

ALL NITASHA'S PARENTS want is for her to be the perfect Indian daughter—something she is decidedly not. Everything she does seems to disappoint them, especially her mom. They just don't get that she'll never be like her doctor older brother. To make matters worse, she's never quite felt like she belongs at school either, and lately, her best friend, Ava, and her crush, Henry, seem to be more interested in the rich new girl than in her.

Alcohol takes the edge off, but when that doesn't work, Nitasha turns to cutting. She can't stop asking herself: Will she ever be enough for her friends or her family? Or even for herself?

This authentic and powerful teen graphic novel debut from Jyoti Chand and Tara Anand shines a light on how harmful the stigma of mental illness is and how lifesaving a community that is honest about mental health can be.

Fitting
Indian

CHAND



ANAND

Fitting Indian

JYOTI CHAND

TARA ANAND

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JYOTI CHAND, known as Mamajotes across social platforms, is a dynamic writer, comedian, and passionate advocate for self-care and maternal mental health. With a foundation in stand-up comedy and improv, Jyoti captivates audiences through her highly engaging content across her social and digital platforms, offering an unfiltered look into the realities of motherhood. Her work encourages others to embrace joy and authenticity in their own lives. Represented by Haley Henning at YMU Social, Jyoti holds an MFA in writing for children and young adults from Hamline University and is currently working on her second book, along with other creative projects. Originally from Los Angeles, she now resides in the Chicago suburbs with her family. Follow her journey @mamajotes, or visit her online at mamajotes.com.

TARA ANAND is an award-winning illustrator and visual artist from Mumbai, India, based in New York City. Her work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and the *LA Times* and on Netflix and more. *Fitting Indian* is her debut graphic novel. Visit her at taraanandart.com.

Also available as an ebook.



Fitting Indian

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Fitting Indian addresses sensitive topics, including mental health struggles, depression, alcoholism, and suicide. These themes are depicted honestly and may be difficult for some readers. If you or someone you know is struggling, know that help is available, and you are not alone. For resources and support, please refer to the information provided at the end of this book.

Please take care of yourself as you read, and remember that it's okay to pause or reach out if you need support.



It always smells like turmeric in here.

Chapter 1

And garam masala.



It sticks to my hair and it's impossible to get out.

Even though I do daily washes and rush out the door before the smell soaks back in.

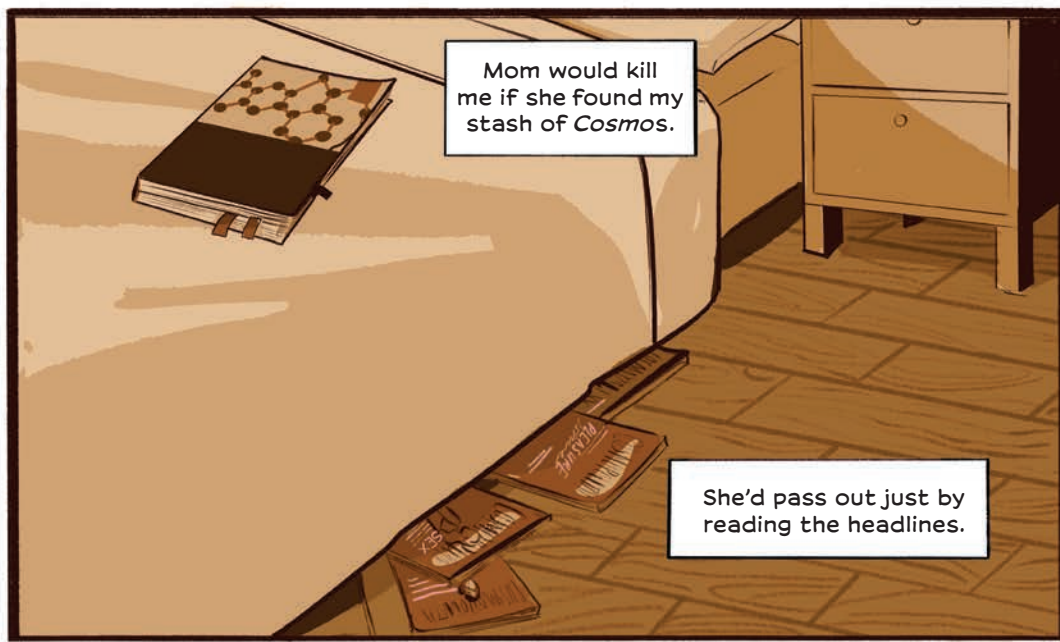


Nothing works.

Cosmo says that you're not supposed to wash your hair every day.



Clearly the people at *Cosmo* don't live with Indian parents.



Mom would kill me if she found my stash of *Cosmos*.

She'd pass out just by reading the headlines.



Indian parents don't believe in the "sex talk," so I have to rely on *Cosmo* to teach me all the good stuff.

I don't want to look dumb when it happens.



Nitaaaaassshaaa!

Mom wouldn't even notice my collection of contraband anyway. She's always on the phone with her sisters.



Or yelling at me.



Roooootttiiiiiii's ready!!!

You don't have to yell.

How am I supposed to know you are right here?

With your eyes.

Is that how you talk to your mummy?



Just say haan ji.



Aajkal ka baahce ...

Just say *haan ji*.
Yes, ma'am and *okay* aren't good enough, even though it's literally the same thing.

It's the golden rule in this house.



Whatever Mom and Dad say, haan ji.

Like an obedient Indian robot.

If they say to touch the smelly, unpedicured feet of an elder you don't even know, just say haan ji.

If they say to sing and dance like a trained monkey for their friends. Just say haan ji.

When they say to go to school for an eternity to become a doctor. Just say haan ji.

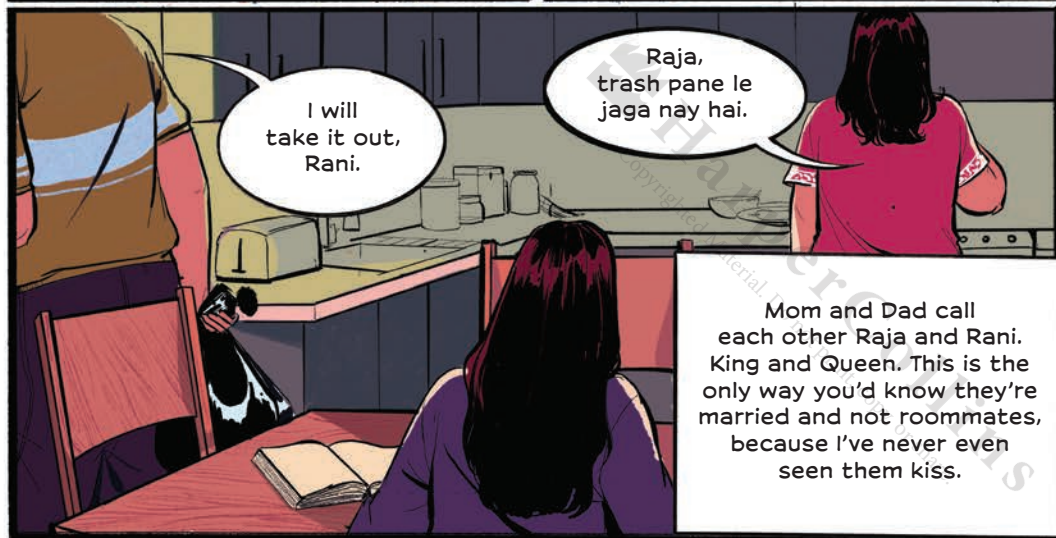
But I talk back. They don't like that I have an opinion.



Ina garmi hai. Turn on the AC.



Beauty of Southern California.



I will take it out, Rani.

Raja, trash pane le jaga nay hai.

