



SAY

YOU'LL
A
NOVEL

BE MINE

© NAINA KUMAR

"A warm, smart, sexy, and absolutely charming debut with the most important lesson at its center: Real love is built on courage."

—COLLEEN HOOVER



PRAISE FOR
SAY YOU'LL BE MINE

“I couldn’t put down this page-turner. A warm, smart, sexy, and absolutely charming debut with the most important lesson at its center: Real love is built on courage. Meghna and Karthik’s happily ever after is the new *When Harry Met Sally*. Naina Kumar’s *Say You’ll Be Mine* has it all.”

—COLLEEN HOOVER

“A fresh and charming story about finding love without losing yourself...I rooted for these wonderfully headstrong, big-hearted characters all the way.”

—LINDA HOLMES, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Evvie Drake Starts Over*

“Naina Kumar’s fresh, compelling voice and lovable characters (including a starchy hero that is now at the very top of my all-time favorites list) made me fall head over heels for *Say You’ll Be Mine* from the very first page. This debut about love, culture, family, and friendship is absolutely irresistible—I didn’t want to put it down!”

—SARAH ADLER, author of *Mrs. Nash’s Ashes*

“Swoony, smart, and charming, *Say You’ll Be Mine* is the type of South Asian diaspora romance I’ve always wished for. Naina Kumar’s debut is spectacular.”

—NISHA SHARMA, author of *Dating Dr. Dil*

“I adored this book! A sweet, funny, and sizzling story of two people who unexpectedly find love while faking an engagement after being set up by their parents. I loved big-hearted and fun-loving (and pun-loving!) Meghna,

and the loyal and buttoned-up yet passionate Karthik was the perfect match for her. With some meddling (but mostly well-meaning) families, complicated friendships, and best of all, two characters who learn together how to be true to themselves, this book should be an instant romance classic!”

—FARAH HERON, author of *Accidentally Engaged*

“Stuffed to the brim with emotion, chemistry, and all the best microtropes, *Say You’ll Be Mine* is a romance lover’s dream.”

—AVA WILDER, author of *Will They or Won’t They*



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NAINA KUMAR



DELL
New York

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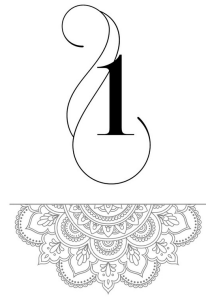
Dedication

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A Book Club Guide

Excerpt

About the Author



“M s. Raman, what’s an ‘arse’?”

Meghna Raman’s eyes snapped to her sixth-grade student, Paige, who sat crisscross applesauce on the floor with the others as they went through their scripts, highlighting their respective lines.

“A what?”

“An ‘arse,’ ” Paige replied, pointing at the piece of paper in front of her. “It says it right here. Eliza goes to that horse race and tells the horse to move its ‘bloomin’ arse.’ ”

A few of the students snickered, and Meghna let out a sigh. She’d meant to edit that line before passing out the scripts, but it had completely slipped her mind. To be fair, she’d only had three days to prepare for this first day of rehearsal. Only three days to wrap her mind around directing the middle school’s fall production of *My Fair Lady*.

“It’s ‘ass,’ ” seventh grader Derek told Paige with a smirk. “It’s the way English people say ‘ass.’ ”

“Though we’ll be using the word ‘bum,’ ” Meghna quickly added. She didn’t want any emails from the parents complaining about this. “I’ll send

out a new version of the script tomorrow.”

“So, now it’ll be ‘move your bloomin’ bum,’ ” a student whispered loudly, sending the room into another round of giggles.

Meghna shook her head, holding back the grin threatening to break across her face. Teaching wasn’t exactly her dream job, but she loved these kids. Even when they drove her up the wall. She checked the clock, wrapped up rehearsal, and headed home to a thrilling night of grading papers.

But before she had even set foot inside her apartment, her phone rang. She blew out a breath and answered without even checking to see who it was. She knew exactly who was calling.

“Hi, Mom,” she said as she unlocked the front door.

