

**JASMINE
ZUMIDEH
NEEDS A
WIN**

**SUSAN AZIM
BOYER**



**WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK**

CHAPTER ONE

SOMETHING EXTRA

When I'm on the tour bus interviewing Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders and she hands me a bottle of Jack Daniel's, I'm taking a swig. It would be rude to refuse. The last thing I'd want to do is piss Chrissie off.

My import single of "Stop Your Sobbing" is already warped from listening to it over and over. And over. I'll be first in line at Tower Records when their debut album comes out in January. All I have to do is convince the editor of the school newspaper to let me be one of the first college reporters to interview Chrissie when they tour next fall. *If* I get into NYU.

I have to get into NYU.

I grab my notebook and pen from my nightstand and start jotting down notes.

Chrissie Hynde, leather-clad lead singer for the Pretenders, is surrounded by male bandmates. "A sausage-fest,"

she calls it. The bus reeks of clove cigarettes and Jack Daniel's.

Leather-clad. Ugh. Too cliché. And who even knows if she smokes clove cigarettes?

Chrissie's face is etched with defiance: lip semi-snarled, eyes underlined in black—a bid for attention belied by the curtain of fringe that obscures them.

Curtain of fringe. Mr. Ramos would like that metaphor.

“Jasmine-joon, you are helping me with the rice?” Auntie Minah calls from the kitchen.

“Coming,” I answer sharply. I'm *right* in the middle of my interview.

“They're all men.” Chrissie gestures to her bandmates and crew. “Nobody to talk to about sex or commiserate with when you're on the rag.” She upends the now half-drunk bottle. “That's why it's so nice to have someone like you here to interview me, Jasmine.”

She hands me the bottle.

“You are coming, Jasmine-joon?” Auntie Minah calls again from the kitchen.

My editor would probably strike through the last paragraph. Rock chicks never get to talk about their periods.

Male journalists write about gawking at groupies or plaster-casting their penises with Mick Jagger all the time.

New York University. My one-way ticket out of Bumfuck, California, and into the New York music scene to write for *Creem*, the only rock magazine that cares about artists with integrity like Chrissie Hynde and Elvis Costello. The LA scene is deader than Jim Morrison (and a two-hour crawl from our house to the Sunset Strip). Your reign is over, Aerosmith. It's 1979: fossilize the dinosaurs of rock already.

Mr. Ramos says I'm one of his first students with a real shot at acceptance. I have "a voice" and "a point of view," and I'm "dogged," which doesn't sound like a compliment but is.

The Heidi and Ruthie dolls Mom got for my first Christmas stare at me with feigned indifference from their perch on my pink scalloped shelves. I can't take them with me. East Coast girls are way more mature. They wear pearls and blazers and go to private schools with names like the Covington Academy.

"*Joonam*," Auntie calls with more urgency.

I stuff the notebook into my nightstand and run downstairs to help Auntie Minah with the rice.



Making Persian rice is a whole production. First, you rinse the basmati—it has to be basmati rice from the Persian market—then soak it in salt water overnight. Rinse again and

transfer to a pot to parboil, which Auntie Minah says means to cook halfway.

She quizzes me. “What is next, *joonam*?”

I said we didn’t need Auntie Minah to babysit us while Mom’s in Kansas with Grandma Jean and Dad has to travel for work—I mean, I’m almost eighteen—but nobody listened.

“Drain the parboiled rice and add oil to the pot, Auntie,” I say, sliding on Mom’s hideous, moss-green oven mitts, which match the flocked wallpaper and hanging ferns.

“*Amme* Minah, Jasmine-*joon*,” she huffs. “Why your father never teach you the Farsi?”

I pick up the pot and dump the steamed rice into a colander in the kitchen sink. “He was too busy trying to be American to teach us how to be Iranian.”

“I teach you,” Auntie says, brushing her thick auburn hair away from her face.

Maybe she’ll teach me how to do a henna rinse, too. We’re two days into our crash course in *All Things Iranian*. Somehow, Dad was able to coax her out of her apartment in San Francisco. To her, Los Angeles is nothing but one big five-lane freeway. She’s not wrong. Everyone thinks Southern California is all bikinis and beaches, but we’re more than an hour inland, a blur of recurring tract homes and mini malls inhabited by the same combination of a nail salon, 7-Eleven, Winchell’s Donuts, and “ethnic” restaurant.

Dad says we’re probably the only Iranians within a twenty-five-mile radius.

“If your father marry an Iranian woman, he would never be divorced. You would speak the Farsi,” she declares.

I turn the heat up under the pot and add a layer of corn oil, then grab a couple pieces of lavash flatbread from the package on the kitchen counter. “They’re not divorced yet. Not totally.” Legally separated. They *could* still reconcile. They have every other time.