Mom and Dad call each other Raja and Rani. King and Queen. This is the only way you'd know they're married and not roommates, because I've never even seen them kiss.

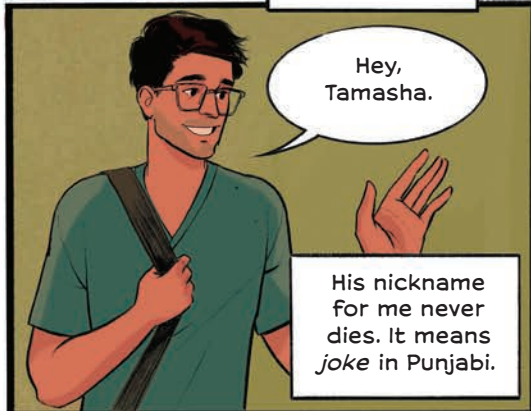


Mom relies on Dad for everything. She can't even put gas in the car by herself, but she's always on my case about knowing how to do everything for my future husband.



You have to watch your blood pressure.

And then there's the perfect child.



Hey, Tamasha.

His nickname for me never dies. It means *joke* in Punjabi.



I'm not five anymore—



It still suits you.

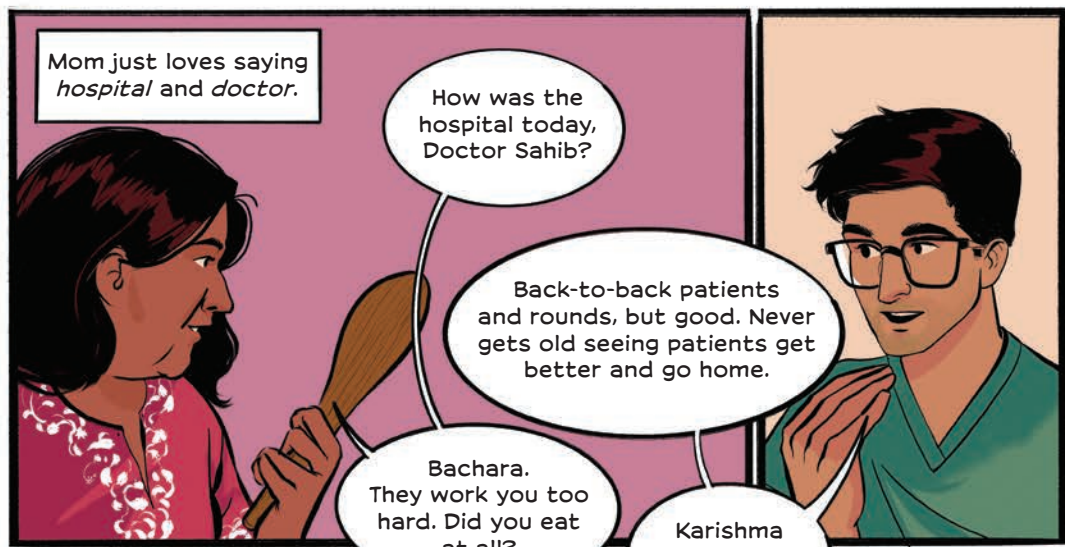
Whatever.

Be nice. He had a long day at the hospital.

Oooh. So touchy. Are you on your period?

Perfect job: doctor. Perfectly engaged to a perfect Indian lawyer.

I had a long day at school too. Junior year is no joke.



Mom just loves saying *hospital* and *doctor*.

How was the hospital today, Doctor Sahib?

Back-to-back patients and rounds, but good. Never gets old seeing patients get better and go home.

Bachara. They work you too hard. Did you eat at all?

Karishma came by for lunch.



Karishma Beti, you are just too perfect.

And there's the other favorite word: *Karishma*.

Karishma is Shaan's fiancée. She's pretty, slim, but not so skinny that anyone is concerned. Because it matters. You can't be too skinny or too fat—there's that perfect in-between aunties look for, and that's Karishma. She speaks fluent Punjabi and doesn't drink alcohol, which is a bonus.

She's in consulting. I have no idea what that means and neither do my parents. All they see is her law degree and that she works from home, which means she can be home with the future babies, which she actually wants to do. Making her even more perfect.

And next summer, they'll finally have the daughter they've dreamed of. Not me, the one who talks back, doesn't know what she wants to be, and can only pull a B in AP History.



Nitasha, get your brother water.

He has legs, doesn't he?

Girls don't talk like this.

Did you see how she rolls her eyes at me?

It's because you say things that start with "girls don't."

My parents want to think they are woke. But they are still so old-school with me and Shaan.

Say namaste.

Why can't I go have fun?



Namaste.

I'm always forced to stay by Mom's side everywhere we go, while Shaan gets to talk to his friends because he's a boy.

Dad still makes me practice around the Albertson's parking lot even though I already have my license. He bought Shaan a car when he got his license and threw me in the car with him.



I should get an after-school job. Save for college.

Focus on your studies and you can work when you're older.

Shaan worked at Best Buy when he was my age.

Young girls don't go to work. We will help you with college. Log kya kahenge?





As annoying as he is,
he always has my back.

I can get
my own water.

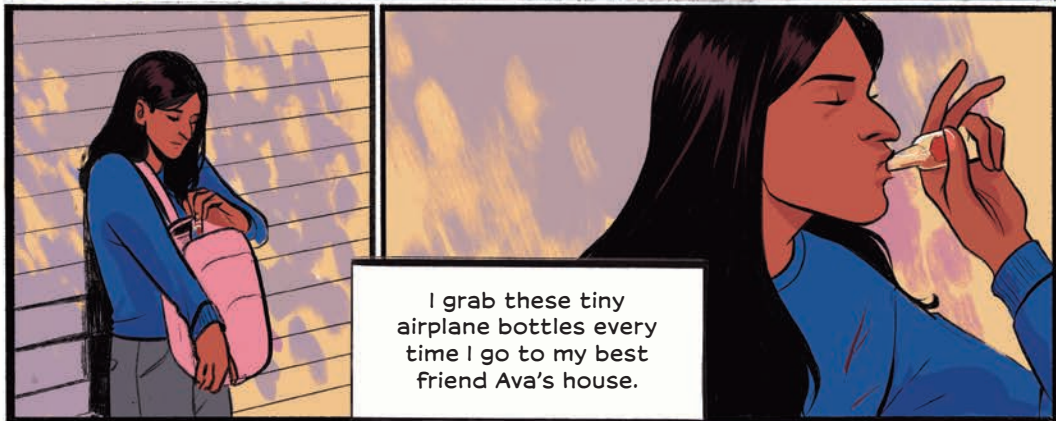
Chapter 2



We go to Arya Samaj
every Sunday.



I know how it looks. Drinking alcohol at a place of worship.



I grab these tiny airplane bottles every time I go to my best friend Ava's house.



Her mom is a flight attendant and never notices.

They just take the edge off.



That's my ama ji. My dad's mom. She leads the havan.



She used to live with us. I was only four when she left.



She and Mom got into a fight.



My mom screamed and slammed her door.



Then Ama Ji packed her bags. Nobody ever told me why she went to go live with my tayi.



She looks like a sweet old lady, but she's really mean.



Especially to me.



Puri maa ka beti hai. Tora vi nay sundi.





Aren't you hot in that sweater?

There's one face I'm always happy to see.



Nick is the first boy who held my hand.