Her mother greeted her enthusiastically, asked about her day, then launched into a recitation of everything that had happened during Meghna’s brother’s visit last weekend.

“Beta, he wanted to cook dinner on Saturday and he made macaroni and cheese. *Macaroni and cheese*,” her mother repeated incredulously. “It tasted like nothing. Like air. I tried to mix in a little mango achar to give it *some* flavor, but—”

Meghna shuddered at the thought of what that would taste like. “I’m guessing that didn’t work?”

“Not at all.”

Meghna chucked off her shoes and headed toward the kitchen. “Well, I’m glad Samir was able to visit you and Dad this time. Even if it resulted in *mac and cheese*.” She infused the words with all the horror and melodrama her mother had. “I know you’ve both been missing him.”

“We were happy to see him,” her mother said. “He’s very busy, but we understand. Being an engineer takes a lot of hard work.”

Meghna grimaced, dropped a stack of mail on her kitchen counter, and settled in. She knew the exact speech her mother was about to deliver. She’d heard it so many times over the years. She’d even given it a few titles: “The Difficult but Satisfying Life of an Engineer” or “Why Engineering Is the Only Meaningful Profession” or “Meghna, It’s Not Too

Late to Quit Your Job and Become an Engineer.” Though her mother would never put it that bluntly, Meghna knew that was what she really meant.

As if on cue, her mom launched into describing all the difficult and rewarding aspects of engineering, things she had experienced firsthand, she reminded Meghna. After all, she had placed first in engineering college back in India, beating out Meghna’s father, who had placed only sixth. But somehow, her mother said, she had fallen in love with him anyway. Their families had considered their relationship scandalous at first, especially since her mother’s family was North Indian and her father’s South Indian, but they eventually came around, and Meghna’s parents had ended up with the first “love marriage” in their family.

Meghna put her phone on speaker, tuning out her mother’s familiar words. As a kid, she’d loved listening to her parents’ great love story. She’d asked to hear it again and again, dreaming about finding that kind of love for herself one day. She still hoped for it. Even though she had no clear prospects in sight. Even though it felt less and less likely every day.

She sighed and opened her mail. She read a few bills, set aside a couple flyers, and saved a stationery supply catalog she had never ordered from, but loved to look through. And that’s when she saw it. A deceptively simple-looking white envelope. It wouldn’t have stood out to her, but the address on the front was written in a style of calligraphy she knew all too well.

A wedding invitation.

She frowned. Most of her close friends were already married. And the few who were single wouldn’t be getting married anytime soon. Slightly puzzled, she took out the invitation. Two names in large, bold italic sprawled across the middle of the page: ***Seth Mitchell and Julie Cox.***

Meghna’s stomach dropped.

She hadn’t counted Seth in her mental tally of close friends. Seth was in a different category altogether. And even though she’d known he was dating someone, he’d never referred to that person as his girlfriend. Let alone mentioned that the two of them were thinking about *marriage*.

Meghna had met Seth as a college freshman when they'd been assigned as partners in Intro to Creative Writing. She had been smitten when she saw his lanky build, dark-green eyes, and blond hair that he left a little too long.

They'd both wanted to major in creative writing, but Meghna had declared an education major instead. Seth had constantly tried to change her mind.

"It's not that complicated. If you want to write plays, you should write them," he had told her, his voice full of conviction. He hadn't understood why she couldn't pursue writing full-time, but that wasn't his fault. Seth wasn't like her. He never doubted his abilities. Never doubted that he would become a successful songwriter. She'd envied his certainty, his optimism, his lack of fear.

When they'd started dating their junior year, she thought it was the beginning of her own great love story. Seth had been kind, funny, and honest to a fault. "This entire section has to go, Meg," he'd told her as he reviewed her latest draft. "It doesn't add anything." His comments had stung at first, but she soon got used to his direct feedback. She'd started to appreciate the way he couldn't help but tell the truth. It had made his praise even more meaningful. When he'd told her that her character work was stunning, she believed him fully. When he'd called her beautiful, she didn't doubt that he meant it. And when he'd broken up with her after graduation, she knew he meant that too.

