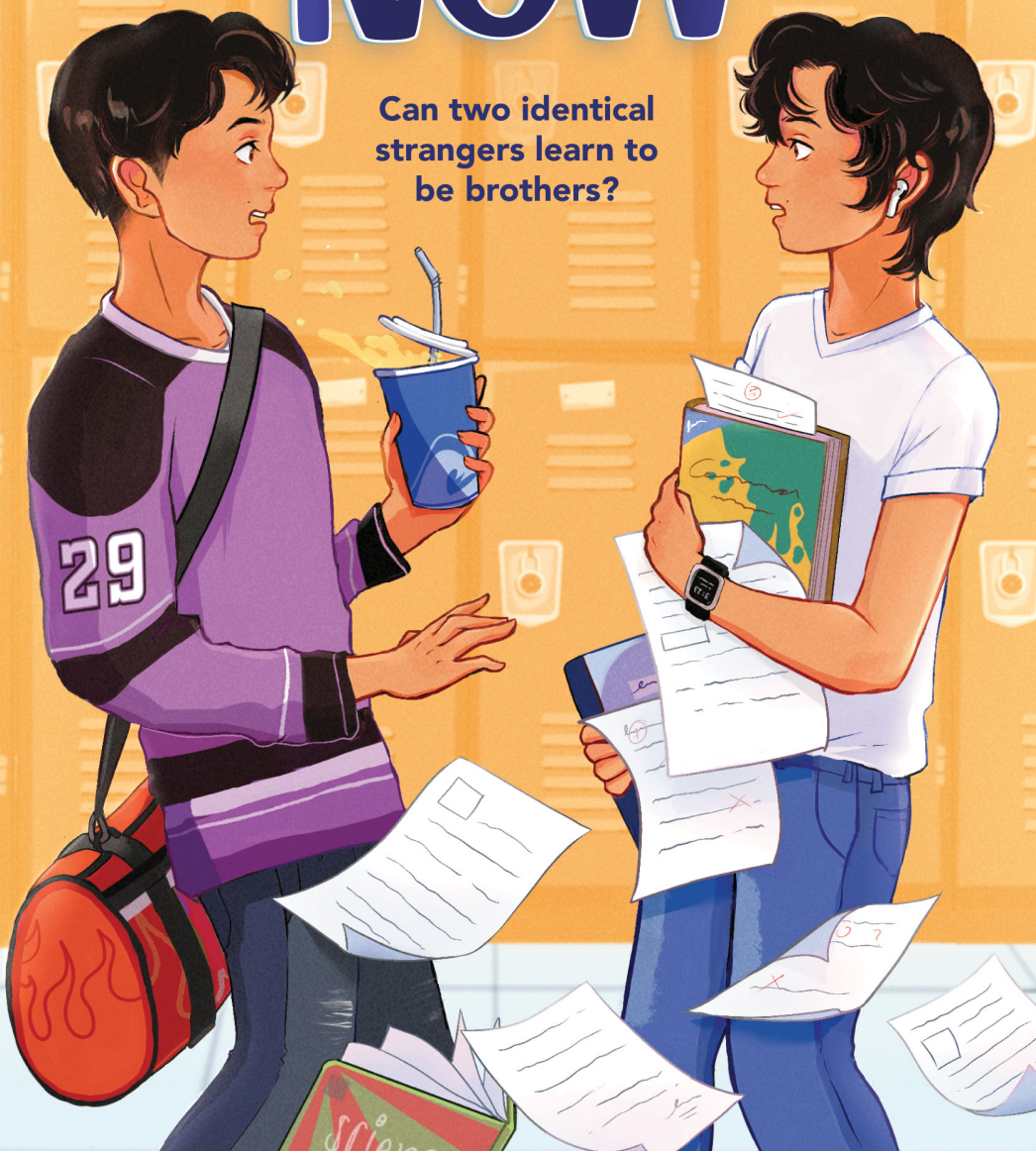


MALEEHA SIDDIQUI

BHAI FOR NOW

Can two identical strangers learn to be brothers?



**BHAI FOR
NOW**

Also by Maleeha Siddiqui

Barakah Beats

MALEEHA SIDDIQUI

**BHAI FOR
NOW**



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For my brothers. May you always be
each other's best friends.

1

SHAHEER

Shaheer threw an armload of clothes onto the bed of his fourth bedroom in four years and kicked the empty box out into the hallway. He couldn't stand the smell of cardboard. Maybe if his life wasn't like a train that barely stopped long enough to let people on and off, he wouldn't hate it as much. At least he wouldn't be around it all the freakin' time.

"Ah, someone finally decided to unpack," Dad said, appearing in the doorway with a mug of chai.

"Look who's talking. You live out of a suitcase," Shaheer deadpanned.

"Not anymore. I hung my clothes up," Dad said proudly. "On real hangers."