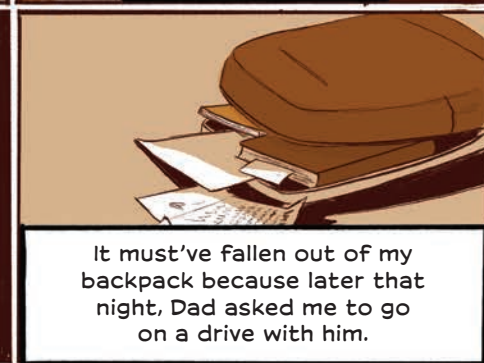
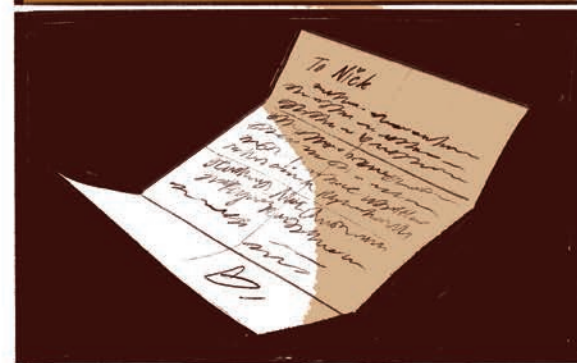
And my first and only kiss.

I wrote him a really long love letter one night.



I've known Nick since I was born.


We used to call each other *cousin* until he was my first and only boyfriend.



It must've fallen out of my backpack because later that night, Dad asked me to go on a drive with him.




That's how I knew I was in trouble.




We don't date until we're married. No love letters. No boyfriends.

But then how do you meet someone?



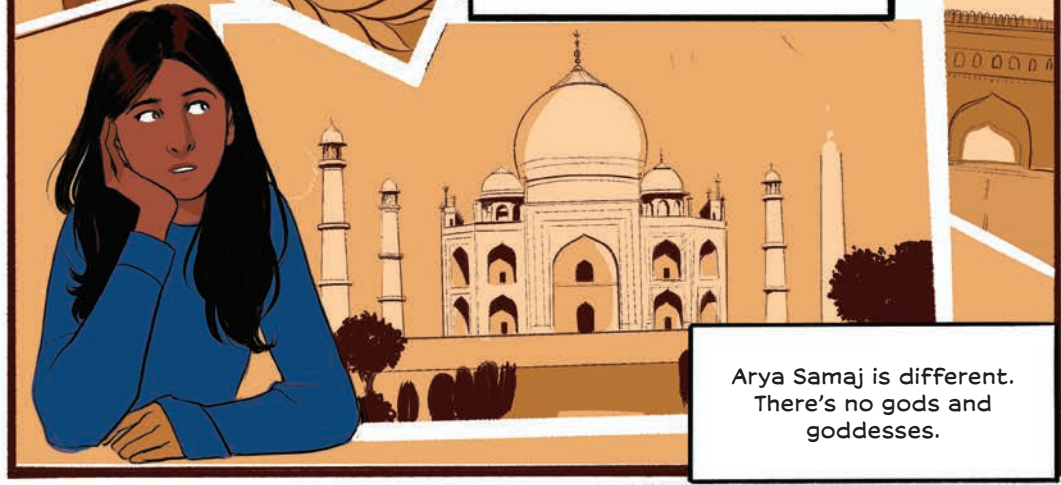
You are too young to understand.

I still don't get it. They tell me I can't date and then tell me I'll get married one day. They're delusional if they think they'll get to pick my husband for me.




There's a lot I'll never understand. Arranged marriages, calculus, why Oreos aren't made with two cream outsides and one cookie middle, most Indian traditions, and I really don't understand the majority of Hinduism.

Was there really a little blue man with a flute? And a woman with a bunch of arms floating on a lotus?



Arya Samaj is different. There's no gods and goddesses.



Just one higher power and all four elements: earth, air, water, and fire.

And we just pray and feel the vibrations inside us.

Sometimes when I close my eyes and chant along,
I feel like I'm alone sitting in front of the fire.



Sometimes I feel like I'm floating.

And sometimes I feel like she's watching me.
Waiting for me to fail her somehow. Embarrass her.



She watches Mom the same way, like we are a pair.
She despises Mom and despises me for being my mom's daughter.
I think she forgets I'm also her son's daughter.

Mom asks
me to sing
a bhajan.

She says I have a sweet voice.

Every. Freaking. Time.

Sing this one.

Do I
have to?

It's harder to let her down when
everyone is watching. Especially Ama Ji.



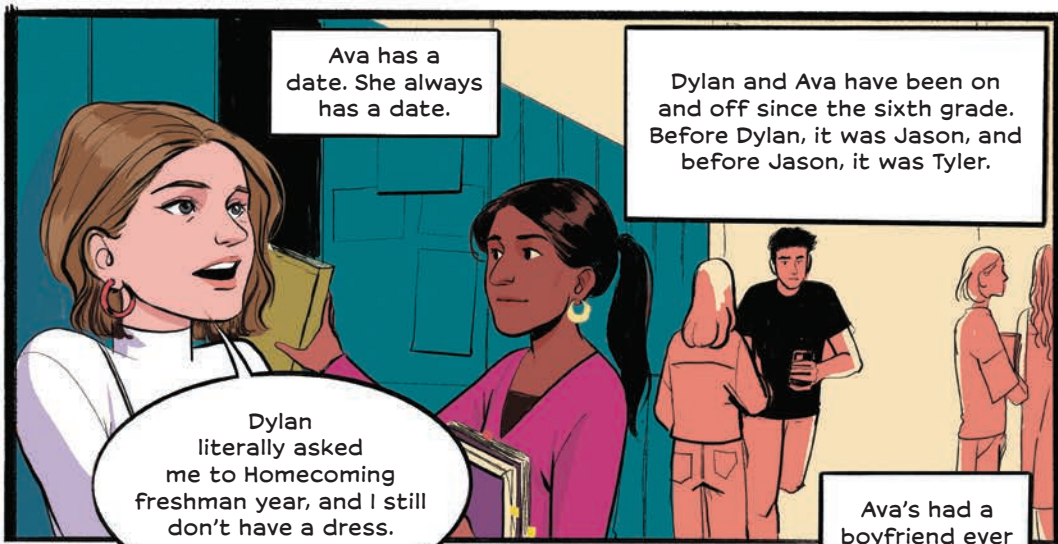
Tere punjana
ko bhagwan, bana
mane mandir
alishaan.

Chapter 3



Rrriinnnggg

Homecoming is one month
away and I don't have a date.



Ava has a date. She always has a date.

Dylan and Ava have been on and off since the sixth grade. Before Dylan, it was Jason, and before Jason, it was Tyler.

Dylan literally asked me to Homecoming freshman year, and I still don't have a dress.

Ava's had a boyfriend ever since we met.



Are you okay?



Uh—I—uh...



I'm so glad I bumped into you.



I've been wanting to ask you something.

Is that for me?



Only if you'll go to Homecoming with me?

Yeeeeeeesssss!



The after party at my house is going to be lit.

