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THWARTED BY AN INVASIVE PARAKEET

One fateful spring day when I was only seven, I learned two things. One: I would be a fashion designer someday. I'd been filling my coloring pages and notebooks with drawings of my dolls in fabulous clothes for years by that point, but that was the first day I felt the thrill, the mind-consuming rush, of figuring out how to create actual clothes from my drawings. I'd cut off a piece of fabric from my old Eid lehenga (which didn't fit me anymore, and my sister refused to wear Indian formal wear) and wrapped it around my Surf City Barbie, because seriously . . . how gauche to live in swimwear twenty-four seven. I stapled up the hem and used safety pins to cinch the back to get it as close as I could to the image in my notebook. Seeing Barbie go from California dreamer to Bollywood glam solidified my gut instinct that day—I was born to create clothes.

And the second thing I learned? Achieving that goal wasn't going to be easy, but I'd have help and support along the way. Because that very same day, instead of being angry that I'd cut up my outfit, my parents took me to the library and showed me my first college, university, and vocational school catalogs. It was a desi-parents thing—our culture was steeped in ambition and strategic goal setting. I learned I'd be a fashion designer because my parents would help me get there. My goals were

family goals. My successes all our successes. Together, we put together *the Plan* to help me start my own fashion line before I was twenty.

Yay for Eastern collectivist cultures.

Even with all that planning, none of us expected that ten years later a rogue parakeet in Paris would derail the Plan spectacularly and give me another life-changing, fateful spring day at the age of seventeen.

Once again my parents barged into my room while I was cutting fabric. After the email I'd forwarded to their respective work addresses that morning, I knew a discussion about the Plan would be coming. And it wouldn't be an easy one. But I didn't expect it to be quite this bad.

"Tahira, we need to talk," Dad said. He sat on the pink patchwork comforter on my single bed.

I stayed at my sewing machine. The last time Dad said "we need to talk" with that look on his face was shortly after I'd told them I was dating my boyfriend, Matteo. Dad had awkwardly thrown a new box of condoms at me before pantomiming with his fingers how to use them, in case I wasn't aware. Mom then told me the college dropout rates for teen mothers. Of course I already knew all that. Sex ed was pretty comprehensive around here.

"Can I keep sewing?" I asked.

"Are those the shirts for the shoot tomorrow?" Mom eyed the black, white, and gray custom-printed fabric I'd designed myself.

I nodded. The fabric had come in only that day, so I needed to hustle to get these done before my photo shoot at noon tomorrow. But I didn't mind a marathon stitching session. Sewing was my happy place.

Mom rubbed her hands together. "Okay, Tahira. Your father and I have talked, and I've made some calls. We think we have a way to get you back on Plan. Do you want to hear about the new fashion industry summer job we found for you?"

Step eight of the Plan to get me my fashion line was the one the parakeet had destroyed. I was supposed to have had an internship with

a Toronto-based fashion designer, where I would work my fine ass off so I'd get a *glowing* letter of recommendation and plenty of content for my application portfolio to FIT—New York's Fashion Institute of Technology (hopefully with a scholarship; step two, already accomplished, of course, was to get straight As to help with that).

The designer I'd scored the internship with, Nilusha Bhatt, was more of an up-and-comer than at the top of the game. But she *had* been invited to Paris Spring Fashion Week after she'd hired me, so she was clearly on track to being huge.

But according to Nilusha's email earlier, two days ago, a rogue ring-necked parakeet had dive-bombed onto the oversize feathers on the designer's summer hat. Maybe to collect some bedding for its nest? Who knew? Anyway, Nilusha's Miu Miu pumps wedged into the space between cobblestones, and she nose-planted on one of those quaint continental Paris streets. Her nose was fine. But she broke her leg in three places.

I exhaled. I didn't really *want* to hear about whatever new job Mom had found now. I wanted more time to mourn the one I'd lost. I wanted to keep sewing now for tomorrow's shoot. I wanted to call Matteo again and vent about how unfair it was to lose my epic summer job because of a bird on another continent. I wanted to sketch out the cool design idea I'd had on my way back from the post office to pick up this fabric before I forgot it.

