

SAVE ME A SEAT

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CHAPTER ONE

RAVI

Most people in America cannot pronounce my name.

On the first day at my new school, my teacher, Mrs. Beam, is brave enough to try.

“Sur-yan-yay-nay,” she says, her eyebrows twitching as she attempts to sound it out.

“*Sur-ee-ah-neh-RI-ya-nan,*” I say slowly.

She tries again, but it is no better.

“I’m going to have to work on that,” she says with a laugh.

I laugh too.

Suryanarayanan is my surname. My first name is Ravi. It’s pronounced rah-VEE, with a soft *rah*

and a strong *VEE*. In Sanskrit, it means “the sun.” In America, people call me RAH-vee, with the stress on the first syllable. That doesn’t mean anything.

“Patience is a virtue,” Amma reminds me often.

She believes that, with time, people will learn how to say our names correctly. My grandmother tells her not to hold her breath.

We moved to Hamilton, New Jersey, a few months ago—May 13 to be exact. I am fresh off the boat, as they say. My father got a promotion at his IT company in Bangalore, so they transferred him to America. In India, Amma, Appa, and I had our own house with a cook and a big garden. We even had a driver to take us wherever we needed to go. My grandparents lived in their own flat nearby. Now we all live together in a town house, in a place called Hamilton Mews.

Things are very different here in America. Appa takes the train to work. We don’t have a cook anymore, so Amma has to prepare all the meals herself. Our new house is much smaller than the old one. There is only one bathroom upstairs, which I share with my grandparents. I wouldn’t mind so much except that Perippa likes to take long showers

and Perimma leaves her teeth in a glass by the sink at night.

I learned to speak English when I was very young. We speak mostly English at home and I went to an English-medium school, but for some reason, people here in New Jersey have trouble understanding me when I speak. I am trying to learn how to swirl my tongue to sound more American.

My grandmother doesn't like it. "Be proud of who you are and remember where you come from," she tells me. "If you're not careful, you'll turn into one of *them*. Your grandfather didn't slave in the tea plantations so that his only grandson would become some rude, overweight, beef-eating cowboy."

I don't think Perimma likes America.

My school in India was called Vidya Mandir, which means "temple of knowledge." My new school is called Albert Einstein Elementary. Perimma could hardly wait to show off to all her friends at home that her grandson had been accepted to a school named after a scientific genius.

I'm not a scientific genius, but I am a very good student. My favorite subjects are math, English, and sports—especially cricket.

"Boys and girls, please welcome our new student,

RAH-vee,” Mrs. Beam says after she has taken the roll call. “He’s come to us all the way from India! Isn’t that exciting?”

Mrs. Beam is short and round. When she smiles, her eyebrows touch each other.

As I look around the room, a sea of mostly white faces stares back at me. I feel a little nervous. It is my first day of fifth grade in room 506, and I am the only Indian in my class. There is one other, a boy named Dillon Samreen, but he doesn’t count. He is an ABCD. *American-Born Confused Desi*. Desi is the Hindi word for Indian. I can tell Dillon is an ABCD, because he speaks and dresses more like an American than an Indian.

“Tell us something about yourself, RAH-vee,” Mrs. Beam says, smiling at me.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, standing at attention.

Everyone laughs.

Mrs. Beam claps her hands. “Boys and girls, where are your manners?” she asks. “Go on, RAH-vee. We’re listening.”

I push up my glasses and continue. “My name is Ravi Suryanarayanan, and I just shifted from Bangalore.”

Everyone laughs again. *What’s so funny?* I wonder.

Mrs. Beam claps her hands. Her eyebrows are twitching like mad. “Boys and girls, is this how we welcome a new student to Albert Einstein?”

The room gets quiet. The spotlight is on me. I can feel the whole class staring. This is my first day of school in America, and things are not going well.

Mrs. Beam turns to me. “You can call me Mrs. Beam,” she says softly. “And, RAH-vee? Here in America, students don’t need to stand up when the teacher calls on them. Do you understand?”

Of course I do. I push up my glasses and rub my nose. It’s something I do when I’m nervous.

Mrs. Beam comes over to my desk. She has a look of pity on her face.

“Don’t worry, RAH-vee,” she says, patting me on the shoulder. “You can introduce yourself to the class later, after you’ve had a little time to work on your English. We have a very nice teacher named Miss Frost in the resource room. I’m sure she can help you.”

I want to say:

1. *My English is fine.*
2. *I don’t need Miss Frost.*
3. *I was top of my class at Vidya Mandir.*

But here is what I do instead:

1. *Push up my glasses.*
2. *Rub my nose.*
3. *Sit down and fold my hands.*

My friends and teachers at Vidya Mandir would have a good laugh if they could see me now—their star student taken for an idiot. What a joke!

Mrs. Beam is writing out our homework on the board. I open my notebook and carefully copy down the assignment. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Dillon Samreen staring at me. He looks like a movie star straight out of Bollywood. His long, shiny black hair falls over one eye; with a quick jerk of his head, he shakes it away. Then he smiles and winks at me. I smile back. Dillon Samreen may be an ABCD, but I think he wants to be my friend.