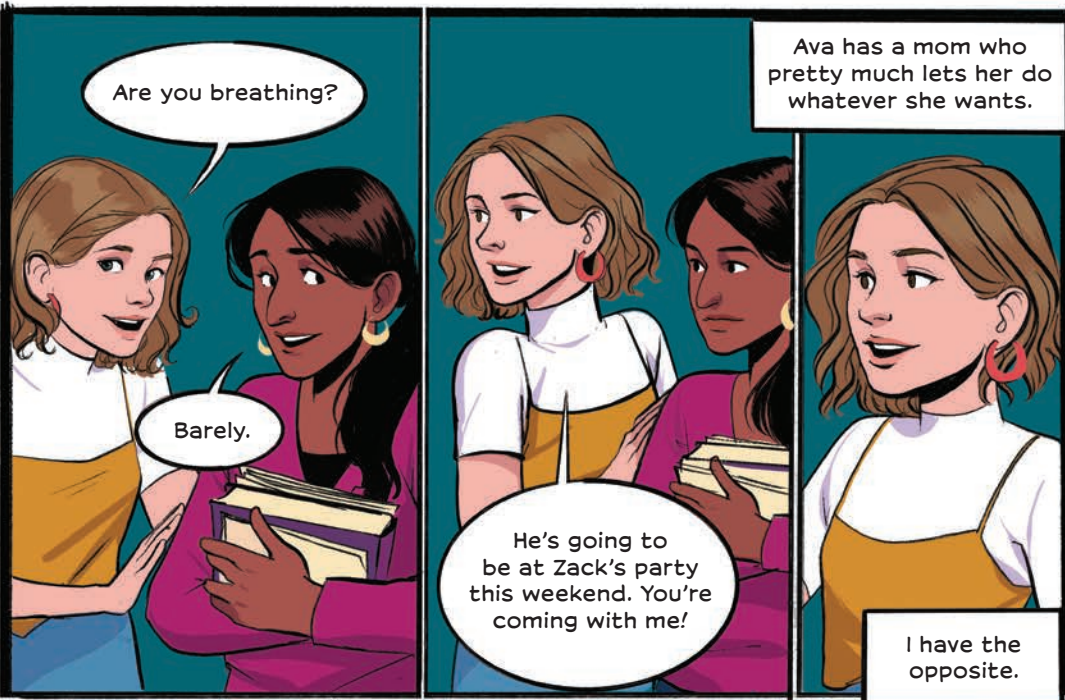
We were just talking about Homecoming.



We'll be there.

You better be.

Both of you.



Are you breathing?

Barely.

Ava has a mom who pretty much lets her do whatever she wants.

He's going to be at Zack's party this weekend. You're coming with me!

I have the opposite.



My parents have me locked in the house with permission to leave when I have either A) a project or B) a school function, because they don't want me to "get in trouble," aka, they don't want me to have a life.

I'll figure something out.



That's my girl!

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Ava is the coolest person I know, and she chose me of all people to be her best friend. But she doesn't know the real me. Nobody does.

That's what it's like living with a secret.

I wish I was this hot.
Blonde, skinny, tall, pretty.



You think I would look good with blonde hair?

I think you could rock it.

Will you help me dye it this weekend?



Nitaaaaassshaaaa!

Nitasha!



What is so important on here?

Mooooom.



None of your business!

You see how she talks to me.



Kinni chilak.

It's my phone!





She just doesn't get it.

I'm sixteen and she still treats me like a kid. She doesn't get what it's like.



She doesn't get *me*.

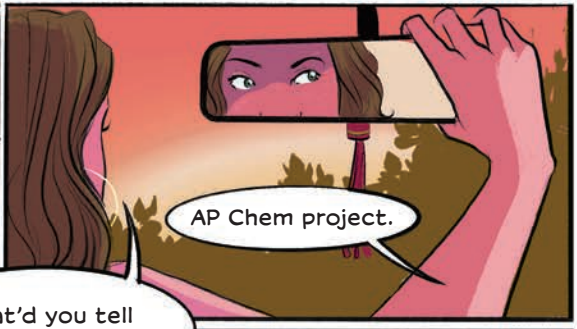
No one does.



Chapter 4



Look who was allowed out of her prison!



AP Chem project.

What'd you tell them this time?



They think I'm capable of understanding AP Chemistry?

No, that's why they think I'm tutoring you.



At first, I liked it. I felt special to get a nickname, but then everyone started calling me India. Even Ms. Avery started using it. I tried calling Ava Mexico. Everyone here is a little Mexican, so it didn't stick.



My parents gave us easy names because they didn't want our names to be butchered or for us to stand out. There's only one other Indian kid at school and his name is Hardik.



Chloe is Ava's new friend. She transferred here at the end of last year and they met at a bonfire over the summer. I heard Chloe tell Ava I bring down their cool factor on the first day of school.





I got the goods.



Hey, babe!

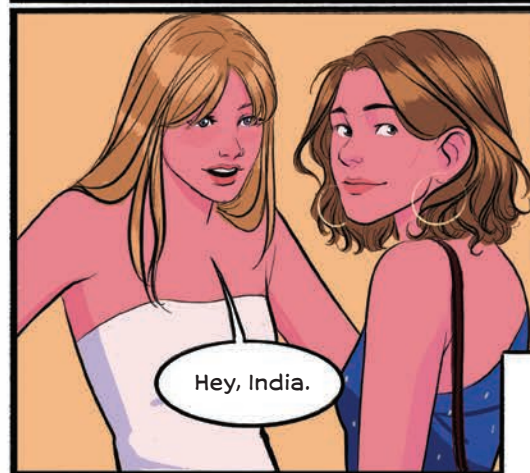


You're going to look so hot.

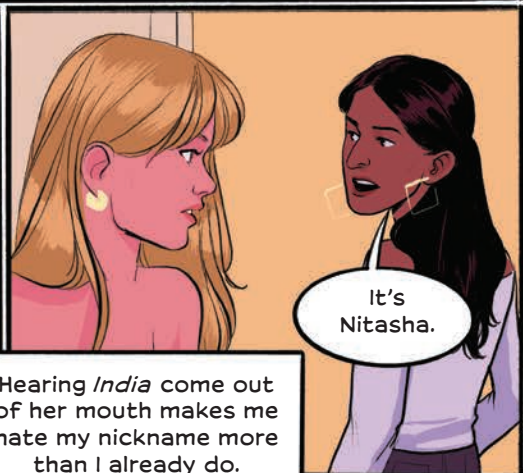


Hot enough for Henry?

Too hot for Henry.

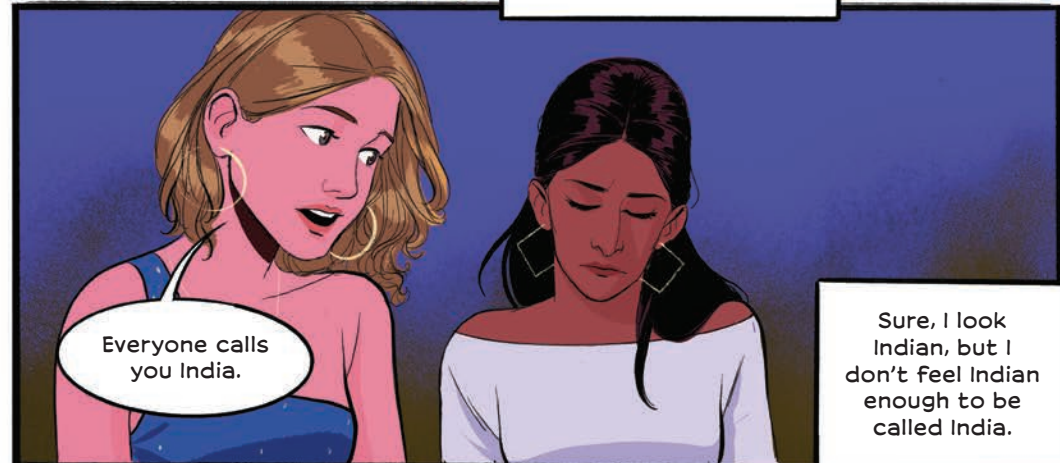


Hey, India.



