

# THE **F** TEAM



RAWAH ARJA

GIRAMONDO

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For my parents, Mohamad and Raife. Thank you for reminding me that I have something to offer the world.

And for the boys and girls I have and haven't met, who were my mirror in times of darkness. May this book be a reflection in which you see yourself, and know that you are worthy, and that you matter.

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# Chapter 1

‘Feet together. Back straight. Shoulders out. Hands on your knees. Chin up. Eyes this way. Hold still and in one, two, three, say “monkeys”.’

‘Donkeys,’ we all shouted.

‘Really, boys? On a Monday morning?’ Mr Ahmed said, shaking his head. ‘These photos are important, so stop messing around. And Tariq, you know as the BBL, I expect more from you.’

I had been chosen as the Year Ten Big Brother Leader (BBL), a program Mr Ahmed introduced to help with our school image. It basically meant that I lost the first half of Monday lunch in stupid meetings, talking about how I have a lot of potential but am easily distracted.

According to every report card comment since kindergarten, anyway.

As BBL, I was chosen to be a role model, someone the boys could turn to if they needed to talk or if they suddenly got the urge to blow themselves up. I know, I know, *very* dramatic, but our school needed to prove that it was doing something useful about our bad reputation besides tweeting a couple of photos here and there.

Term 2 was supposed to be a fresh start, but our school has already featured on almost every news channel this year. Apparently, we’re ‘out of control’ and at risk of becoming ‘homegrown terrorists’. I don’t understand how a couple of guys with beards in my area get raided, and now all of a sudden we’re Bin Laden’s best friends.

The media (aka vultures) and the helicopters (aka ghetto birds) haven’t left us alone. Our ex-principal, Mr Kayan, the old and smelly one, left at the end of last term – or rather, I should say, was ‘quietly escorted out’ by the men in suits. Some people blamed him for stealing money from school funds and sending it over to some Arab country for some terrorist group. I can’t see how he could have done that, since our school had a GoFundMe page just to help us with the basics, like pencils and rubbers, and at least one aircon that we’ve been dying to get for our school hall. Along with the recent terror raids across Punchbowl and Bankstown, our principal getting

fired only made a bad situation worse, and for some reason, white people were linking the two together. Our school was officially ‘too terroristy’.

We’ve had men in suits in and out of our school for most of Term 1, assessing what was needed, and apparently, what we needed was a new principal. He starts tomorrow.

In the meantime, the mess of our school was left to Mr Ahmed, our Year Ten advisor and acting principal, who was like our cool older brother who didn’t think twice before putting us in a headlock. He had a thick black Lebanese beard and tied his hair into a top knot, and was a monster machine when we played footy at lunchtime. No matter what, someone always ended up stretchered off, bruised and in tears.

With all the work Mr Ahmed did in the community, such as helping boys find jobs or talking them out of leaving school, he could do no wrong in our parents’ eyes. They all gave him free rein to whip us into shape. My dad in particular was his No. 1 supporter.

‘If you don’t listen, I already tell Mr Ahmed, he can use belt,’ my dad constantly reminded me. ‘I left one in his office.’

He actually did.

Mr Ahmed set up this photoshoot to help change our school reputation. There weren’t many things we took seriously at this school, but these photos were supposed to be a big deal. They were supposed to ease some of the pressure our school has been facing from the Department as we tried to help ‘rebrand the school image’.

The school hired the photographer, Maxine, who, until about five minutes ago, we all thought was a man. Her hair was shaved, she wore army boots and had an Adam’s apple – what else were we supposed to think?

‘Look, look at her calves, bro,’ one boy said.

‘There’s no way she’s a girl,’ another added. ‘I swear she should change her name to Max.’

Mr Ahmed curled his fingers inside one of the boys’ collars. ‘What would you do if someone spoke about your sister or your mother like that? Or is it only okay for you because you feel tough and strong around your mates?’ Their eyes never left the ground as he continued to tear them to shreds. ‘Let me remind you that if I hear any disrespect like that against



anyone, you'll be gone before you can blink. Now hurry up, we need to get these photos done.'

'You know, little boys,' Maxine said, fiddling with her camera. 'I can bench your weight with my eyes closed.'

While Mr Ahmed got away with wearing his usual tank and shorts on a fifty-degree day like today, we were stuck in the stinking, stifling school hall with collared shirts and ties that almost choked us to death.

*Maybe that was actually the plan?*

We only had a small, silver, dust-covered fan trying to move the humid air around. The ceiling-high windows only let more sun in, and half the boys were now dehydrated, lying on the sizzling brown floorboards, trying to survive the heat.

The hall did look better than usual, I guess. It had received a makeover ahead of the shoot – which is to say, the Honour Boards were now updated and recognised *all* types of achievements.

They now looked something like this:

Name	Date	Achievement
Peter Murphy	1985	Dux
Michael Bowen	1985	Citizenship
David Nguyen	1985	Excellence in Academic Achievement
Abdul-Khalifa Razzak	2020	Excellence in spelling when vandalising school property
Mohamed El-Mirwani	2020	For lighting up the classroom without the use of a matchstick
Bilal Abdul-Haafiz	2020	For using manners when verbally threatening both peers and staff

Okay, so not *exactly* those achievements. But they weren't far off.

Not only had we gotten our hall fixed up, but our oval had been re-turfed, which meant that for once the sickbay wasn't packed with boys bleeding out from the patches of gravel on the field. Mr Ahmed kept saying it was connected to some new program that only a few *lucky* Year Ten boys would be part of. No matter how much the Wolf Pack asked, he wouldn't give us any clues.

Meet my Wolf Pack, by the way. First, there's Huss the Hustler – the hairy, bearded one, the hothead who has the battle scars marked across his lip and eyebrow to prove it. His ears stick out, which is why he let his hair grow over them to mask their size. He can get you anything you want on the Black Market, i.e. his grandma's corner shop. He works there some weekends, during which we always raid Big Haji's shop, taking as many V cans as we like. Then there's Ibby the Panda – the slow and round one, who eats everything he sees. Ibby never leaves home without his green taqiyah cap, the plate-looking thing Muslim men wear on our heads. He's not religious or anything, but he thinks it makes him look skinnier. We all know he mostly uses it to pretend he's collecting money for charity. PJ the Tank is the big and strong one with an afro like a bowl of noodles. He plods around school with his shoulders and elbows out, knocking into doorframes, unaware of how huge he is. Teachers know to have a roll of bandages in their drawers. He can sing, and also uses his guitar as a weapon. Then there's me, Tariq. The school's Under-17s footy captain and the only Arab in Advanced English. We all live around the block from each other, though the guys spend most of their time at mine, eating my mum's food and sometimes sleeping over. They're basically part of the furniture.

When he was setting up the photoshoot, Mr Ahmed told us that we needed to be a more *inviting* school. The problem was that our school looked like a prison and no amount of Photoshop was going to change that. Bars on windows, graffiti on walls, chained doors and a courtyard fit for the toughest prisoners. So Mr Ahmed decided to get a little extra help from our friendly neighbours to help brighten our photos.

We spent the morning in Abu Zaid's backyard, where some boys had to help tend to the vegetables and plants.

'Think "environmental warriors",' Maxine said, rolling on the ground in weird positions with her camera. 'Pose with the tools in your hands.'

Before Mr Ahmed could do anything, we ran around the garden, swinging shovels and rakes, yelling 'Allahu Akbar' like crazy jihadists.

‘They take everything literally,’ Mr Ahmed explained to her before he pounced on each of us and made sure no one lost an eye.

We moved to the day-care centre around the block to show our softer sides and pose with children who, for a bunch of four-year-olds, had some serious attitude. That didn’t work well either. Ibbby and PJ almost got into a fight with the toddlers after they were ambushed and teased about their ‘fat heads’.

‘Let’s just go back to the school and finish the photos there,’ Mr Ahmed advised Maxine. ‘At least they won’t embarrass us in public.’

He only wanted us back at the school so no one would see him whip my dad’s belt out on us.

Our next photo was supposed to show our ‘intellectual’ side. What better way to do that than to wear gigantic safety goggles and white lab coats while pouring some liquids into test tubes?

‘Just pretend to mix things,’ Maxine said, snapping more shots.

‘No, wait!’ Mr Ahmed yelled. But it was too late. Huss had snuck into the science labs earlier and replaced the blue Powerade in the beakers with some chemicals that made things smoke and stink. The alarms went off, which meant we had to be evacuated.

‘We have alarms?’ Huss said, confused. ‘And they work?’

Mr Ahmed clenched his jaw, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. ‘Everyone to the main hall now!’

We thought that after all the trouble we gave him with the photos, he’d let us go. But as always, Mr Ahmed didn’t give up and found a way to make us pay.

We made our way back to the scorching hall for individual photos, and stood around watching Ibbby struggle to keep his round, bald head still for the camera. Two gigantic spotlights shone directly in his face, almost blinding him as he huffed and puffed about how hungry he was. His belly oozed over the sides of the chair that had been placed in front of a blue curtain, beside our new school banners with the words BROTHER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER.

*Who the hell thought that motto was a good idea?*

It took fifteen minutes for Ibbby to get into position, and his face was now bright red and covered in sweat. It didn’t help that his tanned skin was peeling from all the time he’d spent in the sun.

Mr Ahmed held out a tissue box to me and tilted his head towards Ibby.

‘Hell no!’ I said, palming the box away. ‘Get someone else to wipe his sweat.’

Mr Ahmed smiled to himself as if to ask why I even bothered to argue. He had a *special* style of teaching that convinced you to do things you really didn’t want to.

‘If you don’t, I’ll tell your dad about your little adventure to the girls’ high school.’

Yeah, blackmail was his speciality.

‘Sir, you know that’s illegal?’ I said, snatching the tissues. ‘You can lose your job for blackmail.’

‘Yallah, yallah,’ he said, shooing me away. ‘You’re an Arab from Punchbowl. No one will believe you.’

He was right. Punchbowl was one of the ghetto hoods of Sydney, the place where white people locked the doors to their 2004 Hyundai Getz.

Ibby stood up and pulled his shirt loose from each of his stomach rolls. ‘I can’t take it anymore. Why am I the only one taking a photo by myself?’

‘It’s because of your man boobs,’ PJ mocked. Those two would fight one minute and then, in the next, lay on the oval like two giant seals and share a family-sized bucket from KFC.

Mr Ahmed leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. ‘Half a chicken, chips with garlic from El Jannah.’

Ibby’s eyes narrowed. ‘And a large tabouli.’

Mr Ahmed smiled. Deal complete.

‘Okay, and in one, two, three. Say cheese,’ Maxine said, right up in Ibby’s face.

‘Jibnaaa!’ he yelled, irritated.

Mr Ahmed got up and called for the next group of boys. ‘I gave you a chance, but you still want to act like a smeeek. You’ve lost El Jannah.’

‘Nah, sir. Please. Wallah, I’ll do anything you want,’ he pleaded. ‘I’ll tell you who jigged to the girls’ high school.’

That was classic Ibby – feed him, and he’s your best friend. Ibby was only at school to use the wi-fi to watch those five-minute dessert-hack videos on YouTube. If you needed a good laugh or a belly dancer with a head like a trumbaki, he was your guy, but if you needed to get out of

trouble, he was the worst. He couldn't keep a secret if his life depended on it. Our teachers even rewarded him with food if he kept them in on the loop.

'Too late, Ibby,' Mr Ahmed said shaking his head. 'Plus, you don't think I know who leaves and enters this school?'

It had been a long day with these photos. If Mr Ahmed said to do it, we did it. But I couldn't see how they were going to make a difference to the way people see us.

Elias and Johnny, our twin Year Seven scouts, rushed over to alert us that the hot blonde reporter from Channel Nine was back. With all that had been happening around our school, she was the only good thing about the media attention. Our phones came out and our stories on social media began trending. #hotreportercomestopunchbowl #thuglife #talktome #gethernumber #arabsloveblondes

Yeah, yeah, I know. Every local news channel was outside our school and here we were taking shots of this hottie reporter.

'I got one where she's bending down,' PJ said, excited.

'Nah, my shot is better,' Ibby said, waving his phone around.

Mr Ahmed grabbed their phones and ordered them to delete the pictures. 'You wanna be known as Perverts from Punchbowl? This is unacceptable behaviour, boys.'

He thought *that* was unacceptable? Mr Ahmed didn't know that Huss had been taking bets for the last week to see who could get her number first. He was updating it right now.

*Tariq, \$35*

*Huss, \$25*

I don't mean to talk myself up, but I've never had problems with the chicks. They dig my abs and dimples. If ever Huss and I went for the same girl, it was always my dimples that sealed the deal, not his thick eyebrows or tangled beard.

Huss stroked his beard. 'Girls dig the rugged look.'

'But wallah, Tariq is so sexy.' Ibby tried to kiss me. 'Like, I'd marry you if I was a girl. Look at your sparkly eyes, and man, that smile.'

*Malik, \$15*

*Josiah, \$10*

*PJ, \$10*

*Ibby, \$2.50*

Ibby snatched the list from Huss. 'Which jahash wrote that for me?'