But what I wanted most in the world was success in the fashion industry, and my parents were here to help me get it. Most people who made it big in fashion, and I mean really *big*, had help from family. Maybe their mother was the style editor for *Vogue*, or their dad knew the creative director at Gucci, or they had a godmother with a house in the Hamptons next to Tom Ford's. But the only long-standing connection in fashion my family had was maybe some clout with the Spadina Avenue fabric stores, and that one sari store on Gerrard Street that gave my mom the best deals. I was *too* Canadian, *too* brown, and *too* Muslim

to have built an upper hand in the style world. So my parents made up for it by teaching me how to *bustle*, times three. Thanks to them I'd had grit, determination, and Asian ambition bred into me since birth.

And that meant I had no choice, really. I wanted to be in the fashion industry, and doing what my parents asked was how I was going to get there. I pushed the fabric pieces to the edge of my sewing table and folded my hands on my lap.

“Okay,” I said, “I’m listening. How do I get back on the Plan?”

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“This sucks, Tahira,” my best friend, Gia, said the next day as she stopped taking pictures of me and let my SLR camera hang from her neck. Gia, Matteo, and I were at Graffiti Alley, a long stretch of vibrant art in the alley behind a major street in downtown Toronto. It was a bit of a pain-in-the-butt location for photo shoots because we were always fighting other photographers and tourists for the best backdrops, but my Instagram followers loved seeing my designs positioned against the bright art.

“I don’t get why this designer has to stay in Paris all summer,” Gia continued, standing five feet in front of Matteo and me, both of us leaning on the art wall. “Can’t she recover from a broken leg in Toronto?”

“Her leg is, like, *shattered*,” I said. “They had to put a pin in it.”

Maybe it hadn’t been wise to tell Gia just now that I’d lost my coveted summer internship. I needed her attention as my photographer today. But I’d been too upset to talk to her last night.

“Anyway,” I continued, twisting the simple silver ring on my index finger, “she said it’s easier to just stay there with her friend to recover. Her friend’s roommate is a nurse. A hot male nurse named Didier.”

Matteo snorted. “She told you that?”

I nodded. “Nilusha is awesome.” I’d lost so much. She would have been a great boss.

Gia fanned herself with her hand. “*Shut. Up. A male nurse?*” Gia was in the theater program at our school, and it showed. She was determined to be a rom-com star one day and was trying to build a platform as an Instagram influencer to help her get there. “*A French male nurse? Why can’t I get hit on the head with a bird?*” she said, pouting. “*Nothing good ever happens to me. Does this French nurse have a French Canadian cousin or anything?*”

I raised a brow. I loved Gia, but she sometimes took the whole boyfriend-desperation thing too far. We’d been tight since grade nine and were closer than sisters. “*G . . . this isn’t about you. I’m distraught. I needed this internship.*”

“Well, I *need* a boyfriend.” Gia lifted the camera and made a motion indicating she was going to continue taking pictures of us. Matteo folded his arms across his chest, and I rested my hand on his shoulder and schooled my face into the unbothered expression of a person who wasn’t currently plotting the demise of all the world’s parakeets.

We were both wearing the shirts I’d made the day before. They’d turned out awesome. After a few more pictures, Matteo asked, “*So, you going to do what we talked about last night? Apply at other designers?*”

“I looked, but no one is hiring anymore. Most placements started two months ago. I was only able to get the job with Nilusha because the college kid she hired flaked or something last month.”

I sighed before posing Matteo and me together in a new configuration. He put on that sultry, resting smolder-face that was catapulting his popularity on social media as a teen style influencer. He also wanted to work in the fashion industry but was hoping to hit it big as a model. Or, failing that, a stylist. We’d been together four months. Matteo was actually Gia’s cousin, which had made me wary of him at first. Gia put her family before anyone else, and the last thing I wanted was for a wedge to come between us if things went sour with a guy.

But so far things were great with Matteo and me. I’d called him as soon as I got that stupid email from Nilusha yesterday, and he’d been

so supportive. He put things into perspective and told me there were plenty more designers in Toronto who'd love me. He totally cheered me up by helping me plan this photo shoot.