Although, Mom has never left before.

Auntie raises a hand. “No, Jasmine-joon. Wait. The oil is not hot enough.”

I reach for the November issue of *Creem* magazine on top of the pile of mail on the kitchen counter. Why is Jimmy Page on the cover when Zeppelin is so played out—

Oh my God! The letter I’ve been waiting for, it’s right here under my magazine. No one even told me. My notification from the Aspiring Young Journalists Award Committee: after my grades and my writing samples, the finishing touch for my application. Finally.

“Now, joonam.” Auntie motions to the pot. “Layer in the lavash. Oil is popping.”

“Wait, Auntie, let me look at this—”

“*Now.*”

I put the letter aside and quickly layer the flatbread on the bottom of the pot, then dump in the rice, grabbing a wooden spoon to make wells with the handle end. I pour in more corn oil so the crunchy bottom layer of tahdig will taste like movie popcorn, only better.

While the rice cooks, I snatch the envelope and open it. Did I get first place, second, or third? Even an honorable mention will do.

“Dear Miss Zumideh,” the letter reads. “Thank you for your interest in the Aspiring Young Journalists Award. Unfortunately . . .”

Unfortunately?

Unfortunately.

My chest collapses in on my stomach. It’s not possible. I didn’t even *place* in this competition. Mr. Ramos told me not to write about David Bowie, how he’s the only artist reinventing himself—he’s cycled through three musical personas in the last decade alone: Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, and the Thin White Duke—while the Eagles and Led Zeppelin are still suspended in the resin of the 1970s like prehistoric insects. The 70s basically *ended* in ’77 with the Sex Pistols.

Write a straight news article about a town council ordinance or mayoral malfeasance, Mr. Ramos said. Why didn’t I listen?

“Something wrong, joonam?” Auntie asks.

“No, Auntie.” My voice cracks. “I mean, Amme.”

Nothing, except the something extra for my application just went up in smoke. I can practically smell it burning.

“Oh no, joonam,” Auntie cries. “The rice. You turn the oil up too high.”

Auntie performs a rescue operation on the rice while I

toss the rejection letter in the trash. Now I've got absolutely nothing for my something extra.

"Dinner ready?" Dad emerges from his office cocoon.

"Jasmine burned the rice," Ali says, bounding down the stairs. "I could smell it all the way upstairs."

"How do you know? Your room smells like a wet dog—and we don't have a dog."

"It's okay, it's okay," Auntie says. She skims the unburnt portion from the pot. "Go. Sit."

We take our places around the dining room table. No reruns in front of the TV with Auntie, which means Dad, Ali, and I have to engage in idle chitchat. I'm not telling them about the contest. Dad's too wrapped up in his business trip, and it's not like I'd get any sympathy from Ali. We're certainly not going to talk about Mom.

"Um, what time is your flight?" I ask, tearing off a piece of lavash bread Auntie has set on the table along with the sabzi: raw onion, herbs, and, inexplicably, radishes.

"Five a.m.," Dad says with a sigh.

He looks so tired. His tan skin is sallow, his dark hair is thinning at the temples. Ten cities in four weeks to introduce a new fighter jet to the other engineers at his defense contracting firm. He'll be even more exhausted by the time he gets back.

Ali grabs a piece of lavash. "Did you get a window or an aisle seat?"

“Window,” Dad says as Auntie carries in the platter of rice with tomato and eggplant stew. “Kheili mamnoon, Minah-joon,” he says. “Khoresh-t-e baademjooon. My favorite.”

“Khaahesh mikonam, you’re welcome,” says Auntie. She takes Dad’s plate and piles it high.

“Aisle’s better,” Ali says. Now that he’s a junior, he thinks he knows everything.

“Window is way better,” I say, handing her mine. “You can see the clouds and the cities all stretching out below.”

“You can stretch your *legs* in the aisle,” Ali says, popping a radish in his mouth.

“Window’s still better.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is.”

“*Guys*,” Dad nearly shouts.

We get quiet.

“None of this while I’m gone, understood?”

We nod. But asking us not to argue is about as realistic as asking the same of him and Mom. By now, I’ve lost my appetite. All I want to do is go upstairs and figure out a plan B for my application. I make crazy eights with my fork to make it look like I’m eating so Auntie won’t be offended. “It’s delicious, Auntie,” I say. “Thank you.”

Her face crumples. “Daadash, why you never teach them the Farsi?”

“I got them that Learning Language series,” Dad says, mixing his rice and stew together.

Thirty cassettes to learn a language. Ali listened to every . . . single . . . one.

The only way you'd know he's Iranian is his full-on *Starsky & Hutch* 'stache and wild, puffy hair. He got Mom's green eyes and slender, Irish American nose. But Ali is the one who learned the language, follows the politics. I got Dad's "sleepy" brown eyes and "strong" nose. And Auntie's figure. "Zaftig," Grandma Jean calls it.