Shaheer rolled his eyes. He didn't see the point in

setting up his room, and it wasn't like he had a lot of stuff anyway. None of them did. Their next destination was always on the horizon. It was inevitable, like getting half a cheese slice on a McDonald's fish filet sandwich. Their time in every city ended with them saying goodbye, and this spot in Northern Virginia would be next. Shaheer knew they were only going to be there temporarily, no matter what lies Dad fed him about this being "it." As if. Shaheer might believe it if he, Dad, and Dada slept on real beds instead of mattresses, put up curtains for once, and didn't eat off disposable plates all the time.

Dad sipped his chai and peered at Shaheer over the mug's rim. "You excited for school tomorrow?"

Shaheer gave Dad a *What do you think?* look. After years of hopping around from school to school, he'd learned it was easier to hold back and roll with the punches. He almost forgot what it was like to put his feelings into words. Shaheer let his silence do all the talking now.

"Do me a favor, sport?" Dad said. "Please try to get involved this time. Make friends. Join a club. Go to the masjid."

The *masjid*? When was the last time Shaheer had set foot in one? Did this have something to do with how

he'd thrown a fit the whole month of Ramadan? Shaheer technically should have fasted more than the seven days his dad and grandfather had managed to crank out of him. But it wasn't like Dad prayed five times a day or anything. In fact, Shaheer was pretty sure he didn't even attend Friday prayers regularly. If Dad wanted him to do those things, then *he* should try doing them himself first.

Instead, Dad spent all his energy chasing the next shiny hospital job like it was a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. Shaheer had no clue what Dad got out of it.

"What do you say?" Dad asked, continuing the one-way conversation. Shaheer brushed past him to the kitchen of the three-bedroom apartment.

"Sure. Whatever," said Shaheer. He pretended to search for a snack, but the only thing he could find was leftover salad that came with the gyros they'd had for lunch. It was all soggy, but Dada refused to throw food away unless it'd gone beyond bad. Well, someone had to eat it, and Shaheer didn't feel like going back to the room that would never be *his*, or give Dad the chance to keep talking to him. He took up the plate of salad, grabbed a disposable fork, and flopped down on Dada's favorite

armchair in the living room near where his grandfather was making dua.

Shaheer chewed on a limp piece of lettuce as he waited for his grandfather to finish praying. When Dada finally looked up from his splayed hands, Shaheer asked him, “What do you ask so hard for?” Dada took so long making dua that sometimes Shaheer had to poke him to make sure he was still alive.

“Oh, you know,” he said wistfully. Dada sounded younger than sixty-four. He was like a sturdy, uncracked beam that could still hold up the whole house. “Jannah for your dadi. Health. A full head of hair. Hey, we’re supposed to believe in miracles!” he exclaimed when Shaheer smirked. “We’ll see who gets the last laugh when, God willing, you get to my age.”

Shaheer smoothed back his hair fondly. It had grown out longer than it’d ever been and started curling at the nape of his neck and falling into his eyes. His hair was the only thing about his appearance he liked, and the thought of it falling out made him feel faint.

“Way to scare him, Abba,” Dad piped up. He was sitting with his legs crossed against the wall dividing the kitchen from the living room. That wall, Shaheer thought,

was a waste of space. It could be taken out and replaced with an island so that the place looked more open. This apartment was nicer than some of the others they'd lived in, but it didn't get the Property Brothers' seal of approval.

Shaheer had had no clue what "open concept" or "clean lines" meant until a few years ago when they were stuck inside the house for months during a global pandemic. At one point, Dad stayed at the hospital for a whole month to care for patients in the ER and to avoid bringing the virus home, especially since Dada was high risk. That was when Dada morphed into a devout HGTV watcher to distract himself from worrying about Dad. Shaheer had never been so happy to see Dad as the day when he finally came home. That was back when the two of them were still tight.

Shaheer didn't get Dada's interior design obsession at first, but when he started joining him out of sheer boredom, he suddenly started noticing how subtle transformations lit up people's faces. How the way a house changed to suit a particular family's needs suddenly made it a *home*. Shaheer thought it was cool that the twins on *Property Brothers* worked together. He didn't have siblings or a Forever Home. Shaheer might never have either of those things at this rate, so he had to settle for being happy for others who did.

“What are you eating?” Dada asked, peering at Shaheer’s plate.

“The day’s special,” said Shaheer, thrusting a piece of tomato into his mouth.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were hungry?” Dad said. “I would’ve ordered us pizza.”

“No, no. We’ve eaten out too much these last few days. It’s time I made us a real dinner,” Dada said. “Jawad, did you unbox the masala jars? You did the groceries yesterday, right? Great. Here, give me this.” Dada took the sad-looking salad out of Shaheer’s hands. “I’ll finish it. How about I make you anda salan?”

Shaheer sat up. Anda salan was egg curry with cut-up potatoes tossed in. It was the most basic of basic Pakistani dishes, and one of the few things Dada knew how to cook. Shaheer, who rarely got homemade meals, thought it was delicious. And he liked knowing that Dada had gotten the recipe from Shaheer’s mom years ago.