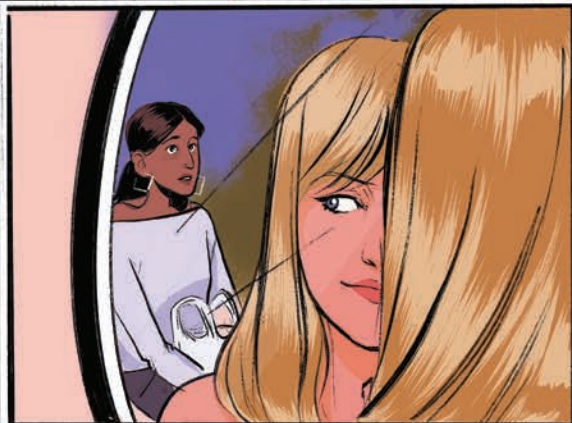
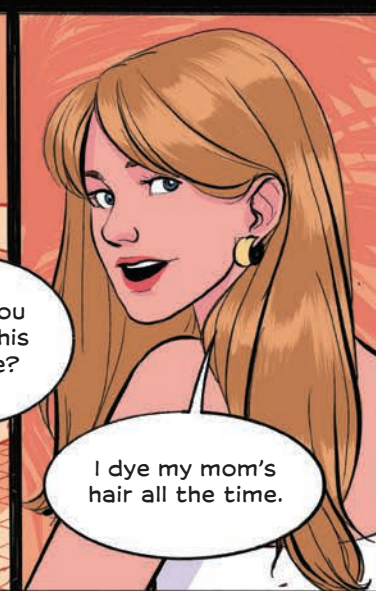
It's Nitasha.

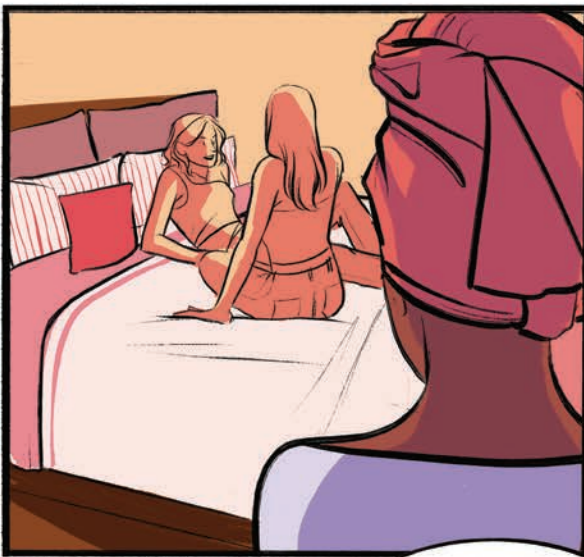
Hearing *India* come out of her mouth makes me hate my nickname more than I already do.



Everyone calls you India.

Sure, I look Indian, but I don't feel Indian enough to be called India.





I couldn't get myself to look yet.

How does it look?

What were you guys talking about?



Ava was just giving me all the deets about last night.



You didn't tell her yet?

Tell me what?

It doesn't matter what it is. It already hurts not to know first.



Remember we were going to wait until Homecoming, but it just happened.

I was going to tell you.

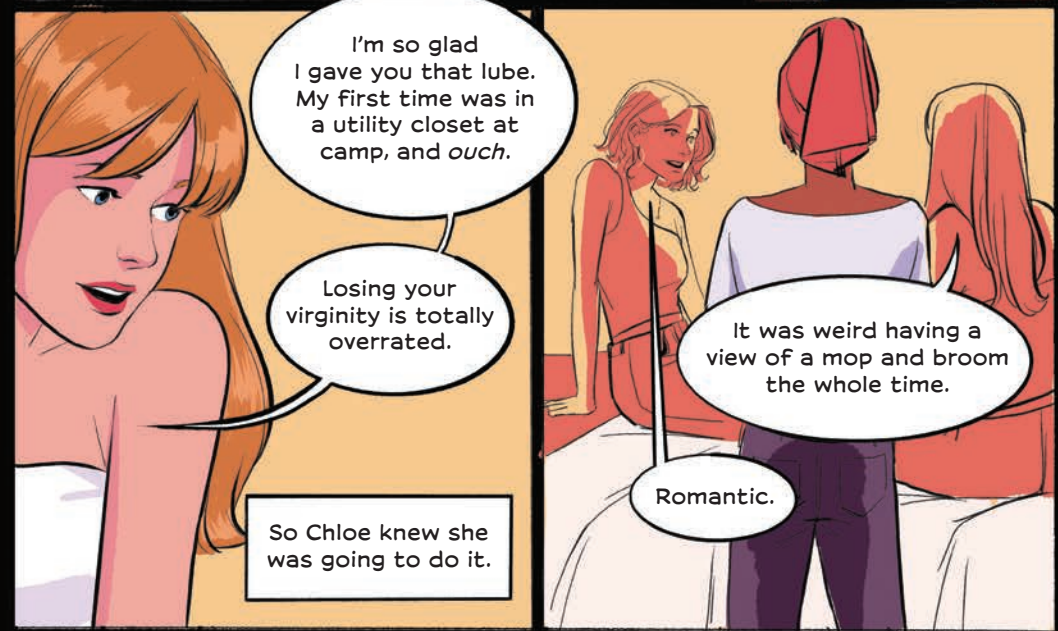
OMG it's NBD! Dylan and I had sex last night.



She told Chloe first?

But she's my best friend.

I wonder if I'm still hers.



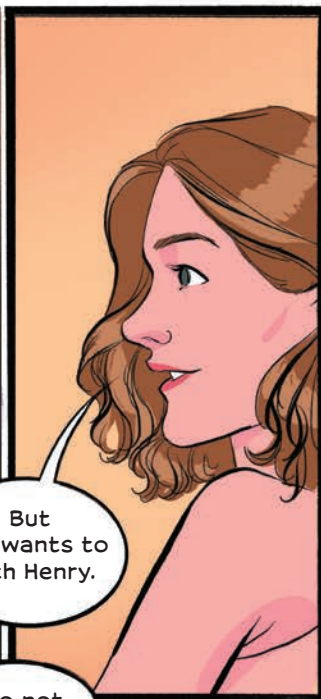
I'm so glad I gave you that lube. My first time was in a utility closet at camp, and *ouch*.

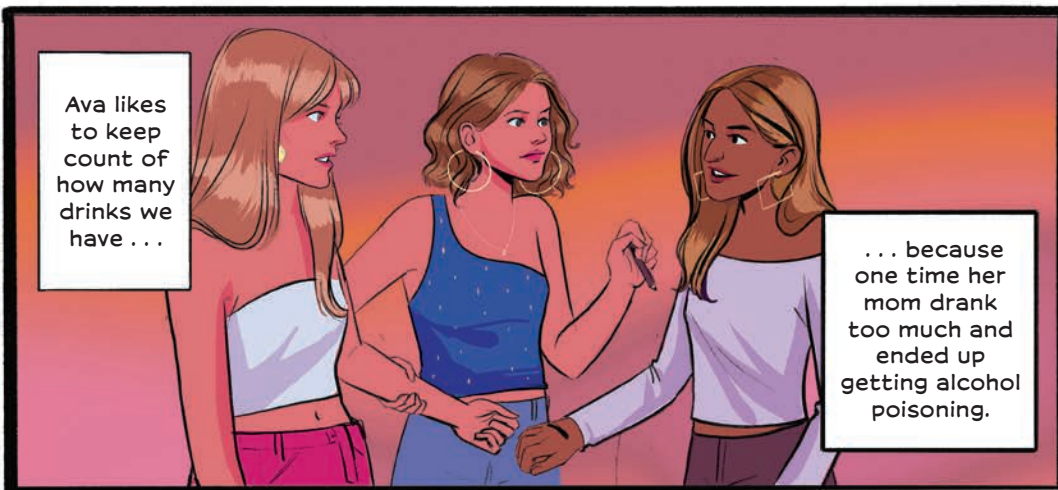
Losing your virginity is totally overrated.

So Chloe knew she was going to do it.

It was weird having a view of a mop and broom the whole time.