"We're friends, Meg," he'd said. "You think so too, right? That we're better off as friends?"

To save face, she'd forced a smile and lied. "Of course, Seth. We'll always be friends."

Surprisingly, their friendship and writing partnership continued. Seth still called or emailed every week. He sent lyrics and voice memos of his songs, and she sent him pieces of the play she had started in college and was still working on. No matter what she was going through, Seth was always willing to listen, to hear her out, to encourage her, or to distract her by making her laugh.

But despite all their conversations, they somehow never ended up talking about their months of dating in college. He never brought it up, and she was too scared to mention it. She still had so many questions. Did he regret ending things? Did he ever think about that time? Had he ever felt anything for her at all?

Meghna swallowed hard, setting the invitation facedown on the counter and pushing all thoughts of Seth out of her mind.

Her mother was still talking to her over the phone. “And before you say anything, let me just tell you about him,” her mother said. “His name is Karthik. He comes from a good family. Well educated. Very tall. *And* he’s an engineer.”

Meghna’s prediction about her mother’s speech had been completely wrong. This wasn’t a talk about it not being too late for Meghna to become an engineer. This was a brand-new speech. One titled, “Meghna, It’s Not Too Late for You to *Marry* an Engineer.”

“You don’t have to promise anything,” her mother said. “Just meet him. Once. That’s all.”

Meghna blinked, completely stunned. She’d never agreed to anything like this before. In fact, it was rare that her parents ever brought up the topic of arranged marriage. They’d found love on their own and expected that she’d do the same. But after she’d turned twenty-eight earlier this year, they’d begun to dial up the pressure. Making comments about her dating life that they probably thought were subtle, but were just hurtful reminders that even though she wanted to find the right person, she hadn’t managed it yet. But those small comments and hints were usually as far as her parents went. They had never seriously brought a rishta, a potential marriage proposal, to her.

And they’d never really talked with her about what the arranged marriage process looked like, though Ankita, her closest friend from childhood, had gone through it and had recently gotten engaged to someone her parents had introduced to her. She’d said the initial introduction was awkward, but that it felt like normal dating after that. “Think of it like Tinder,” she’d said. “Except your parents are the algorithm, and they’re

only showing you people they've already swiped right on." She'd thought for a moment, then added, "And both parties are looking for a lifelong commitment. Not just, you know, a one-night stand."

Meghna had laughed, but hadn't thought about it any further. She certainly hadn't thought about going through the process herself. She didn't have anything against it, but it all sounded pretty...inorganic. Unromantic. She wanted to meet someone who would sweep her off her feet. Someone who could rival those initial butterflies and swoon-inducing moments she'd experienced with Seth. And she found it hard to believe that she would meet that person through her parents.

But she did want to get married one day. And when she thought about it, she'd tried everything else: blind dates, dating apps, physically bumping into cute strangers at bars. Maybe, in the back of her mind, she'd thought that Seth was out there. That one day, he'd wonder why they hadn't worked out, and they could just try to pick up where they'd left off.

Clearly, that wasn't a possibility anymore.

The back of Meghna's neck warmed, and her hands involuntarily clenched into fists. If Seth could let go of their past and move on, so could she. Maybe getting back out there would help.

"Okay," she told her mom.

The line went quiet. Her mother's stunned silence was somehow louder than anything she could have said.

"Mom, did you hear me? I said 'okay.' "

"Oh. Great, beta. Good. That's good. Leave it to me. I'll arrange everything." She paused, then continued, a faint panic in her voice. "Not your marriage. When I said 'everything,' I didn't mean your marriage. It's just a meeting. An introduction. That I'm arranging. That's it."

Meghna smothered a laugh.

"So, I'll let you know. About the meeting. Soon. But I have to go now. Okay. So. Bye." The call beeped, signaling that her mother had hung up.

Meghna shook her head. She knew her mom had ended the call on purpose, likely fearing that Meghna would change her mind or try to back

out, but she had no intention of getting out of this. After all, what did she have to lose?