I'd watched Huss make up a price for Ibby before school, purely to stir the pot and watch Ibby lose his marbles. That was Huss, always starting the fire then pretending he had nothing to do with it. We all laughed now, which made Ibby's face turn bright red in anger. As in most cases, he took it out on PJ.

'At least I don't have a coconut head like yours,' he said.

PJ stopped laughing. 'Ay, watch your mouth, Oompa Loompa.'

*Here we go...*

'Yeah, well at least...at least...' Ibby struggled with a counterattack.

I could see in his eyes that he was about to cross the line. 'Watch it, Ibby.'

He ignored me.

'Nah, I'm gonna say it,' he called out. 'At least my mum didn't go to jail for being a junkie.'

*Crap. Someone's going to die.*

Within a split second, PJ grappled Ibby to the floor. I tried to pull them off each other, but they both weighed a ton. Boys hollered and whipped out their phones, taking sides as our photographer Maxine packed her things and left. She'd obviously had enough of all of it. Mr Ahmed ran over with some seniors and finally managed to pull them apart.

PJ was wiping the blood from his nose with the back of his hand. 'He called my mum a junkie.'

'Yeah, well, he called me an Oompa Loompa.' Ibby pulled at his ripped shirt and adjusted his cap. 'He's pissed because he knows I have a chance with that reporter.'

Mr Ahmed shook his head and tried to make sense of what he'd said. Huss and I froze.

It was too late. Ibby told Mr Ahmed everything about the bet.

Mr Ahmed turned to Huss and me and held out his hand, waiting for the list. We sometimes thought he had superpowers because of his ability to find out who had done what without asking any questions. His eyes ran down the paper, but before he could tear us to shreds, Elias and Johnny ran back over and told him that the blonde reporter wanted to talk. Don't ask me how they knew that – these boys were pros at getting classified information.

*Maybe it was because they carried pocket knives?*

Mr Ahmed opened the main gates and walked with the blonde reporter – without her camera crew – to the front office. We all pushed and shoved to see what was going on. They spoke for about ten minutes and then she left. Mr Ahmed walked back into the hall and sent everyone to class except for PJ, Huss, Ibby and me.

‘You four, in my office now!’

Oh shit. We knew we were dead. He slammed the door so hard that our ears rang. The last time I saw Mr Ahmed this mad was when we egged the girls’ high school down the road.

He sat down with his jaw clenched. ‘Everything you ask, I do for you. You wanted new grass for the oval so you could play a proper game of footy? I do it. You wanted to meet the Bulldogs, I get them here. So why is it hard for *you* to do something for *me*?’

I watched as Ibby tried his best not to laugh and keep his cool. It wasn’t that Ibby found the situation funny, but whenever he was nervous or scared, he’d laugh. I think it was some weird coping mechanism. He sounded like the air that came out of a balloon when it deflated.

Mr Ahmed continued to speak over Ibby’s stifled laughter.

‘All the staff are trying their hardest to turn this school around, but you all think it’s fun and games. Our school is in some serious shit, but you think it’s a joke.’

I decided to speak up. ‘Sir, it was just a dumb bet. Why are you so angry?’

He stood up. ‘You’re seriously asking me that as the *so-called* BBL? Well, Tariq, that reporter I was talking to told me that they got footage of the fight.’

Apparently, the gigantic windows in our school hall were enough to capture everything.

He walked around his desk and opened the door. ‘They’ll be running the story on the news tonight. Can’t *wait* for the new principal to see this.’

And it was in that moment that I remembered, if there was anything my dad loved more than his own children, it was the nightly news.

May God have mercy on my soul.

## Chapter 2

A quick rundown of my family.

My dad Mustafa and my mum Ronda broke all the rules when they decided to marry each other. They weren't cousins and even worse, they were from *different* villages in Lebanon! It's practically unheard of for Lebanese people *not* to marry their relatives. They came to Australia in the eighties and, like good Lebanese parents, popped out five children. None of us have been to jail – yet. Another break with Lebanese tradition, I guess.

My mum was slightly taller than my chubby dad, and even in her hijab, she catches the attention of the coffee-drinking old men in Punchbowl cafes. They'd hound her to help her carry the groceries to the car until she finally gave up and let them.

My dad worked with the railway and rarely had any days off, but when he did, the beach was always the place. He wanted to live the Aussie dream and do what he thought most Australians did in their time off. It was his idea of blending into a country '*that gave me chance to work and give good life for my children*'.

My mum's brother, Uncle Charlie, stayed with us, and lived in the shed out back with his pet bees. He sold honey to anyone who walked by, and without fail, almost every day, got stung by one. He had a thick moustache and a full head of black hair at the age of sixty-five. He claimed that he had never had a grey hair, but we've all caught him using my sister's mascara to cover them up.

Uncle Charlie wore the same pinstriped brown pants and white Bonds singlet with a black bum bag around his waist, no matter the weather. Oh, and I know what you're thinking. *Charlie*? Well, when he first came to Australia, he wanted to blend in, and apparently changing his name was the best way to do that. Not, you know, wearing *normal* clothes and hanging out with humans rather than bees.

My brother Saff is twenty-three with his own mobile mechanic business and is a super-skinny, tall guy. My brother Abdul, on the other hand, is a



year younger, short and sturdy and known for his evil tricks. Though they are both epic shit-stirrers and love to start fights around the house, they aren't very good at it and most of the time only end up burning themselves. Like once, Abdul told my dad that Saff had gotten a speeding fine, only to cop it for opening up Saff's mail. Or Saff would drop hints to my mum about Abdul talking to some girl on the phone, only to have his phone suddenly ring with the name 'Cassandra' flashing bright on the screen. It was of course Abdul changing his contact name to a girl's one on Saff's phone and knowing when exactly to call.

Without fail, almost every day, Abdul and Saff had the same two arguments. It was either about Abdul stretching out Saff's Gucci shirts, which he always denied, or about Saff hiding Abdul's keys to get back at him. In reality, Dad was usually the one to hide the keys to teach Abdul a lesson about something, but he always forgot he had them. He would even start to help look for them until he'd realise they were under his mattress.

My sister Feda is the unmarried twenty-seven-year-old, and pretty much argues about anything and everything. We tease her that she was adopted because she was the only fair, blonde person in the family. If you ever reminded her that she was single, she'd erupt like a volcano, flaming everything in her way. She was in her final year of her medical residency, and my dad couldn't be more proud of her.

Then there is me, always chasing after my eight-year-old sister Amira and making sure she doesn't accidentally demolish the house. She is wicked smart and has a fascination with tools and building things in my dad's garage. We call her Bob the Builder. She even dresses like a tradie with her denim overalls and checked shirts. With the massive age gap between them, Feda was basically a cross between an older sister and a mum to Amira. She'd take Amira shopping for Eid clothes and book her in for her six-monthly check-ups with the dentist, who was one of Feda's friends from med school. She supervised her reading every night and made sure she slept in her pyjamas and not her school uniform.

Amira was born premature and spent her first three months in hospital. Her oesophagus wasn't fully developed and they had to do emergency surgery to make sure she could breathe. I spent every day with her and watched her tiny body, wrapped by so many wires and tubes, slowly grow. I remember one night, when my mum was asleep, I saw her move her hands in the air. She turned her head towards me, softly smiled and then held my

finger until she shut her eyes. She's had me wrapped around her finger ever since.

I know lots of people say they have a crazy family, but I think we'd win any competition if there ever was one. You could just see it on Sunday, aka Market Day aka Buying Crap Because It's Cheap Day aka Hell. My mum would rush into my room at the crack of dawn like an army commander and rip off my blankets. She never bothered to wake anyone else up because she knew I could never say no to her.

The drive to Sydney Markets was always the same. My mum would shout directions like my dad hadn't been there every other Sunday. She'd wave her hands left and right in a panic, blocking his vision, worried we wouldn't get parking. We'd get there, and it was only then that she'd realise I was wearing thongs.

Big mistake.

'Hajj, go and get the plastic bags,' she'd say to my dad.

See, before I was born, my mum had two miscarriages and her pregnancy with me was tough, so she's overprotective. As a kid, I also almost sliced off my toe with a shopping trolley, and so ever since, she made me wear plastic bags around my feet whenever we were at the shops.

People thought I was contaminated.

I mean, it's not like the plastic bags *actually* helped, but I had to be kept perfect, especially for marriage. If there's one thing you need to know about Arabs, it's this: our parents spend their whole lives preparing us for marriage. It's expected that we're in tiptop condition, with no faults, so that when the exchange is made, we can't be returned.

At the markets, I'd try to keep up with my parents as they rushed through every aisle to get the best bargains while I dodged the phlegmy spitballs from the market men. Fitting everything in the car was a challenge because my parents always forgot to leave my seat free. My dad, sweating and out of breath, resorted to impractical solutions, especially if we were in a rush. 'Just go in boot. No one will see. Yallah.'

Somehow, they'd squeeze me in between the junk, with my head down just in case the police pulled us over. Trust me, every Arab kid knows what *that* feels like.

After the markets, my family, including all my cousins in the area, headed down to Sans Souci Beach – one of the only places in Sydney where

I reckon white people feel like outsiders. Dad smoked his *shisha* and lectured us about how grateful we should be to live in this country. We'd light up our barbecues, smoke up the beach and set up our fishing rods.

Sans Souci was the perfect place for some footy, even though half the time our ball ended up in the water. Uncle Charlie umpired our games and made up the rules as he went.

'Uncle? You can't catch the ball and score!' we'd all say.

He'd get so pissed off that he'd pick up any big stick he could find and chase us around the beach. We'd usually run up the grassy hill over on the other side of the beach while my uncle would wait below. We used bits of cardboard to sled down the hill that always stuck a million bindis in our butts. One time, my brother Abdul couldn't stop and took out my uncle at the bottom of the hill. They both flew into the water near the crossing bridge. That was the only time I saw Uncle Charlie truly scared.

Maybe it was because we all screamed that a shark was going to eat him?

So now that you know a little about my family, you'll understand why I didn't want them to be around when the news story broke. They made everything into a big deal and any sign of sibling weakness was taken advantage of until you pretty much wished you hadn't been born.

Only the strong survive in my family.

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## Chapter 3

4:42 p.m. Time left until I'm murdered by Dad: one hour and eighteen minutes.

PJ, Ibbby and I had been outside Em Zaid's Manoush shop, near Punchbowl Station, for about an hour and still had no ideas. I knew my dad was going to hit the roof if he saw my face on TV. I needed to come up with something fast, but my brain decided it'd rather enjoy watching me die. Unfortunately, Huss was nowhere to be seen. If anyone could get out of a murder scene, it was him.

'Where is he?' I asked the boys, but they were too busy stuffing their faces with manoush.

PJ and Ibbby were back to normal like nothing had ever happened. See, that would never work with Huss and me. If we ever fought, it was like Israel and Palestine. Huss was easily ticked off and I knew which buttons I could press. His dad left when he was a kid and he was raised by his mum and grandma, Big Haji. She was basically an Arab granny gangster whose corner shop sold everything you didn't need, like glass portraits of cats or expired lolly packets. She was one of those tough old-school women who didn't need a walking stick but used one anyway, mostly to push in line or knock people out.

'All ready for you, Tariq,' Em Zaid said, smiling from ear to ear. 'I even put extra cheese.' She was always nice to me because her niece in Lebanon needed a visa.

All the boys in the area hung out here every day after school. It was the perfect place for a front-and-centre view of all the action in Punchbowl.

The Muslim and Christian private school kids hated it when their bus stopped in our area. We'd yell out stuff or give them the finger because they walked around with their noses in the air as though we were beneath them. We knew by their stares and smirks that they thought Punchbowl kids were like animals that needed to be tamed or put down. They were always the ones being praised by local newspapers for some crappy robotics machine

they built or were showered with gifts by the local councillors at special student achievement dinners while we were left to the gutter. Kids like that – kids with money – didn't have graffiti on their walls or have to worry about bad reputations.

Any situation that needed sorting, the Wolf Pack would meet here amongst the shops in Punchbowl. It was our family outside of our family – the shop owners were always a friend of someone's dad or cousin or best mate. Some were even ex-Punchbowl boys and always helped us out, with free sausages for our school fundraisers or donations to our GoFundMe page.

We basically had this pact that we'd buy from the shops on the condition that if our parents asked around, the shop owners saw nothing, heard nothing and certainly knew nothing.

Nick from Nick's Chicken Shop sold the best hot chip and gravy rolls and gave us tips on how to pick up girls. He was about ninety years old, so not only was his advice outdated but he also spoke in Greek no matter how many times we reminded him we were Lebanese.

Walid, an ex-cop, owned the tobacconist on the corner, where all the boys bought cigarettes with their dodgy IDs. Bashir, Ibby's third cousin, was the barber who cut our hair. He only knew one style, which meant we all looked like we were part of some really weird cult. PJ's cousins, Ginger and Pete, owned the fish and chip shop where we stuffed our faces with overdone scallops with extra chicken salt.

Abu Habra, a butcher who covered his shop with pictures of Lebanon, gave us extra pieces of chicken or lamb cutlets. He was Mr Ahmed's uncle and thought that giving us freebies was some sort of bribe to stay in school. He'd also lecture us about how we should do something with our lives and get jobs that give back to the community. We always listened an extra few minutes to get that added piece of meat.