Shaheer had never met his mom. His parents had divorced when he was a baby. He didn’t know much besides her name because the one time he’d been curious about her, Dad shut him down. Hard. Made it clear the topic was off-limits. He’d been happier to answer Shaheer’s burning questions about puberty when he was ten.

Shaheer had never even seen a picture of his mom. When he thought about it, it wasn't normal. No pictures of someone his dad had supposedly loved enough to marry and have a kid with?

As Dada headed toward the kitchen, Shaheer scampered to retrieve their one giant pot in the lower kitchen cabinet and put it on the stove himself before Dada could. Dada had back problems and wasn't allowed to bend over a lot. Shaheer always made sure Dada wasn't doing anything that could get himself hurt, even though it made Dada grumble about not being *that* old. Like now. He muttered to himself as he boiled eggs with his reading glasses sitting atop his head.

"Really, Abba. I could've had something delivered. You don't have to stand for so long," Dad said.

"Bah," Dada said, waving him off. "Not that old yet. My feet are fine. So are yours, Dr. Atique. Put 'em to good use and add some rice to the cooker. Shaheer, get me a tomato and one potato, please. Now, what were you two talking about earlier? Allah forgive me, I was listening while reading namaz."

"Oh, I was telling Shaheer that he should do some kind of activity. Remember how many extracurriculars I used to do in school?" Dad said, measuring out a cup of rice.

“That’s ’cuz you were a show-off,” Dada said in Urdu. Shaheer pressed his lips together to keep from grinning.

“But don’t you think it’s true?” Dad asked. “It’d be better than coming straight home every day.” Dad was a total wanderer. When he wasn’t working, he loved to get out of the house and explore new places or try new things. Shaheer stopped joining Dad two moves ago out of defiance. What was the point in getting to know a place you’d just leave behind?

“He lives like this because you refuse to give the boy a chance to make a life somewhere.” Leave it to Dada to not beat around the bush.

“What about a sport?” Dad said like he hadn’t heard him. “Or volunteer work.”

“Shaheer’s not you, Jawad,” Dada said gently. “Let him decide for himself.”

Dad’s eyebrows pinched in Dada’s direction, his hand going still over the rice cooker. “What’s that supposed to mean? I’m not allowed to give my own son advice?”

“Yes, I’m well aware he’s *your* son, thanks,” said Dada.

Shaheer sighed, watching Dada slice the tomato with a little too much force. Honestly, what was their deal? Dad and Dada were almost always fine. Then at random times

certain comments unleashed some old feud and they never clued Shaheer in. Shaheer was used to it, and it was usually the perfect distraction for him when he wanted to be alone, but the bad mojo lingered in the air for too long afterward.

Dad muttered something about Dada never taking his side and moved to the sink to soak the rice.

“He’s always been restless,” Dada whispered to Shaheer. “Hard for him to stay in one place for too long. You should say something to him about it, too, you know. He never listens to me, not since he was a kid. Not even when—” Dada stopped short and got this faraway look in his eyes. It happened sometimes, Dada’s mood shifting out of the blue, and Shaheer never understood why. There was no way Dad thought Shaheer liked all the moving around. If he couldn’t see something so obvious, then what was the point in *telling* him?

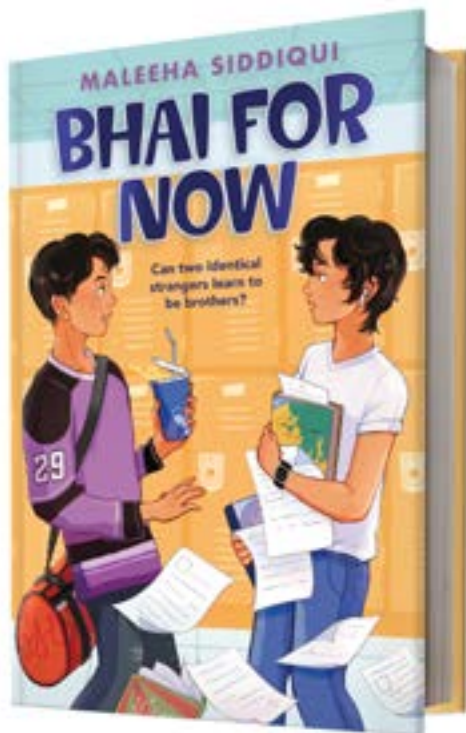
“Anyway,” Dada continued as he cut the potato into squares. “It’s not a bad idea. Maybe a recreational activity is what you need.” Shaheer’s forehead crinkled. “Not saying you have to, but give it some thought. In shaa Allah, you won’t have to live like this forever.”

Shaheer’s mind buzzed. He imagined what it would be like to make friends he wouldn’t have to leave behind.

To not be afraid of getting attached to a place because it always ended up in the rearview mirror as they drove away again. The longing squeezed his heart, but Shaheer knew his options: face disappointment or don't bother to care.

Shaheer didn't bother. He was over it.

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