"Anyway, we're never going to Iran now that the ayatollah took over," Ali says with his mouth full.

"Ali," I hiss at him. Talk like this upsets Auntie.

Auntie's eyes well. "Your grandmother says protesters are still in the streets every day."

As a half'n' half, I never paid much attention to what was going on in Iran, a faraway place we would visit "one day." As long as Grandma Zumideh was safe. Now we get updates on the Iranian Revolution that overthrew the king daily.

"But she's okay, right?" I ask.

"She's fine," Dad says. "And I guarantee, the CIA will run some covert operation to put the shah back in power."

Auntie frowns. "The shah was a very bad man, daadash. There is no freedom under Reza Shah. Nobody wants the shah back."

"He was better for *us*," Dad says. He soaks up the rest of his stew with the flatbread.

"Who is 'us'?" Auntie asks with the arch of one perfectly threaded brow.

“You know what I mean,” he says. “Listen, you kids be good for your aunt.”

“We will,” Ali and I say in unison. He means Ali. I’m pretty much an adult.

“I’ll be back in time for Thanksgiving.” He stands up, gives Auntie a kiss on each cheek. “Kheili mamnoon, Minah-joon. Back to work. Early flight.” He gives me a quick kiss on the forehead and Ali a pat on the shoulder.

Just as he heads back to his office, the phone rings. Ali jumps up to answer. I hope it’s not for me.

I have to figure out what to do about my application. I should have fought harder to be editor of the paper this year, but I would have had to wrestle Gerald to the ground for it. And who wants to edit articles about the cafeteria menu or the big game when I thought I had this contest in the bag? I don’t want to talk to anyone.

“Jasmine.” Ali hands me the phone. “It’s Mom.”

Except for Mom. “I’ll take it upstairs.” I pull the phone from the hallway into my room so Auntie won’t hear if Mom says anything bad about Dad. “Hi, Mom.” I force a cheery tone.

“Hi, honey,” she says, inhaling the Eve Menthol she must have retrieved from her sequined cigarette case. “Ali said you and your aunt made dinner together.”

“I helped make the rice is all.” I sit cross-legged on my bed with a half-eaten bag of Skittles I grab from my dresser. Little yellowed pieces of Scotch tape litter my walls from years of

putting up and taking down posters. Cheap Trick has to come down. Elvis Costello can stay up. “How are you feeling, Mom?”

“Better. I saw a therapist today.” A big exhale. “She gave me an emotional checklist of symptoms to watch for when the divorce is final. Like uncontrolled rage.”

Sometimes, she overshares.

They’ve threatened it so many times before. They’ve always gotten back together.

The last time, in fifth grade, I locked myself in my room and listened to *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* for two days straight. The double album had just come out. The title track and “Candle in the Wind” and “Bennie and the Jets” were all about love and loss and letting go, and it felt like Elton John was right there with me in just as much pain.

I fish an orange Skittle out of the bag. “Do you . . . know when you’re coming back?”

No answer. She’s already been gone for two weeks.

“Mom?”

She exhales again. “Jasmine, I’ve been talking to your grandmother about maybe staying. Here. In Kansas.”

I nearly choke on the Skittle. “*Staying?* Like, forever?”

“I could go back to school here, get my teaching degree.”

“What about me and Ali?” I cry.

“You can finish out the school year there and come here in the summer. You’re going off to college in the fall.”

“Mom, if I don’t get into NYU . . .”

I’m not moving to Manhattan, Kansas. Imagine saying

you're from Manhattan and then having to say, "No. The other one." If I don't get into NYU, I'll stay with Dad and go to Cal State.

God. I can't choose between Mom and Dad. Plus, Cal State doesn't even have a proper journalism department. Kansas State does, but what band has ever come out of Kansas except . . . Kansas?

"We'll talk about it another time," she says abruptly. "Forget I brought it up."

As if I could. We hang up. I flop back on my bed. An hour ago, I was on the tour bus with Chrissie Hynde. Now it's driving away, belching a big black cloud of smoke in my face.

And she's serious this time. They could *actually* get a divorce. Split our family apart. Mom and Dad would fight over custody of Ali. Sit on opposite sides of the auditorium at my graduation. Refuse to talk to each other at my wedding.

Dad better have a good apology ready for Mom when she comes home—and maybe those emerald earrings she's always wanted.



"You don't want the sangak with feta and walnut for breakfast?" Auntie asks as I breeze by.

"Uh . . ." I stall.

I'm on a mission to get to school before first period and meet with our guidance counselor to find that "something extra" for my application.

Her shoulders droop. For her, an uneaten meal is like unrequited love.