Moey and Abz, two of Mr Ahmed's ex-students, helped us train at Broadway gym, especially before any big footy game we had. At Shadia's Chemist, she threw in some Panadol on the house if she knew our families were travelling to Lebanon, because our parents always travelled with a mobile pharmacy in case anyone got sick on the trip. Then there was Beirut Blockbuster, where our parents got cheap prices on DVDs of Turkish shows dubbed with bad Arabic voiceovers. We also had the same group of old men

who drank coffee at Sahara's Café and sang Arabic serenades at any random woman who walked past, particularly my mum.

Our area always made the news for some robbery or drive-by, but never for Em Ahmed, cooking food and donating it to the homeless, or Ming the baker, leaving bags of bread by people's doors. They never showed how the mosque collected blankets and clothes for children, or how the church sold halal sausages on their open days. Punchbowl didn't have the best reputation. Nobody outside this suburb thought it was worth anything. But we knew better. It was our hometown and we were proud.

5:20 p.m.

Huss finally showed up, out of breath like he had run a marathon. He took the few slices left of my manoush and sat on my chair.

'Bro, where were you?' I was annoyed. 'What the hell am I going to tell my dad? He's going to see my face on the news and kill me.'

'Relax, bro,' PJ said. 'He probably won't even notice.'

Everyone looked at PJ, who stopped short of taking a bite of his manoush.

'It's Tariq's dad?' Huss said blinking a few times. 'The White Arab?'

PJ slowly chewed his food, still trying to figure out why we were staring at him.

Huss shook his head. 'Bro, the guy watches the news 24/7 and makes us sing the national anthem every time we come to his house.'

'Oh yeah,' PJ nodded. 'Yeah, Tariq, you're dead.'

'Yeah, thanks,' I replied. 'Real helpful.'

Ibby stood up, buckled his pants and put on his shoes. 'Alright, boys. I'm out. Tariq, if I don't see you, Allah Yerhamak and Insh Allah I'll see you in heaven.'

Huss shook my hand. 'Just man up. Whatever happens, happens.'

'Yeah bro. God be with you,' PJ said and left.

The boys were gone and it was just me. They'd been of no use and now my head was spinning thinking about what my dad was going to do. It was either going to be the 'I came from the poorest part of Lebanon to give you a better life' lecture or a size 12 shoe to my head.

Both were going to be equally painful.

I walked home and decided to go through the back gate. It was starting to get dark and I could see the light on in the garage, which only meant one thing – Amira. I opened the door to see her covered in white clouds of dust, surrounded by a bunch of tools, with streaks of dirt across her face. Her big brown eyes behind her bright pink glasses were wide open as she held an IKEA manual towards the light. I watched her hammer a few more nails into a bee box she was building for Uncle Charlie. They had recently decided to go into business together and had started their own company called *Bee My Honey*.

‘You know that business contract you made Uncle Charlie sign doesn’t count for anything?’ I said to her now. The contract basically read that Amira was the King of the World and that Uncle Charlie was her slave.

She looked up at me over the top of her glasses. ‘Why not?’

‘Because you tied him to the tree and wouldn’t let him go until he signed. I think they call that coercion.’

She picked up the hammer and thumped a few more nails in the box. ‘Nobody can prove that.’

‘Yeah, true. Yallah Bob, we need to go inside. You still have that farm diorama project I have to help you with and you need to wash up.’

‘See, that’s why you’re my favourite person in the whole wide world.’

She finally finished and jumped onto my back for a ride to the back door. It was oddly quiet. That’s never happened before in my home. Amira climbed down and as soon as her feet hit the ground, she took off like a wind-up toy.

I walked over to Mum, who was washing the dishes, and kissed her on the cheek. She turned and pointed to the plate of food on the kitchen bench. ‘I made lubya bi zaat especially for you, albi.’

I sat on our comfy bright blue and gold couch and waited for my mum to set the table. In our small three-bedroom house, everywhere you looked there were either fake flowers, pot plants or baby photos. Our red and green Persian rugs were even decorated with flowers and vine leaves. We had two living rooms, one for guests and important people and the other for – well, for everybody else. *That* living room had a leaky roof and we each had our own buckets and bowls strategically placed to catch the rain. We’re pretty competitive, and the person with the most water in their bowl won the rights to the TV remote. We also had one bathroom to share between the

eight of us and a hot water system that shut off anytime you turned on any other tap in the house.

‘Habibi, if you want more, I save more in oven,’ my mum said cutting up some cucumbers and tomatoes picked fresh from our garden.

Feda came out of her room and stared at my mum.

‘Why is it that because he’s a guy, you leave him food, but I’ve been working all day, and I don’t get anything? No wonder women are leaving their husbands now.’

‘How would you know?’ I said taking off my shoes and getting ready to eat. ‘No one’s come to marry you.’

She threw a couple of cushions at me. ‘At least I don’t piss my pants during the night.’

Okay, let me explain. It was one time. I was twelve and I had drunk heaps of water the night before.

‘Khalas,’ my mum interrupted before things could escalate any further. ‘There’s food in oven for you, Feda. No more trouble. Baba will be home soon.’

‘She started it,’ I protested.

Feda shook her head. ‘Can’t wait to see the day someone twice your size bursts your big head.’

I ignored her empty threat when I heard keys rattle. The front door opened, followed by a loud ‘As-Salaam-Alaikum’.

I felt my throat tighten as I watched my dad kiss my mum on her forehead, then Feda and finally me. He sat on his massage chair, unbuckled his belt and turned on the TV, ready for his daily hit of the evening news. The belt wasn’t a good sign – now he had a weapon right beside him. He flicked through a few channels until he stopped on Channel Nine. The intro music began to play just as Abdul and Saff, the epic shit-stirrers, came home from work. They sat on either side of Dad and didn’t waste any time demolishing my food. I tried to sneak out, but it was too late. The anchor launched into the opening story.

‘An all-boys high school in Sydney’s South West has once again made headlines after footage has emerged of the ongoing violence and chaos sweeping the school. Their disgraced former principal is currently under investigation for allegedly funding Islamic extremism overseas. Now it appears the students are out of control. Many have described the school as



an easy target to recruit terrorists with Sharia Law allegedly being implemented. A woman, who wishes to remain anonymous, has described the fear of leaving her home and claims the school's teachers are afraid for their lives. Jane Mitchell was there earlier today and brings us this report. A warning to our viewers: the following images may be disturbing. Viewer discretion is advised.'

*Really? Couldn't have been more dramatic?*

The report cut and paste a few clips together and we looked like a bunch of angry hooligans, jumping on each other's backs, yelling and screaming. It looked like we were part of a riot.

They even ran some mobile phone footage of the fight, which pissed me right off because that meant some snitch from our school had sent their videos in.

Feda ran to the TV and pointed to my face. 'Oh. My. God. Is that you, Tariq?'

Mum rushed from the kitchen with soap all over her hands. 'La. La. It can't be my habibi, Tariq.'

'Are you serious?' Saff said hitting me over the back of my head. 'You part of ISIS now?'

Abdul followed. 'Dad has worked so hard to give you a good life and you throw it away.'

I wanted to laugh because I knew he was mocking Dad's whole Lebanon-sacrifice speech, but I held it in. 'Piss off. I wasn't in the fight. I was trying to stop it!'

I could smell the smoke from Dad's ears. He loved Australia more than anything, and to see his son on the news in a segment about terrorism was his worst nightmare. Abdul and Saff spent the next five minutes pausing and rewinding parts of the story until Dad turned off the TV. That was the signal that everyone needed to leave.

He put his glasses on and dialled a number on his phone. It was one of those moments when everything went quiet and you're unsure if you're going to live or die.

'Salaam, Mr Ahmed. How are you?' *Oh shit. He rang Mr Ahmed.* 'It's Mr Nader...yes good. Good...I want to ask question.' A short pause. 'So this story on news. I see my son. What did he do? Yes... yes...Ohhh, okay.'

A long pause.

‘Sank you so much, Mr Ahmed. Yes. Sank you. Sank you. Salaam.’

He hung up, gently packed his glasses away and rested his hands on his belly. He was calm, which only gave me more anxiety. ‘Mr Ahmed told me everything. You very lucky you weren’t in fight.’

I smiled, relieved. ‘See, I told you.’

He stood in front of me. ‘I’m no finished. He also tell me that you throw eggs at girls high school. Is this true?’

*Damn it! Mr Ahmed was getting me back for arguing in his office today.*

I sank into the couch. ‘Maybe.’

Quick as a flash, Dad smacked me across the head. He spent the next half an hour lecturing me on respecting women. I pictured Feda covered in eggs, which only made me snigger.

‘You think this funny?’ Dad said, with another thump to my head, this time a little harder. ‘That’s it! Tomorrow you coming with me to say sorry to girls from high school.’

I jumped up. ‘Wallah, Dad, no! Please! Wallah, I’ll never do it again! Don’t embarrass me like that.’

‘No. No. No.’ He put his hand out for me to help him out of his seat. ‘I’ve been wanting to talk to you about your rude behaviour for long time. Enough is enough. My son is not going to throw eggs at girls. You coming with me tomorrow.’

Amira rushed out of her room with paint all over her face and crumpled cardboard. ‘Tariq, I think I broke my project.’

I closed my eyes and tried to disappear. It didn’t work. ‘When Dad finishes, I’ll come and fix it for you.’

She bounced around like she needed to go to the toilet. ‘Please. Hurry. Now.’

I turned back to Dad who gave me the green light to leave. ‘Don’t forget tomorrow.’

Tomorrow was going to suck.

## Chapter 4

‘Tariq! Help!’

I tried to drown out the voice but it only got louder. It was too early for this.

‘Tariq! I’m going to fall!’

I tumbled out of bed and dragged my feet to the kitchen. My eyes were still half shut, but I could see Amira hanging by her Batman shirt from the top cabinet.

‘What the hell, Bob? What were you doing up there?’ I unhooked her shirt and saw that her face was covered in Nutella. ‘Bob, you know you can’t have dairy.’

About two years ago, she kept complaining of her bones aching and stomach cramps. The doctor ran a couple of tests to find out she was highly intolerant to dairy.

Amira looked up at me now and tried to do the whole big-innocent-eyes apology. Even though I knew she was playing me, I gave in.

‘Go wash your face and get dressed for school before Mum wakes up. Don’t forget your diorama.’

I wiped the kitchen of all evidence and threw away the Nutella. I packed her lunchbox with her favourite, a plain lettuce sandwich and a container full of sliced watermelon. Trying to scam Nutella was becoming part of Amira’s routine.

My own morning routine went something like this:

- Wash face, brush teeth and do wudu.
- Style hair.
- Pray Fajr.
- Get dressed.
- Style hair again.

Amira walked into my room as I finished up, dressed and ready for me to walk her to school. She always wore rainbow knee-high socks and her

hair in two uneven braids. My phone dinged with a message from Huss.

Huss: Yallah. We're outside

Tariq: Gimme 2

As we headed out, I heard my parents' bedroom door open. Dad emerged, all dressed and ready to go. Any day he had off, he'd wear his white abaya and his Aussie green and gold thongs.

*He was an Arab's version of Santa Claus.*

'You sink I forgot,' he laughed.

He patted his pockets. 'Where are my keys?'

*Please don't find them. Please don't find them. Please don't find them.*

Dad stopped patting his chest. 'Oh, yes, yes. Saff took car to service it.'

Yes! That meant I didn't need to go to the girls' high school today and make an idiot of myself.

Dad laughed and pointed like he'd had a genius idea. 'We have something even better. Amira, go wake up Khorloo from the shed. Tell him we need truck.'

*No. Please, no.*

*Anything but that.*

I could feel the room spinning and my eyes started to tear up. I begged Dad and even promised him that I would marry whoever he wanted me to – even someone from Lebanon! Dad barely listened. He looked into the hallway mirror and brushed his fluffy beard one last time. 'No, no, no. You need to learn lesson.'

I slid down the wall and sat on the cold tiles. It was official. My life was over.

Uncle Charlie came running along the corridor with his fly undone. Someone needed to buy the man some new pants.

'Who's ready to go?' he yelled, excited that he could drive us to school in his truck.

I prayed a bus would fall from the sky and hit me. We walked out to see PJ, Huss and Ibbby waiting, each with a can of V and a manoush. They gave the zaatar one to Amira before Huss looked at me, trying to figure out why my uncle and dad were with us.

‘Yallah, boys, I take you to school today,’ Dad said, shaking their hands.

We had walked a couple of houses down when the boys stopped in their tracks.

‘Why are we walking to *that*?’ Ibby asked, taking a few steps back.

‘I never asked for a lift,’ PJ said quickly. ‘I’m out. I can walk to school.’

Dad gave him the death stare that all Arab dads have. One eyebrow slowly lifted and his head tilted down towards his chest.

We had no choice.