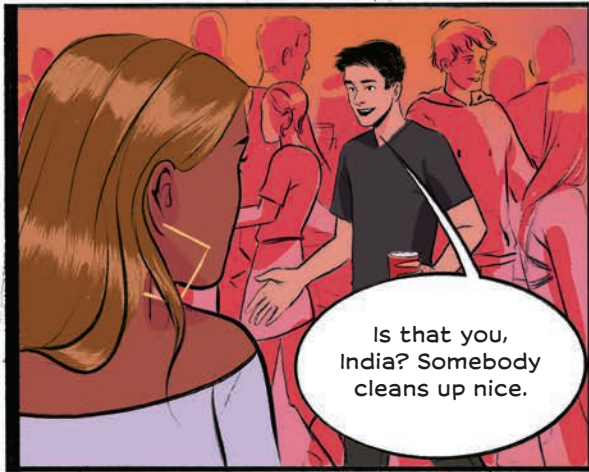
Romantic.





Ava likes to keep count of how many drinks we have ...

... because one time her mom drank too much and ended up getting alcohol poisoning.



Is that you, India? Somebody cleans up nice.



He's like a god.



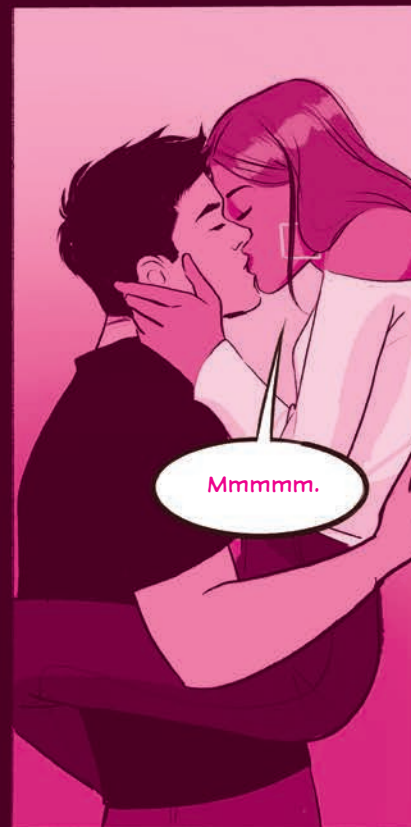
All right, what are we drinking?

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I'll have a sip of you.

You have no idea how long I've been waiting for you to say that.

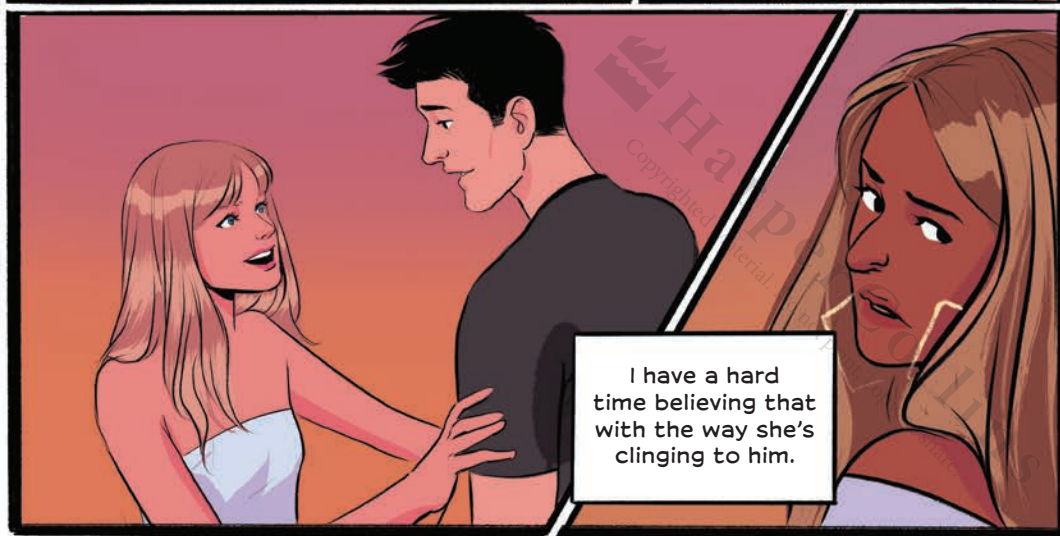
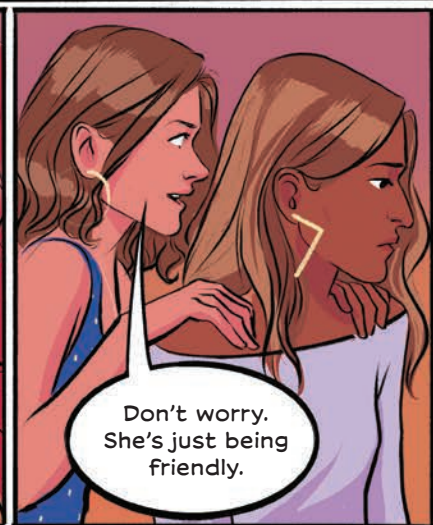
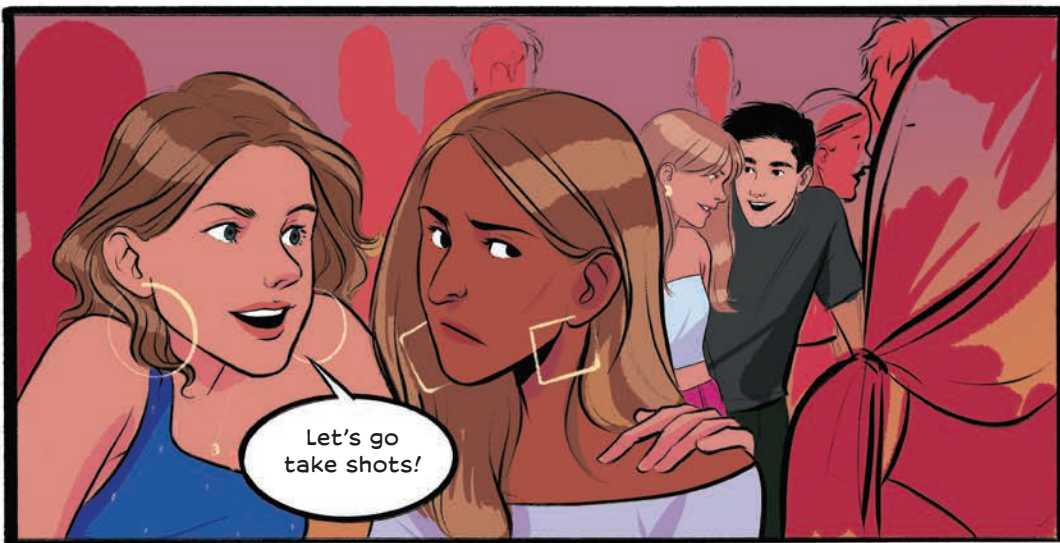


Mmmmm.



Let's get out of here.

I thought you'd never ask.





Let's do one more.

I'm done. I have to work tomorrow.

Hell no.

C'mon! Ava?