Ali is at the kitchen table devouring Auntie's sangak along with the *New York Times* Dad left behind. Poor Ali, trapped in Kansas with Mom and Grandma Jean: Grandma badgering him to cut his hair or bursting in on him at inopportune moments, like when he's secretly browsing through Mom's *Cosmo*.

I pause at the back door. "You want a ride to school?"

"Got one," he says, turning to the sports section.

Just as well. I've got to get to the counselor's office.

Outside, a warm, acrid wind—the Santa Anas, whirling up from Orange County—covers Mom's lemon-yellow Toyota Corolla in an even thicker layer of dust. Somehow, Ali has resisted writing "Wash Me" on the back window. The fake strawberry air freshener hanging from the rearview reminds me of Mom, blasting her Janis Joplin cassettes, singing along to "Me and Bobby McGee." I like Janis. She's wild and raw like Chrissie.

Another week or two at Grandma Jean's, and Mom will be ready to come back as her old self. Or a new, improved one. As long as she comes back.

The Eisenhower High parking lot is nearly full when I pull in: the stoners and skaters, the jocks and soon-to-be dropouts sneaking one last cigarette before class. Our campus must have seemed super-modern when it was built in the 1950s. Lots of concrete and low, boxy buildings painted pale sage green with a lone oak tree in the middle of the quad.

I head toward the Admin building and our counselor, Mr. Buchanan's, office. He's rocking a radical comb-over and sporting his plaid, bad sportscaster sports coat when I show up in his doorway. A portrait of former president Richard M. Nixon hangs on the wall opposite his desk. Everyone knows Mr. Buchanan is obsessed with him.

"It wasn't so much the crime as the cover-up," I say as I sit across from him, the only thing I remember about the whole Nixon Watergate scandal from when it was on television 24/7.

"I agree. Nixon should have done a much better job covering it up. Now, Miss Azumski—"

"Zumideh," I correct him. Everyone gets intimidated by all the vowels.

He dons his reading glasses and peers at my transcript. "So, you need something extra, something that makes you stand out from the crowd. Apart from your name."

"Yes. I'm on the school paper, taking honors classes. I was a student reporter for the—"

"Oh, Miss Zip-uh-dee-ay," he says, not even coming close, "*everyone* applying to NYU is taking honors classes and interned at their local paper." He leans back in his chair. "You know, East Coast schools are out of reach for most Californians. You're not the country club set. You're all barefoot at the beach, toking on marijuana cigarettes. Rutgers man, myself."

"Actually, I don't smoke."

“Were you a Girl Scout?” He removes his reading glasses.

“Did you get that Gold Award?”

“Uh, no.” Not even a Brownie.

“A camp counselor?”

No. I wasted the summer on soap operas because I thought I would win the Young Journalists Award. And I would have, if the judges knew anything about music.

I should have known they wouldn’t.

“Do you speak a second language?”

Dammit. Why didn’t I listen to those cassettes?

“Mr. Buchanan, I need that something extra *now*. The application deadline is December first. It’s already October twenty-eighth.”

He sticks his finger in his ear while he thinks, as if tuning to a certain frequency. “What about a service project? Volunteering at the hospital or an old folks’ home.”

Great. Barf or bedpans.

He exhales, straining the center button on his jacket. “You and that other fella, putting all your eggs in the NYU basket, you may end up with yolk on your face when we have several fine universities right here: USC, UCLA. Cal State.”

USC and UCLA are filled with stuck-up sorority girls. “I’m applying to State as a fallback, but—wait, what ‘other fella’?”

“Oh, you know. Gene, or is it . . . Joe? Anyway, Miss Zum-buh-dum, take heart.” I lean forward with anticipation.

“No one from Eisenhower High has ever actually gotten into NYU. You won’t have to feel bad if you fail.”

I’m not going to fail. I’m going to be the first college reporter to interview Chrissie Hynde.

I gather my purse and folder. “Thanks for your, um, guidance, sir,” I say. “And by the way,” I add on my way out, “it’s pronounced ‘Zoom-ee-day.’”

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

First published in the United States by Wednesday Books,
an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

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For information, address St. Martin's Publishing Group,
120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

www.wednesdaybooks.com

Designed by Devan Norman
Case stamp art © Shutterstock.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Boyer, Susan Azim, author.

Title: Jasmine Zumideh needs a win / Susan Azim Boyer.

Description: First edition. | New York : Wednesday Books,
2022. | Audience: Ages 12–18.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022021560 | ISBN 9781250833686
(hardcover) | ISBN 9781250833693 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Iranian Americans—Fiction. | CYAC:
Iranian Americans—Fiction. | Identity—Fiction. | High
schools—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction. | Student
government—Fiction. | LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.B6955 Jas 2022 |
DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022021560>

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First Edition: 2022

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1