Uncle Charlie pulled the tarpaulin from the truck with a flourish, and there she was. The famous white and pink ice-cream truck that he *supposedly* found abandoned on the side of the road. It still had the pictures of ice cream all over it and a stupid red light on the roof. He opened the back doors and a puff of dust hit us straight in the face. There were no seats back there. Instead, my uncle had a bunch of milk crates, covered in cobwebs.

I could feel PJ breathing down my neck. ‘I’m going to drink your blood.’

Huss didn’t make the situation better by laughing his head off at PJ and Ibby as they squeezed their bodies in through the door.

‘Wallah, keep laughing and watch what’s going to happen, dumbo,’ Ibby said, kicking Huss a few times as Uncle Charlie started the engine.

Just when we thought it couldn’t get worse, deafening Arabic music blasted through the speakers. I stared at the ground, trying to ignore the death stares sent my way.

We drove around the block and dropped Amira off at her school with her diorama. Some of the kids pointed and laughed at us as we shut the door behind her. We gave them the finger through the back window as we drove off.

I knew I should tell the boys where we were going.

‘So, guys, we might be a little late to school because –’

‘Okay boys,’ Dad interrupted, poking his head through the sheet Uncle Charlie had hung between the driver’s seat and the back of the truck. ‘When we get to girls’ high school, each of you need to say sorry and why.’

‘Girls’ high school?’ Ibby repeated, confused.

‘Why are we going there?’ PJ asked me inching closer. I didn’t like that his body took up most of my space.

Huss was the only one with any idea, not because I had told him, but because we were the only two who had egged the girls. He stayed quiet.

I cleared my throat. 'Um. You know how –'

'Because you throw eggs on girls,' Dad interrupted once more.

Before the boys could kill me, my uncle made a sharp left turn, which toppled us off our crates and onto one another. I was squashed between PJ and Ibby, who jabbed me a few times before we got back upright.

'Uncle, it wasn't even me or Ibby,' PJ pleaded hoping Dad would set them free. 'It was only Huss and Tariq. Wallah. I promise.'

Just then, I noticed a bee hovering above Ibby's head. I think it must have followed Uncle Charlie to the truck.

'Ibby, don't move,' I said, trying to slowly slide away. 'There's a bee above your head.'

His body stiffened; his googly eyes widened with fear. 'Please, Tariq, move it away. Ya Allah, help me.'

Huss and PJ were now sitting close to the back doors and held their bags over their heads. It was too risky for any of us to help Ibby in the confined space, so we watched him sweat it out until the bee casually landed on his nose.

'Watch and see, ya dogs! Watch and see what I'm going to do when we get out of this truck,' he threatened, now cross-eyed.

BANG!

My uncle slammed the brakes hard, and a loud, girlish scream rang out. At first, we thought that Uncle Charlie had run someone over. But it was Ibby.

He'd been stung.

Dad opened the back doors and we all jumped out. Ibby held his nose in pain and screamed out for some water. PJ opened his backpack and pulled out an ice-cold two-litre Pepsi bottle. 'Tariq, use this.'

Before I could do anything, Huss snatched the bottle and poured it over Ibby's face. He fell to the ground, rolling left to right, still in pain and now covered in Pepsi.

'Uh...' PJ stared at Ibby in his Pepsi puddle.

'I think you were meant to put the cold bottle on the sting, bro,' I said to Huss while Ibby screamed.

He shrugged. 'How was I supposed to know that?'

A loud cheer echoed around us. We turned, and there were the girls from the high school, standing behind their school fence, pointing and laughing at the defunct ice-cream truck, at Ibby and his Pepsi puddle, at us.

‘I can be any flavour you want,’ one girl shouted.

‘Ooh. Take me for a ride,’ another said.

Kill. Me. Now.

The bell chimed as we were escorted to the front office. Ibby was receiving medical assistance from the school nurse, and PJ sat outside under a tree, too angry to speak to us.

Huss and I each had to apologise to the principal separately. I went first. This was such a waste of time. Not only was the principal half asleep, but I’m pretty sure he was rolling a ball of snot between his fingers the whole time I was talking. I walked back to the reception desk and waited for Huss to finish. My dad stood outside like he was a bouncer.

I rested my back against the wall and closed my eyes.

‘Okay darling. So you’re a new student here?’ the office lady said. I almost missed the quiet reply.

I opened my eyes and leaned forward, but I couldn’t see much. There was a big leafy plant and a few armchairs in the way.

‘And what’s your name?’

‘Jamila May.’

As she finished filling out whatever forms the office lady gave her, she turned her head and our gazes met. I could see her golden hazel eyes through her thick lashes as she tucked her wavy brown hair behind her ears and smiled. Her dimples flashed. She walked past me and the smell of coconut almost lifted me off my seat. My eyes followed her until I saw Dad staring at me with one eyebrow raised. I casually turned the other way, praying that he didn’t make a scene.

*Jamila May*, I repeated silently.

We arrived at school where Mr Ahmed waited at the front gate. He had the biggest grin on his face and didn’t bother to hide his satisfaction. ‘Nice ride, boys.’ He looked at Ibby, whose nose was as big as a balloon and his eyes so swollen that he could barely see. ‘I’m not going to even ask.’ Ibby sniffed pitifully.

Mr Ahmed pointed towards the hall. ‘Yallah boys, the new principal wants to see you.’

We all turned around. ‘New principal?’

‘Yeah. I don’t have time to explain. Just go now. He’s waiting for you.’

There was an eerie silence as we made our way to the hall. The long hallway which connected to the main office usually had boys bouncing off the walls or swinging from the fans, but not today.

‘It’s way too quiet,’ PJ said, looking around the empty hallway. ‘I feel like something’s about to go down and we gonna die.’

‘Shut up, man,’ Huss retorted. ‘Who’s going to kill a wahash like you?’

Ibby held onto my shirt. ‘Wallah, if something does go down and you don’t help me, watch and see what’s gonna happen.’

We opened the doors to find four lonely chairs facing the stage beside boxes of paper. It was dark – all the window blinds were now permanently closed just in case we made the news again. We sat and waited and waited but no one showed up.

‘I’m out,’ Huss eventually said, picking up his things. ‘This new principal is already wasting my time.’

‘Your time belongs to me now,’ we heard a deep voice echo.

‘Is that the shaytaan?’ Ibby whispered, squeezing my arm.

PJ’s afro puffed up a little higher as he looked to me for answers.

The stage curtains moved and a shadowy figure walked our way.

Huss slowly sat down and whispered. ‘Is that him?’

I shrugged, confused.

A tall, muscular man stopped in front of us. ‘You leave when I tell you to leave. Is that clear?’

If someone had a photo of all our faces, you’d see four boys with their jaws on the ground. We were expecting one of those textbook old principals with a wrinkled face. Not this guy. He wore a blue Ralph Lauren polo and had a tattoo sleeve on his right arm. His closely-cropped blond hair and shiny Rolex weren’t anything we were used to. He spoke with an odd accent.

Ibby leaned over to me. ‘I’m seeing what you’re all seeing, yeah?’

‘Okay, seriously, your breath stinks.’ I said, palming his chubby face away from me.



The tall man sat down and looked at his watch. 'Like I said, your time is my time now. So let's not waste any of it and get straight to the point. My name is Thomas Archibald but you can call me Mr Archie.'

PJ and Ibby nodded like they were back in kindergarten, still mesmerised by this muscular man who was supposedly our new principal.

Huss crossed his arms and looked at the rest of us. 'So this guy is our new pri –'

'Don't talk until I tell you to talk,' Mr Archie snapped. 'Believe me, you don't want to come up against me. You'll lose eleven times out of ten.'

I could see Ibby using his fingers to work out how eleven out of ten was even possible.

'Stop counting, ya hayawan,' I whispered. 'He'll tell you off for being that dumb.'

'Well, let's get through these, ay?' Mr Archie said, lifting the box of papers like it weighed nothing. He picked up a red folder and looked at Ibby first. 'Ibrahim Nasser, student ID 617. Broke into the canteen and not only took all the hot food but then resold it at lunchtime. Chased three casual teachers out of the school and broke the only library window. Twice.'

'Sir, the boys made a bet that I couldn't fit my body through the window. I had to prove them wrong.'

'It also says here that this school has had five different canteen owners in the last six months?'

Ibby scratched his head and squinted out of the corner of his eye. 'I think so, or it could be six. I'm not a hundred per cent. If you want, you can ask my cousin Maz. He knows.'

Mr Archie stared at Ibby for a while, probably trying to figure out if he was taking the piss. He must have eventually realised that Ibby couldn't take the piss if he tried.

'PJ Malofa, ID 602,' he continued. 'The lad who put scissors on top of fans in three different classrooms, with four lads injured and taken to hospital as a result.'

'Everyone dared me, sir.'

If you haven't picked it up yet, our school basically ran on bets and dares. We always wanted to see who was willing to do what. Plus, it made the time fly by during class.

I could see where this was going and we were pretty screwed. Mr Archie held a separate red folder with Huss's name in bold. 'Hussein Haydar, ID 666. You set a classroom on fire, and prank-called the police, resulting in bomb squads entering the school on two different occasions. You sell cigarettes in the playground. But let me guess: the lads dared you?'

Huss shrugged. 'Yeah. But even teachers buy cigarettes off me.'

Mr Archie's piercing green eyes were now on me. 'And last but not least, Tariq Nader, ID 658. Top of all his classes, best and fairest three times in a row, captain of the Under-17s footy team. Not one single bad thing on his record.'

The boys all looked confused.

He smiled. 'You're very smart, getting these lads to do the dirty work while you stay unnoticed behind the scenes. Yeah, so you've skipped a few days and egged the girls' high school down the road, but I believe you paid for that today.'

'I don't get anyone to do my dirty work,' I said, sitting up.

'So you admit you have some dirt on your hands?'

*Damn it! I fell right into that trap.*

'Like the time you jumped the fence and hung out by the station, or the time you forged your parents' signatures for those detention slips?'

He spent the next twenty minutes reading out more from our files, even things we had forgotten about. The time Ibbby and Huss locked Mrs Abdallah in the classroom, or the time PJ punched through Mr Jeffery's car window because he lost in a game of footy.

Finally, he flipped the files shut. 'My point is, boys, I know you better than you know yourselves.' He stood up and walked around like a lawyer, interrogating us as if we were on trial.

'How?' Huss asked, laughing to himself.

Mr Archie stopped and stared at him. 'I've been watching you for all of Term 1. You may not have noticed me amongst those men in suits, but I certainly noticed you.'

He went on and on about how he had been watching us like an eagle hunting for prey, which – if you ask me – was borderline weird. Like I get it, he wanted to act all tough, but he needed to stop referring to us as his prey. I mean, that's weird, right?

Just when we thought he had finally finished, he handed us a pile of every negative article that had been written about our school.

‘So this school is the fifth-worst school in New South Wales and is now considered at risk for closure if you lads don’t change your behaviour. We have until mid-Term 3 to clean up our school’s reputation and be on the safe side.’

Our? He just got here. He doesn’t get to be part of us just yet.

I knew our school was doing badly, but I never thought that it could actually close down. We’re not saints or angels but we’d take a bullet for each other and our school. Just ask Sammy from Year 11, who tackled a guy and almost put his head through a wall because he raised his voice at our office ladies. No one gets away with being disrespectful on our territory, except for us! Yes, I know it’s hypocritical, but that doesn’t change the fact that this place was a home to us.

Mr Archie stopped in front of Huss, who still had a smirk on his face. ‘It may mean no more of *this* school, Mr Haydar, but you still have to go to a school. A *separate* school, which the government will choose for you.’

Huss shuffled back in his seat and crossed his arms, like he had heard all this before.

There was something about the way Mr Archie spoke. He was so calm and cold, like a gangster with manners. The ones from the movies who excuse you to kiss your family goodbye before they throw you into the ocean, gagged and chained.

‘Back in Ireland, I was a head teacher at a school like this,’ he began.

Ibby clicked his fingers. ‘Ireland. I knew it.’

‘Don’t act like you’ve heard of Ireland before,’ PJ said. ‘We all know you’re too dumb to know any places in England.’

Mr Archie looked at his watch again and shook his head. ‘As I was saying, I taught in Northern Ireland, in some troubled schools. Ireland has had its fair share of war and problems with the government. Some schools closed, but others stayed open because of one simple program that we trialled, which I believe will work here.’

‘Jail?’ Huss laughed to himself.

‘I guarantee that you will end up there if you keep making the same choices you are now.’

Huss stood up and kicked the chair. ‘*What* did you say?’ It didn’t take long for Huss the Hothead to appear.

Mr Archie turned his back and picked up a few more folders, as if Huss’s tantrum didn’t bother him one bit. ‘Sit down and stop embarrassing yourself.’

I could hear Huss’s breathing get heavier by the second. We all sat up and waited, watching a ticking time bomb.

‘The program was focused around soccer,’ Mr Archie continued, now sitting down and ignoring Huss and his heavy breathing. ‘I organised a program with the local football club in Belfast and they agreed to help out those school lads on the condition that they fixed their behaviour and grades. A sports competition was created with neighbouring schools, and the winning team was awarded a scholarship with the club. Long story short, our school stayed open because this program was the first of its kind and attracted heaps of media attention.’