And he looked so hot today. I'd paired his cotton button-up shirt in the custom fabric with black jeans rolled at the ankles and sharp black brogues. My shirt was the same design, but I was wearing black faux-leather pants and wedge-heeled sneakers with it. We were amazing together. We were going to be labeled #PowerCouple on Instagram again.

I twisted and rested against his warm, solid back. Mmm . . . every time we touched, I felt a full-body tingle combined with a deep sense of comfort. I sighed happily.

"Slide over a bit." Gia motioned us to the right. "That bird painted on the wall looks like it's flying out of Matteo's chest." Of course. Thwarted by birds, again. I'd started to slide over when Matteo pointed at a recently vacated floral-art-covered wall.

"We can go there," he said. "The shirts will look *sick* against the pink flowers."

"No. Stay here," I ordered. "I don't want flowers."

Matteo frowned. "Why not? You see Christopher Chan's spread in *StyleFactor* magazine? Flowers are happening this season."

I shook my head. Christopher Chan was one of my favorite New York designers, but his design aesthetic wasn't mine. "Flowers are Christopher Chan's thing because he used to be, like, a florist to the stars or something. I'm not into florals." Christopher Chan might have been a major name in streetwear, but I was developing my own style, and florals were not *me*.

After a few more pictures, we leaned against a wall painted with a detailed rendition of the solar system, except with cats instead of planets. I took a sip from the bottle of flavored soda water in my bag. It was hot for the last week of June. Much too hot to be in long sleeves and pleather pants, but fashion first.

Gia had a wistful look on her face. “When you’re famous, we should totally spend a summer in Paris, like Nilusha. I look awesome in berets, and I got an A in French. A little pied-à-terre, a French male nurse . . .” She suddenly perked up with an idea. “Hey, you want me to see if I can get you a job at Old Navy with me?”

I’d tried to convince Gia to work on her career this summer and take acting classes or something, but she insisted her drama classes at school were enough. And she figured that if she was Instagram famous, then the acting jobs would come easily.

Matteo snorted. “Can you see Tahira working at Old Navy? She needs fashion industry experience for FIT, not folding T-shirts and jeans.”

“Dude, you work at H&M,” Gia said. “How is that not just a Swedish Old Navy?”

They argued mall stores before I was finally able to interrupt them. I needed to tell them the rest of my news. I took a breath. “Actually,” I said, cringing, “I won’t need to work at Old Navy because I have another job lined up, thanks to my parents.”

It was impressive how quickly Mom and Dad had found me a replacement job—less than three hours after they’d seen Nilusha’s email. Seemed I had been wrong about them not having valuable fashion industry connections. Although it was debatable how *valuable* this experience was going to be for me.

“It’s a fashion industry position, which I theoretically could use for my FIT application portfolio,” I said. “My aunt bought a ladieswear boutique, like, a year ago and needs someone to do a major overhaul. You know, new look, new merchandise, new visual design—the works.”

Matteo brightened. “That’s actually perfect! For sure you can get into FIT with that. Where’s the store? Queen West?”

“That’s the catch. It’s not in Toronto.”

“New York!” Gia said.

My eyes widened. “OMG, that would have been awesome. But no. It’s in this tiny town, Bake . . . something. Near Niagara.”

Gia shook her head. “No,” she said emphatically. “Taking off to New York is allowed, but you *cannot* go to some shit town in the middle of nowhere all summer.”

“Believe me, I don’t want to,” I said. “I don’t have a choice. There is nothing else on short notice. At least nothing that will give me the experience I need. Apparently, my aunt has, like, three vacancies she hasn’t been able to fill for summer staff. No one in the town has any fashion retail experience.”

Matteo’s jaw was tight. “I can’t believe your parents are forcing you to leave for the whole summer.”

I put my arm around his waist. “I know. My aunt’s going to put me up in a garden shed or something . . . you guys know I’m allergic to flowers. What did she call it . . . a ‘granny flat’? A little house in the backyard. Like a pool house or something.”