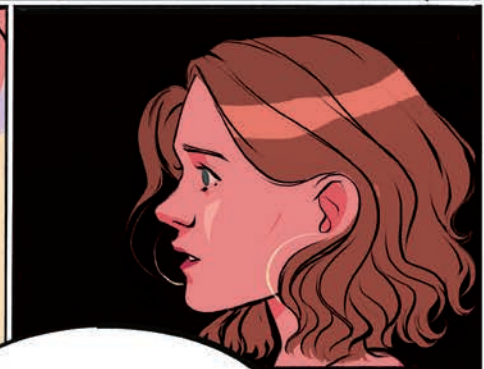
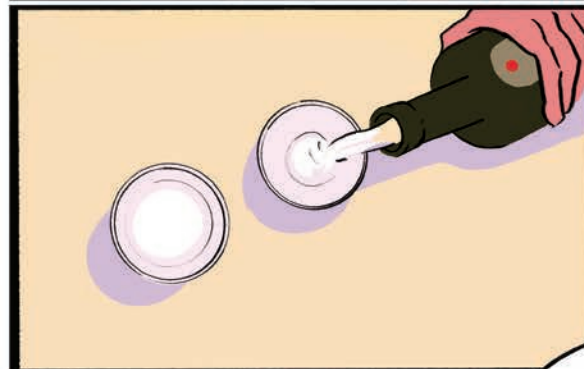
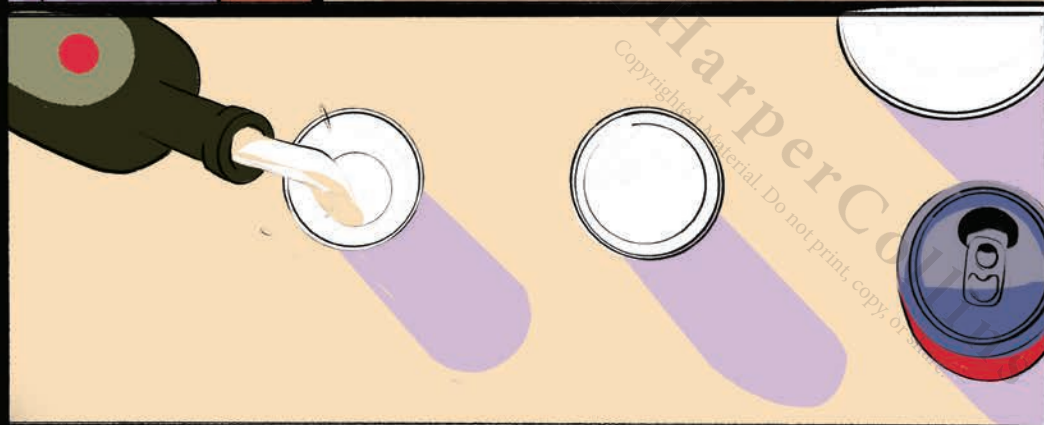
What about you, India?



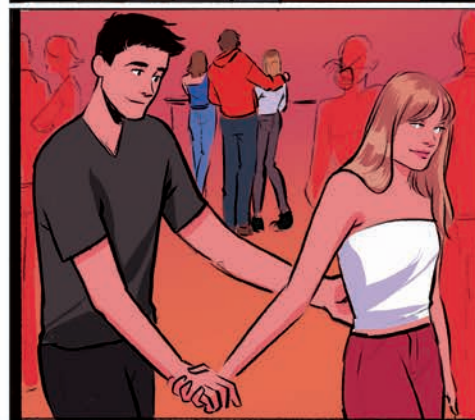
I'm game.

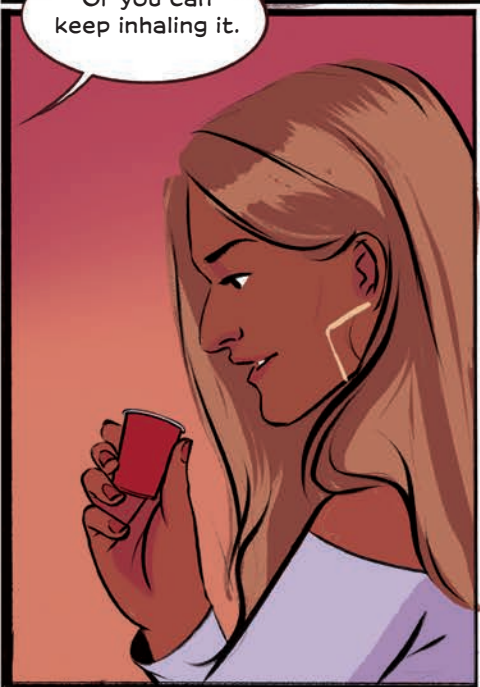
You're what?

Sweet!



Damn! I didn't know India could party! Hot and fun? Perfect combo.





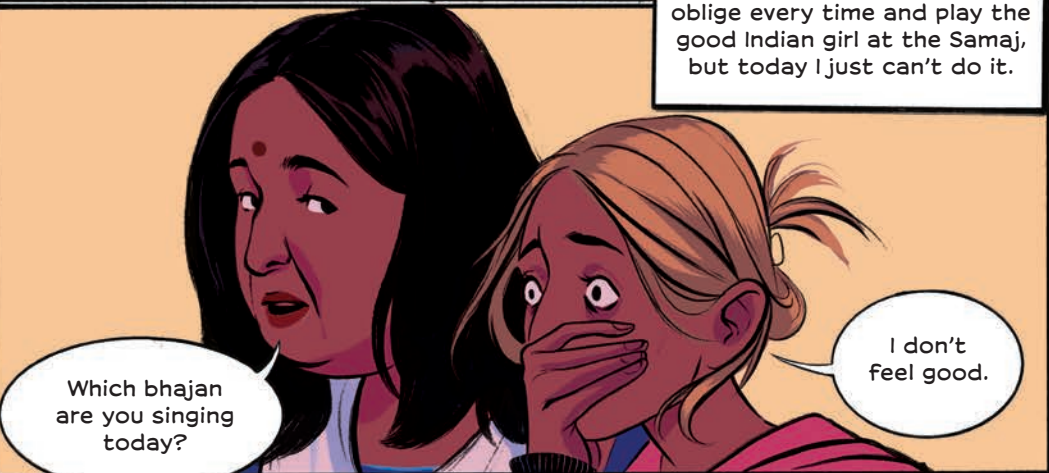
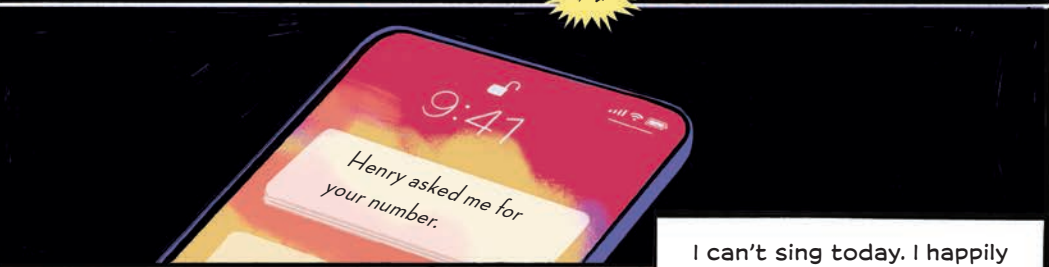
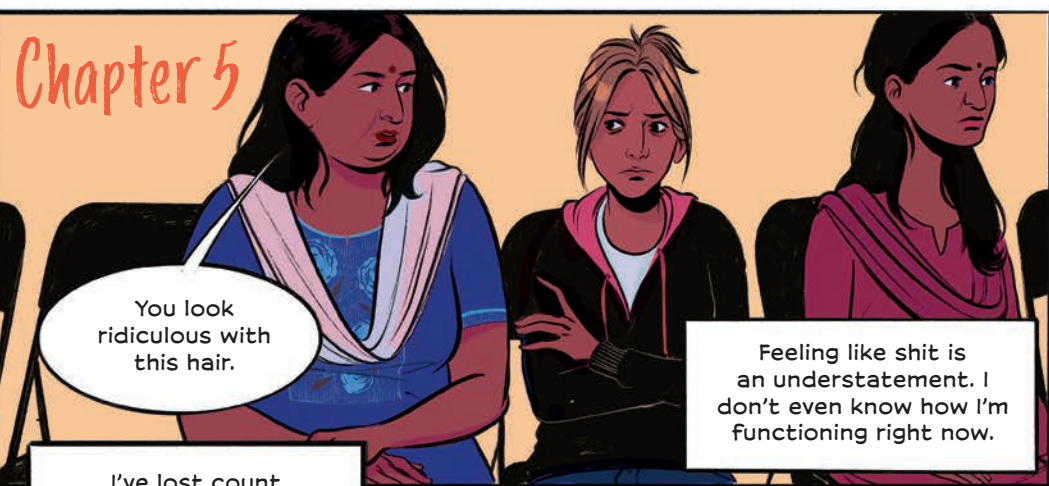
Or you can keep inhaling it.