‘I’m so confused,’ Ibby said looking at me with his puffy eyes. ‘Is he saying we’re going to Ireland to play soccer?’

‘It’s Mr Archie, and no, not exactly,’ Mr Archie answered. ‘I’ve chosen you four lads because I believe we can implement the same program here.’

‘I hate soccer,’ PJ said throwing his bag on the floor. ‘That game is for wimps.’

Mr Archie tapped his fingers on our records to remind us once again that our free will was history. ‘Since you’re all a part of the school footy team anyway, I’ve decided that rugby league is the way to go.’ He looked at me and smiled. ‘And since you’re their BBL, with such a *clean* record, maybe you can lead by example.’

I smiled through my teeth, trying to control my anger. I knew what he was insinuating and I didn’t like the way he said it. No teacher has ever questioned me or my record.

‘The program starts next week. You’ll head over to a week-long camp. Your parents have signed the consent forms, so you belong to me now.’ He walked towards the door with the box of our files. ‘Oh, and if you’re not there, consider yourselves expelled.’

And just like that he was gone. It was like someone threw us into a tornado and we’d been spat back out. What the hell had just happened? The only explanation we could come up with was that the government had sent

this white guy with the men in suits, a so-called ‘principal’, to get information from us and then use it to put more of us in jail.

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## Chapter 5

No vultures.

No ghetto birds.

The media had completely disappeared, which not only meant no more flashing cameras, but also no more hot blonde reporter. Some of the boys went around peeking inside cars parked along the street to see if any reporters were hiding out, but they really had left without a trace.

I waited by the school gates and saw Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed having a conversation in his office. My eyes locked with the new principal's before I turned away and pretended to scroll through my phone. I knew he was powerful enough to pull strings and get things done in record time, like having a forty-minute conversation with my dad about this sports program without me ever noticing.

'This Mr Thomas Archie call me today at work,' Dad said when he came home that evening. 'We talk and talk about school and I tell him that you is smart but dumb, you know? He agree, too.'

'He agreed? He doesn't even know me,' I protested.

I thought about telling Dad that he had no right to sign on my behalf, especially without my permission. Then I remembered that I'm an Arab and my rights were ceded to my parents from the moment I was born.

The Wolf Pack were hanging out at mine for our usual Tuesday night routine, watching Amira's favourite Disney movie, *Mulan*, with her. We had no choice. Mum usually made spaghetti with yoghurt for us, and we'd – actually *I'd* – have to pretend to enjoy watching the movie. PJ and Ibby always reacted like it was the first time they had seen the movie.

'Uncle, we think he's a cop,' Huss said to my dad, slurping his spaghetti. 'I lost it and kicked the chair. Did you even see the way he was speaking to me, boys?'

'Why you lose it?' Dad asked. 'If you go crazy, this only hurt you. You only one to lose. This man here because the school is very bad and you boys are reason.'

I shook my head, annoyed that now I'd have to hear about Mr Archie at home, too. 'Of course, we're the reason. It's not because our classrooms are like ovens, or that our school has no money so our teachers have to photocopy *photocopies* of books and we can't even read them because the words are so faded.'

It was one thing to give me up, Dad. It was another to blindly believe everything this guy was saying.

'This no excuse to be disrespectful Tariq, especially with BBL program Mr Ahmed chose for you,' Dad said. 'And he also tell me sport program can help and I believe him. You very good at football, anyway. What the problem?'

He stood in front of the TV just as Mulan was about to jump off the palace roof – Ibby's favourite part. 'Boys, listen very careful. I give you life advice not even gold can buy. When I was young boy...'

Ibby's still-reddened eyes darted my way. We knew it was lecture time, so we all got comfy. This was going to take a while, no matter how much Amira pleaded with Dad to wait until the movie was finished.

Even with his 'You need to start to act like men and trust this new principal' and his 'Get your act together and start to take your school more seriously' talk, Dad couldn't convince Huss that Mr Archie wasn't a cop.

Huss was still on the case with the boys the next day at school.

'I'm telling you, boys, he's a cop,' he explained. We each had our manoush and our V, and had stopped just outside the school gates. We weren't allowed to enter the school with any energy drinks, so most of the time we'd have to chug it down before the bell rang. 'Trust me, I know what I'm on about.'

Unlike PJ and Ibby, who hadn't stopped talking about Mr Archie's tattoos or how amazing his muscles were, Huss was seriously convinced Mr Archie was part of a plot to get us Punchbowl boys 'under control' and force us to follow orders.

As we listened to him rant about it, a couple of trucks parked along the road, and a bunch of construction workers began to unload packages and boxes labelled with the words *CLASSIFIED* and *FRAGILE* in huge red writing.

'See?' Huss pointed. 'I told you something shady is happening!'

'Relax, bro. It's probably just school stuff,' I said trying to calm him down. Huss can be unrelenting when he gets an idea in his head.

Some of the boys had gathered under the palm tree beside the basketball courts. They had the trumbaki out, drumming and dancing to Arabic music played from an iPod dock. PJ and Ibbby ran over to join the dance as the boys formed a circle, on their knees, hollering and clapping. That was how most mornings went until Mr Ahmed brought out the fire hose and watched us scramble to class.

It didn't matter what year you were in; everyone had a role. The seniors were there to make sure that if any fight broke out, it would be fair – one on one, and no illegal weapons. They also were in charge of our *Guinness Book of Punchbowl Records* for any special talents that was worth mentioning. Hamza in Year 10 lit his own hair on fire for two whole minutes, Joseph in Year 9 ate Mrs Adra's goldfish – while it was still alive – and Jamal in Year 12 stapled his eyelids shut for ten minutes (yes he was rushed to hospital). All these legends and more were in the book.

Us Year Ten boys watched over the Year Nine boys, the inbetweeners, and made sure they'd report to us if anything suspicious was happening, like any boy who was selling drugs or mixed substances. We'd make sure those troublemakers were either dealt with by the seniors, or that they were permanently out of our school. Then there were the juniors, and their job was to be on the lookout and take the blame if a situation were to break out. We all took care of each other. Respect was earned through the ranks, and if anyone stepped out of line, we had our own laws and court system that took care of it.

It didn't take long before the 'Mr Archie is a hectic principal' conversations began. The seniors loved him, but the rest of us were still unsure of his real purpose, especially, of course, Huss. He stood on the silver seats and announced his conspiracy theory. Mohamed, our school captain, threw a footy at his head.

'He's here because our school is *actually* on its last chance,' he explained. 'It's serious.'

Mohamed was the guy who worked every day after school, had his head stuck in books and never left the classroom, even at recess or lunch. He knew he had to work twice as hard to get a good ATAR because our school ranked so poorly.

I picked up the footy and kicked it back to Huss. 'Just drop it, bro. I don't like the guy, but there's no way he's a cop.'



‘Bro, he *has* to be on the gear,’ one boy said. ‘There’s no way he’s all natural.’

‘I can’t understand half the things he says,’ another complained. ‘His accent needs to come with, you know, that writing that’s on the bottom of the TV screen.’

‘They’re called subtitles, ya donkey,’ another boy mocked.

I ignored the pockets of conversation when Elias came running my way. ‘Archie’s just expelled Year Nine Jamal and Billy. They’re not allowed to come back.’

Those boys were ruthless and had been the ones you called if you needed a situation ‘taken care of’ – if the money was right, of course. If Mr Archie could get rid of *them*, then it meant he could get rid of anyone. Expulsion was something our teachers only threatened us with but never actually implemented.

I turned back to let the boys know, only to see Mr Archie walking through the back gate of the canteen. Huss was still ranting about his theory when Mr Archie stopped behind him.

‘I don’t care what you all say, there’s something shifty about this Archie guy.’ Huss was waving his hands in the air. ‘He has to be a pig trying to get information from us.’

Some of the boys tried to get him to shut up, muttering in Arabic that Mr Archie was right behind him, but Huss continued.

‘They brought over this guy who knows *nothing* about our school, to *change* it and make it *better*. Like, we don’t need your help, bro.’

‘Ya hayawan, shut up!’ I finally yelled. ‘He’s been behind you this whole time and you’re still talking shit!’

At first Huss thought we were messing around, until Mr Archie walked out in front of him with his hands in his pockets. Everyone slowly filtered away, afraid of what was about to go down. Then it was just Ibby, PJ, Huss and I.

‘You four lads, follow me to the main hall,’ he said, after staring at Huss for what felt like a million years. ‘This pig has something he needs to tell you.’

Huss’s pride wasn’t going to let him feel bad, so as usual, he was unapologetic. I knew that whatever Mr Archie was going to tell us, it wasn’t going to be good.

And of course, I was right.

‘Okay, lads. I’ve spoken to your teachers and they know you’ll be off first period,’ he said, walking towards four yellow buckets, mops and cleaning products. He handed a mop to each of us and explained that the hall was to be in tiptop condition by the time he got back in forty-five minutes. None of us knew why we were chosen out of almost two hundred students. It was starting to feel like we were really his prey. ‘Consider this early preparation for a long and tough couple of terms ahead,’ he said. ‘If you aren’t going to take care of your school, then who is?’

‘I will, sir, Thomas!’ Ibby raised his hand in the air, waiting for a high five. He had a habit of calling teachers by their first name, except for Mr Ahmed – probably because Mr Ahmed could turn anyone into a pretzel. I think Ibby thought it was a good way to suck up to the teachers.

‘Are you my ma?’ Mr Archie asked with his eyebrows close together and his lips tight. He marched Ibby’s way and stopped inches from his face. ‘It’s Mr Archie to you.’

I could’ve sworn I saw a couple of tears fall down Ibby’s face when Mr Archie left and slammed the doors. As always, Huss, Ibby and PJ immediately began to argue about whose fault it was that we were in this mess in the first place.

*There must be more to this Archie guy,* I thought to myself. I had a feeling that this was going to be worse for me than the other boys. I could feel it in the pit of my stomach, just by the way he looked and spoke to me. The fact that he was here, at our school, possibly in our classes, watching us for all of Term 1, meant that he knew things about the way we worked and who we were. He had all the cards and advantages going into this war. And I didn’t have any doubt about it – we were in a war.

‘I’m not cleaning this craphole,’ Huss said, sitting down. ‘Isn’t that why we pay cleaners? We do the mess, they clean up. Simple.’

PJ bit his lip, trying to control his anger. He had Music first period, and Mrs Flinders was his favourite teacher who entered him in music competitions or drove him to any auditions. Missing it was seriously pissing him off. ‘You always run your mouth, Huss, and we all suffer for it. If you didn’t call him a pig, then maybe we wouldn’t be here in the first place.’

‘Shut up, you dumb coconut,’ Huss said with his hands behind his head. ‘Stop talking and clean already.’

Quick as a flash, PJ swung his mop towards Huss and knocked him out of his chair and into the bucket filled with water and soap. 'Call me a coconut again!'

It was on like Donkey Kong, which meant bodies were going to be slammed and faces were going to be rearranged.

Huss, now with red in his eyes, charged towards PJ but lost his balance on the slippery floor and landed on his back. He finally managed to step off the soapy floor and jumped on PJ's back. It was like watching a meerkat on an elephant as he tried to lay some jabs into PJ's ribs. PJ grabbed him from behind and swung him out towards the chairs. I had thought they were doing their usual messing around, but then PJ had his hands tight around Huss's neck. If I didn't stop him now, Huss was heading to Rookwood Cemetery. Ibby and I rushed over and pulled them apart.

'Let go of me!' Huss yelled, still wanting to rip PJ's head off. 'I swear if you don't, wallah I'll smash you and him.'

I held him against the wall until he finally calmed down. 'What is wrong with both of you? Just relax, yeah?'

Huss's chest heaved in and out. As though the situation couldn't get any worse, Mr Archie walked in with a group of men in suits. We hadn't cleaned any part of the hall and our clothes and the floor were soaked with water.

Mr Archie cleared his throat. 'Gentlemen, why don't we head on back to the office where the ladies have fixed up some morning tea?'

We quickly rushed to fix the crime scene knowing he'd be back here any minute to punish us. Soon enough, he walked in and slammed the door behind him so hard that I felt the vibrations ripple across the floorboards. We found ourselves standing to attention in a line like we were in the army.

He pinched the bridge of his nose as if he had a bad headache. 'So *those* men were from the department and a government agency sent out to see how *safe* this school is. I brought them in here, and what do you know, you lads look like you've just brawled.'

I realised that us being in the hall, cleaning and supposedly being responsible, was no accident. It should've been a good look for us once the men in suits walked in but Mr Archie's plan had failed miserably.

'It was PJ and Huss.' Ibby wasted no time turning them in. 'They started it.'

We all stared at Ibbby. He shrugged, as though we shouldn't be surprised by his big mouth.

I could hear Huss's teeth grinding together as Mr Archie now stood face to face with him. 'You, sir, are on a roll today. Get your act together, or your grandma will get a call and find out why her grandson was expelled.'

Huss looked taken aback that Mr Archie had mentioned his grandma. Big Haji meant everything to him and he knew she'd be disappointed.

Mr Archie then stood in front of me. 'Consider yourself stripped of the footy team captaincy.'

'What?' all the boys asked, shocked.