Gia’s head shot around to look at me. “Seriously? You’d get to live in your *own apartment*? Like, that Paris dream could happen now?”

“It’s, like, the most opposite of Paris possible.” Well, that wasn’t true. I was pretty sure New Zealand was opposite Paris on a globe, but this place was *ideologically* the opposite of Paris. I sighed. My parents’ advice was usually spot on, but I had a lot of doubts about this. My life was here, in Toronto, not out in the country. “Maybe I should talk to my parents again. There’s got to be another way—Gia, doesn’t that one cousin of yours work at Saks? Can you ask if they’re hiring merchandisers?”

“Cousin Angela quit and joined that cult in Alberta, didn’t she?” Matteo asked. Gia and Matteo had about twelve more cousins together.

Gia didn’t answer. Her eyes were twinkling. “You said your aunt had more than one job vacancy?”

“Yeah, apparently. Goes to show that no one *wants* to work there.”

“Maybe I should apply . . . how big is that pool house?” Gia asked, a devilish grin on her face.

Holy crap. That was an *interesting* idea. Not something I’d considered, but . . . maybe living in that nothing town would be tolerable if I had my best friend with me? “But what about Old Navy?” I asked.

She smiled wide. “You think I actually *want* to be at Old Navy? C’mon, this could be fun! Meet some country boys, take some pictures. A summer away from our parents.”

Matteo wrapped his arms around my waist. “Country boys?”

I shook my head. “None for me, thank you very much.” I kissed his cheek. “I prefer city boys.”

He shook his head. “You *both* can’t leave Toronto all summer, though.”

I didn’t like the idea of leaving my first serious boyfriend. He’d graduated high school (he was a year older than me) and had just started the full-time job at H&M. We couldn’t see each other much because he lived on literally the other side of Toronto—Etobicoke to my Scarborough—and neither of us had a car. But we were both supposed to be working downtown this summer—his job wasn’t far from Nilusha Bhatt’s design studio. That stupid French bird took that from me, too.

Gia laughed, patting his arm. “It’s cool. We’ll come home to see you weekends.”

“It’s retail, G,” I said. “I’m assuming I’ll be working weekends.”

Matteo’s gaze locked onto mine. “We had things we were going to do this summer. A photo shoot at Brick Works, Toronto Islands, and . . . other stuff, too. Isn’t there a way you can stay?”

His lips were smiling, but those dark eyes told another story. I knew exactly what kind of *stuff* he wanted to get up to, and yeah, I didn’t like missing out on that, either.

But I wasn’t worried about losing Matteo, no matter where I worked this summer. All I had to see was that look in his eyes, and I knew he wasn’t going anywhere. Neither was I. We were *solid*.

“I can’t think of another way. I *need* the experience.” I tightened my arms around him.

Gia clasped her hands together, pleading. “So, will you ask if I can come, too?”

I sighed. Maybe, having Gia with me in our own “apartment,” the summer would be tolerable. Heck, it could be fun. “I’m not guaranteeing anything, but drop me your résumé, G. I’ll call my aunt tonight.”

Gia clapped and hopped up and down. “Yay, Tahira! We’re going to have so much fun! Should I get, like, farm clothes or something?” She tilted her head. “Would I look cute in a cowboy hat?”

I wanted to laugh, but I could see the look in Matteo’s eyes. He was upset about this. I leaned into him. “The summer will go fast,” I promised, “and I’ll come back whenever I can.” I tilted up to kiss him. I loved Matteo’s soft lips. The way he let out a tiny gasp every time I made the first move. I loved that he always tasted faintly like Hi-Chews, the chewy Japanese candy that only I knew he was mildly addicted to.

“Get a room,” Gia groaned, but she was laughing. She was pretty proud that she was responsible for our epic happiness.

I giggled, resting my face in Matteo’s neck. Soaking in the sun and letting the deep comfort of being wrapped around *him* envelop me.

“Just for eight weeks,” I said. “I’m going to miss you.”

He leaned close. “I’ll miss you more,” he murmured, and he kissed me above my ear.

“Mmm,” was all I could say.