I didn't know you had it in you!

Why do I feel like I'm going to regret that?

Because tequila is meant to be drunk chilled in a margarita.

Might as well. I'm already going to feel like shit tomorrow.



Chapter 5

You look ridiculous with this hair.

Feeling like shit is an understatement. I don't even know how I'm functioning right now.

I've lost count of how many times she's said that since she handed me a box of her dark-brown hair dye this morning.

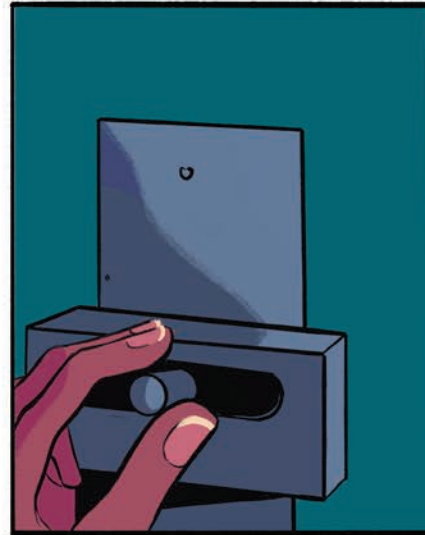
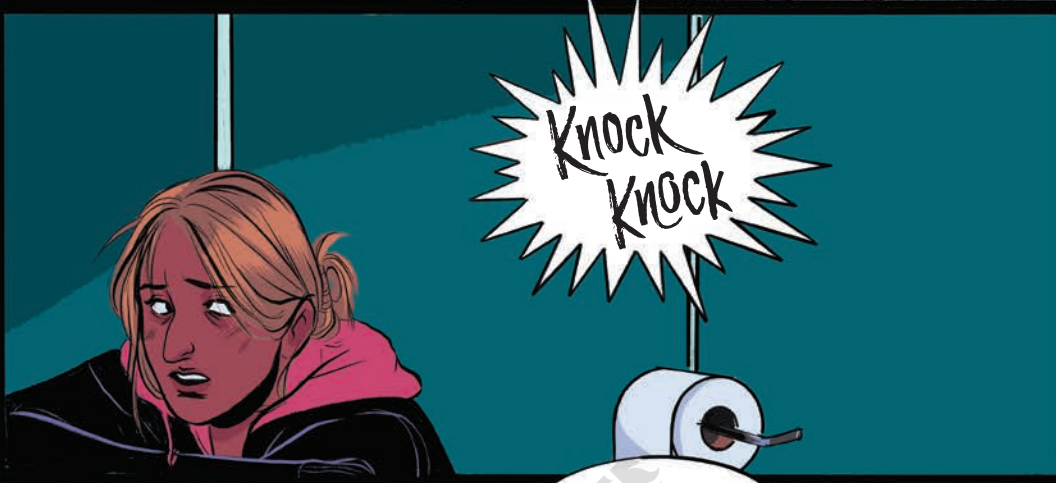
Blz!

9:47
Henry asked me for your number.

I can't sing today. I happily oblige every time and play the good Indian girl at the Samaj, but today I just can't do it.

Which bhajan are you singing today?

I don't feel good.





Soak it in.
I'll be brunette
by bedtime.



It looks good.



You always
look good.

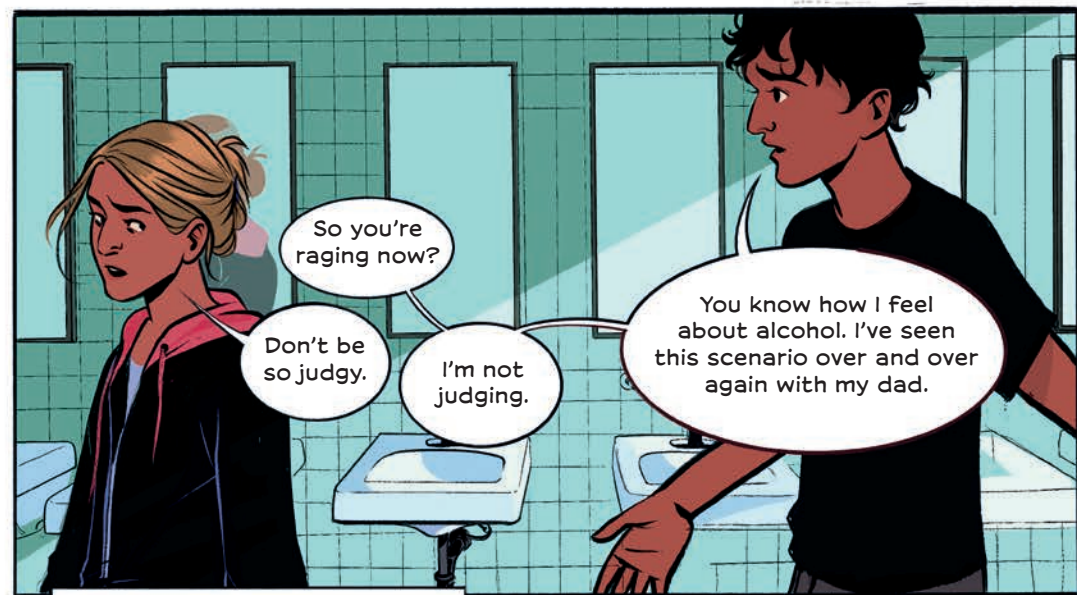


I would finish that.



Aren't you
worried someone will
find us in here?

Let 'em talk.



So you're
raging now?

Don't be
so judgy.

I'm not
judging.

You know how I feel
about alcohol. I've seen
this scenario over and over
again with my dad.



Is he trying to help me
or make me feel worse?

I'll meet you
out there.



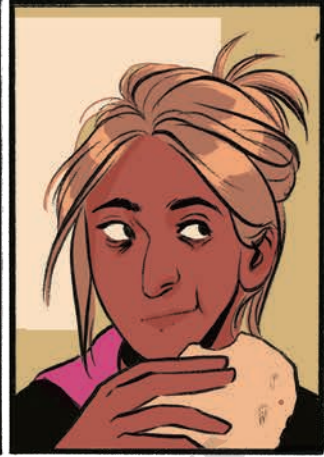
Okay, let's get
you out of here. You
want to exit first,
or should I?

I really
do look
like shit.



Serving food is the last thing I want to do right now.

You need to eat. I can serve both if you want.



These kids don't have any respect for their elders. Not like we did.



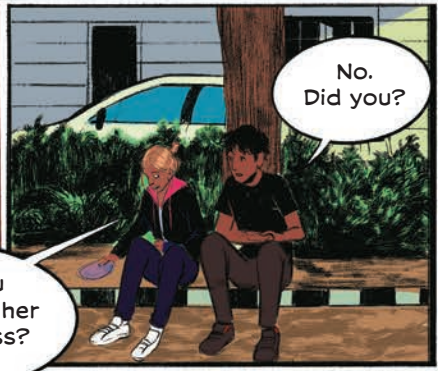
Sorry.



Your ama ji is so intense.



Did you ever take her Hindi class?



No. Did you?



I failed.

So that's why she hates you?

Maybe she needs to get laid.