The boys argued for my position, even threatening to leave the team, but that didn't faze Mr Archie.

'You lads need to start accepting that I'm the principal, or you'll continue to lose opportunities. Tariq is the BBL. He should've stopped the fight before it got to this.'

I felt my eyes narrow and the anger take over my body. I wanted to shout and fight back, but my body was paralysed.

He then pulled out a chair, took it to the back of the hall and ordered us to get cleaning. I was still trying to comprehend that I'd just lost my captaincy of a team that had won the last three grand finals. The more I thought about it, the more my blood boiled.

PJ and Ibbby cleaned the windows and the huge dust balls underneath the rows of stacked chairs. Huss and I mopped, but no matter how many times we wiped the floor, soap bubbles scummed over the surface and we had to redo everything.

Half an hour went by before Mr Archie called for us. 'It looks like you're finished for the morning, but there's one more thing I have left for you to do.'

PJ let out a loud sigh. 'Sir, I swear I'm tired. Can't you just go easy on us?'

Mr Archie smiled, but there was nothing pleasant in his expression. 'You will play a game of footy at lunch with a team of your choice. Pick your team and meet me and my team on the oval. The losing team will have to clean the hall for the rest of the week.'

'And if we win?' I asked, knowing he must have something up his sleeve.

‘You will have my respect,’ he said.

‘Respect?’ Ibby repeated like he tasted something bad. ‘What am I going to do with that?’

‘Deal,’ I said, before Mr Archie could change his mind. ‘And I get my captaincy back.’

He nodded like he was impressed. ‘Deal.’

We shook hands, and now I began to feel the blood pumping furiously in my veins. I wanted more than anything to embarrass him and show him what skills I really had to offer.

‘Okay, lads, you can leave,’ Mr Archie said. ‘Except for you, Tariq. I need to have a word with you.’

The boys left the hall, Ibby staring curiously back over his shoulder. When they were gone, Mr Archie leaned on the edge of his chair and stared at me. ‘Why didn’t you fight back?’

I looked up, confused. ‘Fight back?’

‘Yes. I took the captaincy away from you, mocked you without any explanation, and you didn’t even try to get it back.’

‘You’re the boss, right?’ I said, fed up with these games he was playing.

‘Lad, I’m not here to make your life difficult, but I’m not going to lie, I am tough and I have high expectations,’ he said. ‘If you want to be captain, you need to do more than be good with the ball. You need to set an example and lead from the front. It’s about proving yourself as the BBL. This is not a one-man show.’

‘What is this, some kind of therapy session?’ I snapped. ‘Look, I *get* it. You’re supposed to act tough and strong but –’

‘But what?’ he interrupted. ‘They’ve given us until mid-Term 3 to at least show you lads are heading in the right direction. Do you think you’re anywhere *close* to making that deadline?’ He walked over and stood in front of me. He seemed much bigger up close. ‘I know your dad would be so disappointed if he saw you act and behave the way you do.’

It cut me deep that he, a stranger I barely knew, mentioned anyone in my family like he knew them, but I wasn’t going to let him see me hurt.

I looked up at the clock above his head. ‘I need to get to class. Miss K is waiting for me.’

The boys huddled around the door to my English classroom waiting to hear what happened with Mr Archie. I told them that our only focus was to

find four players for our footy game and prove once and for all that this white Irish guy had no idea what to do with the school. I left the scouting to Huss and the boys while I thought of some game plans. They had the luxury of having toilet breaks or leaving class, while I, being in Advanced English, was expected to own a pen, a book and actually do some work.

Miss Kyriacou, aka Miss K, was my English teacher and hers was the only class I never jiggled, not only because she'd threatened to send letters to my dad's work but because she actually taught in a way that made me want to learn. Even though she was petite and most of the boys towered over her, her voice was strong and stern and could command the attention of any room without lifting a finger. Her classroom was the only one with walls filled with colour and information that was useful. Along with Mr Ahmed, she'd been my teacher ever since Year Seven and knew exactly how my brain worked.

'We're focusing on poetry this term, Tariq,' she said as I walked in. 'Slams in particular.'

I sat at the back of the room and watched the clock hands slowly tick by. My mind was going into overdrive thinking about all the set plays we'd pull off in our finals to destroy Mr Archie's team. I wanted my captaincy back and I was willing to do anything to prove to him I was worth it.

'You don't need to look like that,' she said, noticing my ferocious expression. 'It's not the end of the world.' She handed me a poetry outline. 'You'll get to be captain again when you start to take the BBL and Mr Archie more seriously.'

'He told you?'

'*Everyone* knows, Tariq,' she said, sitting beside me. 'As I've been telling you since you first walked in those doors as a junior, you have so much potential but you choose to cruise by.'

'Miss, he's making us do all these things without asking. He's called my dad and now they're best friends. He's made me ex-captain of a team that's nothing without me, and on top of all that, I have to be part of this so-called footy comp that I know nothing about.' The more I thought about everything that had happened, the angrier I got.

'If you'd just take a step back and actually process what's going on, you'd realise that tough calls need to be made because this school is in a tough position,' she replied. 'Tariq, I know you're angry, but you *have* to

learn how to express yourself better. We've talked about different strategies before.'

Anger Management Strategies go as follows, in no particular order:

1. Deep breaths.
2. Count to fifty.
3. Walk away.
4. Respond when you're calm.
5. Speak to someone you trust.

That's what we've been told to do when our anger gets out of control. Sometimes it works, but most of the time it doesn't.

I still remember the first time Miss K saw me lose it. I was in Year Eight. It was halfway through Term 2 when a new kid called Ibrahim Nasser – Ibby – started his first day. Not only did his buttons look like they were going to explode, he wore the wrong school uniform. Huss and I were running late to class when we heard someone yelling in the gym toilets. We rushed over to see three boys holding Ibby with his back to the wall and his shirt over his head. They punched him in the stomach a couple of times, laughing and teasing his 'flabs', before Huss and I rushed over to help.

I want to say we saved the day and taught those boys a lesson, but I can't. We got our arses handed to us until PJ arrived. He looked like he was ready to kill someone. His fists were clenched and the veins in his neck throbbed. He was livid that his team had lost in a game of touch footy. It worked out well for us, because PJ took his anger out on the boys while we got to live another day. Seeing PJ throw those boys around like they were ragdolls triggered something feral in Ibby too. It was the last day anyone messed with him, and it was the first day of the Wolf Pack.

Miss K continued to talk me through what was expected, which only made my brain wander off, still focused on getting that win. The bell finally rang for lunchtime and before I knew it, word got around about the game.

'So you're in?' Miss K asked as I packed my things.

'Yeah, yeah, Miss. No worries,' I answered wanting to leave.

*No idea what I've just agreed to.*

Everyone sat around the oval as the drums blasted and the boys cheered. I was pumped, until I saw the team the boys had come up with to stick it to

Mr Archie.

Mr Archie's Team	My Team
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Muzzi, the fastest kid in the school.</li><li>• Terry, captain of the senior footy team</li><li>• Sal, the biggest kid in the school</li><li>• Harry and Ali, award-winning footy players</li><li>• Toufiq and Adnan, play for St George's Under-17 club</li><li>• Mr Archie, principal of the school</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Me, halfback and ex-captain</li><li>• Huss, fullback and goal kicker</li><li>• Ibby, forward and once fit a whole football in his mouth</li><li>• PJ, prop and can use his afro to catch a ball</li><li>• Yousef, never played footy before and often is mistaken for a primary schooler</li><li>• Ahmed, never played a game but is usually our waterboy</li><li>• Sonny and David, table tennis champions</li></ul>

This was who they'd come up with?

I threw my bag on the floor. 'What part of "find a team" did you not understand?'

'Shut up, bro,' Huss said, annoyed. 'These losers were all that was left after Archie took all the best players.'

'We're right here,' Yousef said. 'We can hear you.'

I had no time to argue and went through a couple of game plans. David and Sonny, the only Indonesians in the school, asked about a thousand questions, which only made PJ and Ibby walk away, unable to handle the tension.

'Just run straight and don't drop the ball,' Huss snapped at last, frustrated. 'If you make any mistakes, you know what will happen.'

Huss and PJ had gotten over their earlier feud because we now had a bigger enemy and needed to turn up the heat. Each of us wanted to get back at Mr Archie for everything that happened that morning, and show him how people like us played footy.



‘Boys, I want to be captain and win this game so he doesn’t mess with us again,’ I reminded them.

Ibby hugged me tight. ‘Wallah even if I die, I’m going to help you get captain.’

‘Just die after the game, yeah?’ I tried to catch my breath. ‘I need you to go full Hulk on them.’

Mr Ahmed, the official umpire of our game, came over with a smile on his face. ‘Yallah boys, you ready to get smashed?’

Ibby tackled him from behind. ‘Wallah, sir, I’ll tell my brother to get you protein shakes if you rig some calls for us.’

He ignored Ibby’s bribe and ran onto the field to begin the game. Mr Archie’s team looked like superheroes while I stared back at mine, only to see David and Sonny standing on the wrong side of the field.

‘Don’t look at me,’ Ibby said, following my gaze. ‘Huss chose them.’

I called them over and explained the rules one more time. In the meantime, Mr Archie had his shirt off like he was on Season Ten of *The Bachelor* and a loud cheer led by the female teachers echoed around the oval.

We were to have fifteen-minute halves in a game of tackle. Mr Ahmed blew his whistle and we kicked off. Mr Archie caught the ball and ran full steam ahead. He was quick and strong and so was his team. They tore our defence apart and focused on our weak sides – which, in this game, was every side. They scored try after try, until we were the laughing-stock of the school. We were not only getting hammered on the field, but off-field the other boys gave it to us. You would think that being a principal and an adult, he’d slow it down, but not Mr Archie. He was competitive, shouting orders and delivering set pieces you would only see in an NRL first-grade game.

This guy was a machine.

Mr Ahmed blew the whistle for the end of the first half with us down four tries. Ibby and PJ needed lung transplants, while David and Sonny tapped out and joined the crowd. I needed to do something fast to preserve whatever shred of dignity I had left and put at least a couple of tries on the scoreboard.

I turned to Yousef and Ahmed. ‘You wanna know why you guys never make it to the footy team? It’s cause you can’t tackle. Maybe show us you

can tackle, and I'll put you in the team.' Although I wasn't technically captain right now, everyone still knew that role was mine and nobody could do the job better than me.

You could see the spark in their eyes. 'Seriously?'

'Just hold onto Muzzi and Mr Archie and leave the rest to me,' I said.

They ran onto the field and stood in position, rubbing dirt onto their faces. They wanted those footy positions more than anything.

Huss looked at me. 'Seriously? In the team?'

'Of course not.'

Second half.

Mr Archie played with six players since we were two short. He kicked off and the ball landed in my arms. We had set after set, but couldn't break their line. They came close a couple of times, but Yousef and Ahmed's solid tackles actually worked. They were so determined to get their spots in the team, they became like two wild bulldogs. Mr Ahmed had to speak to them a couple of times to try and calm them down because they were so in the zone. The clock was ticking and I knew I needed to break out on my own. It was like hitting a brick wall, but if there's one thing I've learnt about defence, it's that high kicks in the air can test the Billy Slater in all of us. Huss kicked the ball up high a couple of times until some finally landed my way. We were on the scoreboard.

Five tries to two.

I could tell from Mr Archie's face that he was going to take it up a notch, but so was I. He caught the ball and ran towards PJ and Ibbey, who had their hands on their hips, too tired to play. Yousef and Ahmed tried to tackle him but accidentally headbutted each other. That left Huss and me to chase him down. We made the tackle, but he slid over the line to score their sixth and final try.

Mr Ahmed blew the whistle. 'Game over, boys. Congratulations, Mr Archie's team.'

Huss and I sat on the ground and tried to catch our breath while the whole school ran onto the field and cheered around Mr Archie and his team. I looked up to the sky and prayed that it had all been a nightmare. I hadn't really lost to Mr Archie in front of the whole school right?

Apparently, I had.

‘Alright, lads. Great game,’ he said, shaking our hands. ‘You made this old man work up a sweat. But a deal is a deal, and so the hall is yours all week. And Tariq, you remain stripped of your captaincy.’

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## Chapter 6

‘Tariq, make sure Amoorah has no chocolate in bag,’ Mum shouted from the kitchen. ‘The Nutella missing again.’

Mum had been up since four in the morning preparing food because her sister Salma – the rich uptight one – was visiting from Lebanon in a couple of days. She was married to a big-timer politician and expected a grand reception upon her arrival. I’d only ever spoken to my aunt on the phone. Not voluntarily – by force. Actually, my whole family was forced to talk to her, though we’d all try to avoid it. Abdul always pretended he was praying, Saff locked himself in the toilet, Feda would be studying for an imaginary test, and Amira and Uncle Charlie would hole up in the shed. Which left me with no places to hide.

‘Don’t be rude,’ Mum would say. ‘Just say anything.’

‘Um, how’s the weather?’

Mum would shake her head then whisper things to say in my ear. I would save myself by claiming that Feda was *dying* to speak to Auntie Salma. Then I’d leave the phone on Feda’s desk and run away, which made Abdul laugh in his supposed prayers and made him the next target. Everyone would run around the house trying to offload the phone until Uncle Charlie ‘accidentally’ hung it up.

‘Yeee, how did this happen?’ he’d say with a sneaky smile.

Auntie Salma always reminded Uncle Charlie about everything he didn’t have – a marriage, extravagant houses, a stamped passport and the endless ‘Sri Lankan’ servants who worked for her. They weren’t actually from Sri Lanka – they were usually from Ethiopia – but everyone in Lebanon called them Sri Lankan.

I only ever asked my uncle once why he never got married. Tears welled in his eyes and he quickly changed the subject and joked that he was married to his bees. I knew there was more to the story but left it alone, since I’d never seen Uncle Charlie so upset.

Mum was now frantically running between our oven inside the house and the oven in our garage. We had two kitchens. The indoor clean kitchen was used only when judgemental guests came over. Mum would neatly sort all the expensive cups, plates and cutlery so when a judgey guest opened the cupboards, they'd be impressed and spread the news on the *Arab Gossip Women Hotline*.

The outdoor kitchen was used for our barbecue cousins – my uncles and aunties and their kids and my random cousins who just so happened to be in the neighbourhood. It was stocked with plastic cups and plates from Linda's Discount Store, the place in Punchbowl that sold everything you needed.

I kissed Mum goodbye and walked to where Amira sat on the cold tiles by the front door. She slid her bag towards my feet, which meant that she was too tired to walk. I straightened her glasses and put her on my shoulders. She wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed my cheeks. 'You're the best brother ever.'

'I bet you say that to all your brothers.'

I walked her to the school gates and then watched her run through. The ride over on my shoulders had restored her energy. A teacher wearing a hi-vis vest stopped her. Amira pointed back to me and called me over.

'Sorry, but she's not allowed to stay on her own unsupervised before 8:30 a.m.,' the teacher explained. 'We have a teacher on duty after that.'

Amira grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the play equipment. Apparently, she had been practising to finish the monkey bars and today was the day. My genius sister could tell you anything you wanted to know about the world, but finishing the bars was a mission, and she wasn't going to fail.

Amira jumped up on the step and got ready to tackle the yellow bars. She squinted her eyes and rubbed her hands together like she was competing in the Olympics. I stood beside her and watched every move. She pushed her glasses back against her face, took a deep breath and jumped onto her first yellow bar. She placed one hand on the second then quickly moved to the third.

'You only have three bars left, Bob.' I tried to encourage her. 'I'm right here.'

She tried to keep her grip as I noticed her arms begin to shake and the sweat drip down her face. She was struggling now. It didn't help that a

small crowd had gathered around her. Some laughed and pointed while others watched and whispered.

‘It’s so easy. Kindergarten can do it,’ one boy mocked.

I turned back and gave him the eye until he shut up. Amira placed her hand on the fourth bar but her fingers began to slip. Tears began to well in her eyes and her lips trembled. I felt sick to my stomach seeing my sister up there like that.

‘Don’t worry about them. I’m right here.’

I moved closer just as she reached out to grab the next bar but missed and fell to the ground. The kids broke into laughter. I picked her up and brushed her clothes clean. She buried her head in my chest and covered her face behind her hair.

‘They’re laughing at me,’ she whispered.

I wanted to throw those little shits over the fence but more teachers had come onto the playground now. I hugged my little sister tightly instead.

I arrived at school to see Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed at the front gates, greeting the boys as more construction workers filled the school. A new electronic sign had been installed, streaming key dates and events happening around our school.

YEAR 10 FOOTBALL CAMP

WEEK 3, MONDAY–FRIDAY

Great. Now we’d be getting daily reminders about Mr Archie’s plans.

They each shook my hand before Mr Archie launched into a ten-minute lecture about my uniform.

I couldn’t catch a break with this guy.

Our uniform policy had just been updated to something like this: black shoes every day except for Friday sport. No Adidas or Nike hoodies, which pissed Huss off, and no basketball jerseys and loose pants, which pissed PJ off. Ibby’s taqiyah was still acceptable because it was his right to express his religious freedom. If we didn’t abide by these rules, we’d cop a detention with a ban on representative sport until we looked the part.

Ever since Mr Archie arrived, Mr Ahmed had changed. He’d become strict to the point that he didn’t let us jump the fence to get El Jannah, play cards or use our phones during class. He didn’t even let the boys smoke

shisha during Friday lunch. Right now, Mr Ahmed was clearly enjoying every minute of my frustration as Mr Archie's lecture finally ground to an end.

The school bell rang.

'Tariq, see me in my office after roll call,' Mr Archie said.

I was waiting outside his office when Huss and Ibby arrived. We had no idea what we'd done now or which building needed to be cleaned. PJ, with his eyes still half closed, flopped onto the couch next to us and leaned his head against the wall.

'You alright?' I asked waving my hand in front of his face.

He ignored me and continued to breathe loudly through his nose. Ibby pulled at PJ's eyelids, as though he was a doctor. 'Did you take some of your mum's stash?'

PJ's eyes shot open. Ibby quickly jumped back, shouting 'Bismillah!' like he'd risen from the dead. They went back and forth, swearing and kicking each other as Huss and I tried to drown out their bickering.

Mr Archie finally walked out of his office.

NO PAIN, NO GAIN, a poster read on the door. That didn't make us feel safe at all. 'Lads, come in and take a seat. I'll be with you soon.'

His office was unlike that of any other principal we'd had. Those had been filled with teacher quotes and crappy student artwork that everyone pretended to like. Just above Mr Archie's head, he had framed an EPL Liverpool jersey, a Bulldogs jersey and the Irish National soccer team jersey. The wall beside us was covered in pictures of himself with different sporting champions.

He had a picture with LeBron James!

'It has to be Photoshop,' I said, watching Ibby and PJ try to contain their excitement.

'Bro, you're such a hater,' Ibby said. 'You're just pissed because Mr Archie doesn't like you.'

'Shut up, Ibby,' Huss retorted. 'Archie doesn't like any of us.' 'That's *Mr Archie* to you.' The man himself came in and shut the door behind him. Huss had been caught out yet again.

Mr Archie sat, sorting through some papers like we weren't even there. He did that a lot – making you feel as though you didn't exist.

He finally looked up and handed us each a sheet of paper.

## Student Contract

I, \_\_\_\_\_, understand the following expectations and rules of this school. If I break any of these rules, I know my position at this school may be jeopardised and I could be at risk of expulsion. I will:

- follow the school rules both in the classroom and on the playground.
- wear full school uniform and make sure I arrive to school on time.
- represent the school to the best of my ability by showing sportsmanship and respect both on and off the field.
- not use violence to intimidate any student or staff member.
- attend the correct classroom and participate in all activities.
- not skip classes without permission.
- listen to and respect all teachers, including casual and student teachers, and extend that respect to community members.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

He gave us a few minutes to read over it before handing us each a pen. ‘I think it’s pretty straightforward, lads.’

Ibby and PJ signed the contract, but Huss and I held back. Mr Archie walked out from behind his desk and pulled up a chair in front of us.

‘Let me remind you that my job is to make sure this school has the best chance of staying open in the shortest time possible,’ he said. ‘I know things are moving fast, but we have no choice. This contract will let me and all the staff know that you lads are serious about your future.’

Every cell in my body fought against signing the contract, but I knew I had no choice. Mr Archie packed our signed contracts in a filing drawer labelled ‘Contracts 2020’.

‘You know, only four boys have refused to sign this contract.’ He snapped the drawer closed. ‘They’re now out. Let’s talk about the Rugby League program,’ he continued. ‘It starts next Monday, with our camp, then



training sessions and Friday games which start the following week.’ He handed us another sheet of paper.

### **Rugby League Buddy School Program**

*Dear Principals and students,*

*Your school has been selected to participate in the inaugural Year Ten Rugby League Sydney Schools Program implemented by the NSW Department of Education, in partnership with the National Rugby League. The aim of this program is for students to work with a buddy school to help improve and better develop their social and personal skills in a team environment.*

*Participating students will have prior experience in their school teams and will be selected according to skill and potential in leadership. The first game in the tournament will be played on Friday, Week 4, Term 2, with a grand final scheduled to take place Week 3, Term 3. The winning team will receive a scholarship with their local NRL Team and \$10,000 dollars towards their Physical Education programs.*

*Good luck and we look forward to hearing about your journey.*

*Adam Svenski, NRL Chief Executive Officer  
Shelly McField, NSW Department of Education*

Teams were supposed to be made of eight players – four from one school and four from a buddy school. Lucky us, our buddy school was in Cronulla. We argued loudly that we should change our buddy school, but Mr Archie wouldn’t budge, claiming that we’d learn a lot from different people and that the challenge would only make us better men.

The only thing I’d learnt about Cronulla was from my brothers and cousins who told me about the riots there and how ugly they’d been. Something about Arabs going swimming and checking out some chicks which somehow turned into an altercation with lifeguards which *then* turned into a mini civil war. I even Googled it and those images of angry faces with the Australian flag and sprays of alcohol was enough for me to know that it was always going to be Us vs Them, not Us with Them.

‘Why can’t the other half be from Greenacre?’ I argued. ‘They’re more like us and they have a good footy team, too. We know nothing about this Cronulla team.’

‘Everyone chosen in the program has some skill they can add to the team,’ Mr Archie assured us. ‘I know you’ll be able to play with the lads from Greenacre, but the real challenge is not only playing with a new team, but also to learn and grow and hopefully form new bonds.’

I *knew* this footy comp wasn’t just us kicking a ball around for fun. It was about showing the rest of Sydney that we could act like humans, even around our new white *friends* from the Shire.

‘We don’t need any more *bonds*,’ I said, bluntly. ‘Everyone at this school is enough and –’

‘I want new bonds,’ Ibby called out with his hand up. ‘If it means I miss Mr Sullivan’s science class, then give me all the bonds in the world, sir.’

Mr Archie stood up and opened the door. ‘Be ready on Monday morning or consider yourselves off the team and out of the school.’

‘How are we gonna get out of it?’ Huss asked me as we walked up the stairs. ‘He’s a bit psycho, hey?’

‘I don’t know, man,’ I answered, shaking my head. ‘We’ll just have to fake it and see what happens.’

‘Yeah, alright. We’ll just pretend to care and then eventually he’ll give up on us and leave. That’s what they all do anyway.’

I wasn’t too sure. All the other principals we’d had had been easy to read. Either they had wanted credit for being the one that could tame us or they wanted to use our ‘problem school’ to make their resumés more impressive. If they could handle us, that meant they could handle any school in Australia.

I headed over to English only to see Miss K standing outside with the rest of my class – the three other boys in Advanced English. There was Anwar, who called himself Hot Chocolate, and claimed he had a romance with a girl every summer when his family visited Pakistan. He had a hard time filling his clothes and his small frame only made him an easy target in the hallway. Rajiv, who had only one eyebrow and a thick moustache, always tried to convince me to join his Saturday cricket team because he once saw me swing a bat at a boy. He thought it would be good to have a non-Indian on the team. It didn’t matter that I thought cricket was the most boring thing ever. Abdullah’s family migrated to Australia from Somalia in the nineties. He was almost two metres tall and looked about forty-five

years old with a full-grown beard. Someone seriously needed to check his birth certificate.

‘We’ve been waiting for you,’ Miss K said, handing me a name tag. ‘We need to leave now.’

‘Wait, what?’ I said, trying to keep up with her. ‘Where are we going, Miss?’

‘The Poetry Slam Comp,’ Anwar answered from behind. ‘You know it starts today right?’

I stopped and stared at him for a good minute as I tried to remember when I had signed up for a poetry slam.

‘The one Miss told you about yesterday before lunch?’ Anwar continued. ‘Before the footy game?’

He always answered my question with another question, which meant he could never give me a straight answer. This only made me want to punch him.

I caught up to her and made up excuse after excuse but she ignored me. I felt the walls closing in. I was being pulled and pushed into too many different things I didn’t want to do.

‘C’mon, Miss, please,’ I begged. ‘I hate this stuff. You know I’m just going to sit there and do nothing.’

She stopped. ‘Tariq, you know I always listen to you whenever you come to me for help. I’ve done favour after favour for you. Now it’s my turn to cash them in. You owe me this.’

‘Cash them in for something else, Miss. Wallah it’s not fair.’

‘Stop being such a child. Haven’t you signed Mr Archie’s contract?’

She turned around and walked away with the other boys. I looked up at the sky and prayed that by some miracle it would fall on me.

We arrived at a place that was all too familiar – the girls’ high school up the road. Anwar brushed his shiny black hair one more time in his pocket mirror.

‘Hey, Uber. Do you think that hairdo is going to help you pick up any girls? Maybe you should bench a few before you try.’

‘Just wait and see,’ he said, smoothing his eyebrows.

I laughed. ‘For what? For you to get rejected in front of everyone?’

‘You know what, Tariq, get over yourself.’ He walked over to Miss K.  
‘Can you please tell him to stop calling me Uber?’

‘Tariq,’ she called out. ‘Show some respect.’

We walked across to the library where some of the other schools had already gathered. Everyone chatted beside a table of small sandwiches and a fruit platter. Anwar, Rajiv and Abdullah got in with the other nerds while I leaned against the wall, scrolling through my phone.

Huss: Heard you got stuck at a poetry thing with Miss K?

Tariq: Bro, I’m with Anwar and Rajiv too.

I hate my life.

Huss: 🤔 Suck tin. Wallah I’d pay to see you with them.

Tariq: Get stuffed. At least I’m at the girls school.

Huss: What? Da boys told me it was at some  
centre thing. Shit. Now, I wish I was there.

Have you seen Mariam yet?

Tariq: Shiiiiit. I forgot about her. Bro, she’s psycho.

Huss: Deaddddd. Bro I hope she finds you.

Tariq: Wallah you’re a dog.

Mariam was a girl who I’d talked to for like thirty seconds before I may or may not have ghosted her. She was what you’d call a stage-five clinger and had trouble getting over the fact that I wasn’t really into her.

Huss: Gotta go. This Archie guy is coming.

‘Tariq?’ I heard a familiar voice call.

I didn’t think things could get any worse.

‘Don’t act like you can’t hear me.’

I looked up to see Mariam standing with her group. She walked closer twirling her bright pink fingernails in her long black hair. ‘You stalking me, Tariq?’

‘Stalking you? Relax, I’m here for a poetry thing,’ I said, moving away.  
‘I’m being forced to be here.’

She smiled and stepped closer. ‘A poetry thing? How funny! So am I.’

I shuffled sideways until I saw Miss K walk in my direction. ‘Yes, Miss. I’m coming now.’

Miss K knew about the history between Mariam and me, and now she thought it would be funny to ignore my emergency call.

‘I *didn’t* call you, Tariq,’ she said with an evil grin. ‘It’s okay, we have about ten minutes before we head in.’ She looked at Mariam. ‘He’s all yours.’

I wanted to jump into the thorny bushes and save myself from listening to Mariam go on and on about how ‘every guy would die to be with her’ and that I was ‘lucky she didn’t call her brothers on me’.

Just then, behind the sandwich table, a familiar smile caught my attention.

Jamila May.

Her hair tied up perfectly, with a red ribbon falling to one side of her shoulder. Her eyes caught mine between the noise and chatter before she looked away.

If there was something to help ease the pain of being in this poetry slam, it was her.

I edged my way over. It was my chance to speak to this new girl – until Miss K popped back up in my face.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ she said ushering me away. ‘You owe me, and you’re here for poetry.’

‘Don’t think about what, Miss?’ I asked innocently. ‘You said I should get to know fellow students.’

‘Tariq, I’m serious. We’ve spoken about how poorly you treated Mariam.’

Okay, so Miss K knew most things about me because when I finished my work early, we’d talk about stuff like girls or what my goals were after I finished school. I asked her once about how to leave a girl who was like superglue. She told me to be up-front and honest with Mariam. I didn’t think I could do both, so I opted for honest rather than upfront, and then disappeared with no explanation.

I know, I know, it was a shitty move, but it wasn’t my fault she couldn’t read the signs. I mostly zoned out when she talked, I wouldn’t answer her

calls and never wanted to hang out. She finally got the point and stopped calling, but she still messaged here and there.

‘Miss, that was like ages ago,’ I said now. ‘Why are you still punishing me?’

‘It was two months ago, Tariq, and you *still* haven’t apologised properly to Mariam.’ Miss K confiscated my phone. ‘This is mine until you man up.’

I looked at Mariam and then at Jamila. My phone was too important to me. I walked back over to Mariam.

‘Look, Mariam, I know I ghosted you when we were hanging out, but I just didn’t know how to tell you that I didn’t like you. I’m sorry.’

Mariam shook her head disbelievingly. ‘*You’re* the one who asked *me* out. *You’re* the one who asked for *my* number.’

Mariam was that girl who didn’t care if anyone was around – if she had something to say, she’d say it. ‘You think I *want* to spend time with someone who can’t be bothered to pick up the phone?’

I felt flustered and just wanted her to stop talking. She was attracting attention from everyone around us. ‘Maybe you should stop texting me, then?’

She rolled her eyes. ‘Get over yourself, Tariq. I was trying to get you to own up to being a shithead. I don’t *need* you to like me.’

‘Okay, okay, that’s enough,’ a teacher said walking out from the library. ‘Show’s over, we have enough pregnancies. Praise the lord, we just saved another one.’

With that stupid smile on his face, it was like someone had given Anwar a million dollars. ‘Look who got rejected in front of everyone?’

‘Shut up, Uber. Don’t you have some deliveries to do?’

Miss K tapped me on the shoulder. ‘I know that was hard, but you deserved it. Do better next time. And you’ll get your phone back at the end of the session.’

I sat in the library and watched Anwar chatting up Jamila. They’d been paired together, while Miss K paired me with – surprise, surprise – Mariam. Even though she was still pissed at me, we were both forced to pretend we were working so that detention didn’t become our second home.

‘Did you have to yell that loud?’ I asked, flipping through some books. ‘Like, relax, yeah? I friggin said sorry, and you ate me.’

‘Look me in the eye and tell me you didn’t get what you deserved,’ she said, then took a deep breath. ‘It’s okay, we can start over now.’

Wait, what? Start over?

Miss K popped her head up and gave me a look to stay on task.

I nodded at her a few times before a woman came to stand in front of me. It was Mrs Pepper, the coordinator of the program. Her long white hair, streaked with green and blue, reached her hips. She wore a shirt with the word feminist af in bold, and had a dragon tattoo wrapped around her neck. I noticed that she was barefoot, and was rubbing her feet on the carpet.

‘Is this the boy?’ Mrs Pepper asked, tapping her pen on my head like I was her pet.

‘Yes,’ Mariam said.

‘Do you believe women only serve for your entertainment and pleasure?’ she asked.

‘Huh? Um, maybe?’ I answered, unsure whether I’d answered badly.

She stared at me for a while then a smile appeared on her face. ‘Come right this way. I need to reshuffle some pairs and I have just the perfect partner for you.’

I would rather work with anyone than Mariam and so I gladly stood up. She blew me a kiss and began twirling her hair again while she waited for her new partner.

Mrs Pepper stopped in front of Anwar and Jamila. ‘There’s been a change in plans, kids.’ She looked at the clipboard. ‘Anwar, you’ll be working with Mariam now.’ His jaw dropped and his eyes darted back to me.

‘But Miss, I don’t understand why I have to change partners? I didn’t even do anything. Can’t you pick someone else?’

‘Anwar, it’s not about you doing something wrong. It’s about partners who will challenge you. I think you and Jamila are both well-rounded students,’ Mrs Pepper said, before looking me up and down. ‘Some students need extra help.’

‘Yes, Miss. I need *heaps* of help,’ I said sarcastically.

Anwar walked off with Mrs Pepper and I was finally alone with Jamila. She continued to type and take notes while I sat there and tapped my fingers on the table. Everyone else talked about their ideas except us. I still didn’t

know what a poetry slam was, let alone what I was supposed to be doing in one.

‘Are you going to just sit there or actually contribute?’ she finally asked, her eyes still on her screen.

‘I’m Tariq, by the way.’

She looked up from her screen and down to my name tag. ‘You don’t say.’

*Okay, so she was going to play hard to get.*

A few more moments of silence passed before I tried to strike up conversation again. ‘So you from the area?’

She completely ignored the question and slid a sheet of paper towards me.

*You and your partner are to come up with a three-minute slam performance about the concept of PLACE. Examples may include your home, school, country or places from your childhood memories. You will use our weekly Wednesday meetings to work on your project. You may also meet in your own time. Any questions, see your teacher.*

‘I still don’t get it,’ I said sliding the paper back towards her. ‘If I were to talk about my home, I might as well describe Taronga Zoo.’ Jamila finally cracked a smile. ‘Tell the truth, aren’t you happy that Uber isn’t your partner anymore?’

‘Anwar and I actually came up with some good ideas,’ she said. ‘But now, since you don’t seem to know what you’re doing, I have to start all over again.’

Jamila turned her computer screen towards me and went through her notes. She talked with her hands and every so often her dimples flashed when she’d mention her home. She sat closer, and her knees sometimes touched mine. I could see three freckles on her thigh between the hem of her dress and her white socks.

‘So that’s basically it,’ she said. ‘That’s what we have to do.’

*Shit. I’d totally zoned out while trying to check her out.*

‘So, you know what to do?’ she asked, turning the screen back. ‘Or do I have to say it again because you couldn’t keep your eyes off my dress?’



‘Wait, what? What are you talking about?’ I straightened righteously in my chair.

She smiled sweetly, not buying it for a second. ‘My mistake. So, you know what to do for next week?’

‘Of course I do,’ I said, obviously lying. She kind of scared me a little.

Mrs Pepper came round and sat with us. ‘How we going here? Have you brainstormed some ideas for your slam?’

‘Well, *I* have,’ Jamila said. ‘But Tariq’s been too interested in staring at my dress.’

My face burned. ‘We’re men and sometimes we look. What’s the big deal?’

Mrs Pepper patted my knee like I was a puppy. ‘Real men can grow beards, honey. You’re just a boy trying to get the attention of a beautiful young girl who will run circles around you.’

## Chapter 7

The best part of any weekend should be sleeping in, right?

Yeah, not at my house and not with my family.

All my aunts and their friends were helping Mum with the food for Auntie Salma's arrival. I tried to ignore the banging pots and pans and the singing, burying my head deeper into my pillow.

My brothers and I all slept in the same room and shared one closet. Abdul's bed was in the middle, under the window, where he often copped pillows from the both of us when he snored too loudly. As the eldest, Saff had the prime location – in front of the TV, against the wall with his very own snot collection.

The singing got louder. I rolled over and cracked open my eyes to see a circus of women in my room. Auntie Heba – actually Dad's aunt – had the loudest voice in the world, and sang some Arabic song as the rest of them hammered pots in our doorway to get us up. Auntie Heba was partially deaf, so any conversation with her always set our ears ringing. We only saw her on special occasions or when someone was coming from overseas so she could collect the packages that had been sent with them to her. Then there was Em Youssef and Em George, our neighbours down the road who did that *lilililili* thing in their high-pitched voices like they were going to a wedding. Em Khaled and Em Adam were Mum's cousins from Liverpool, who worked full-time at Channel Even-Though-It's-None-Of-Our-Business-We're-Still-Going-To-Spread-Your-Secrets. Their friends randomly popped in as well, along with our neighbours, Mr and Mrs Wallace, with their platters of cheese and crackers.

*White-neighbour-food.*

It was a full-on Arab orchestra raging in our tiny bedroom. They thumped their wooden spoons on the pots right above our heads and yelled at us for staying up late, playing cards.

That was our typical Friday night. We'd sit outside under the pergola, fill the table with snacks and drinks, and play cards. Huss and I were usually

partners against my brothers, while Ibbby and PJ ate and kept score. Huss and I always secretly cheated, bribing Ibbby with food to change the score.

Mum now stood at the edge of our beds with a bucket of water, threatening to soak us if we didn't get up to help around the house. We shot out of bed, still in our boxers, which made the women scream and cover their faces with their hijabs – all except for Em George, who peeked a little. We sprinted to use the bathroom like we were in the Olympics.

We tackled each other to the ground, in front of the door, then Saff finally freed himself and made a break for it. I heard him fiddle around the bathroom, opening and closing the cupboards before he opened the door a crack. 'Bob? Get me toilet paper!'

See, whoever had the toilet roll was the one with the power to bargain.

Amira walked past holding the toilet roll in her hand. Abdul ran towards her, knocking the roll out of her hands before he tripped and face-planted onto the tiles. I saw Feda's foot poking out of her doorway. The roll was now in her hands.

'Come on, man, I'm busting!' Saff squawked from the bathroom.

Feda stepped over Abdul's body and waved the roll in Saff's face. 'Fix my car and it's yours.'

'Deal.'

I turned to Abdul who was groaning and clutching his face. 'If you were taller, this wouldn't have happened.'

We'd finished getting dressed when Dad and Uncle Charlie called us to join them in midday prayer under our mulberry tree. My brothers and I always tried not to pray together with Dad because he took way too long, one of us always tried to make the others laugh and Uncle Charlie always did something stupid.

Uncle Charlie finished making wudu and his face was still wet. He squeezed water from his beard and flicked it in Abdul's eyes. 'Real men don't use towels.'

'What does that even mean?' I demanded.

'He only does that to me because I'm short,' Abdul complained.

We'd lived with my uncle long enough not to question the random things he did and usually put it down to too many bee stings messing with his head.

Dad made me call the adhan before we began prayer. Everything was going fine – and then Uncle Charlie’s phone began to ring.

‘Alo,’ he answered it, halfway through our prayer.

Saff’s chin was now held against his chest as he tried his hardest to keep it together. Abdul was about to explode. I closed my eyes and tried to go to my happy place. Prayer was supposed to be a time to be closer to God, not to make business deals and sell honey. Dad cleared his throat loudly.

‘Yes, yes. This is Bee My Honey business,’ my uncle said proudly. ‘Yes, I have pure honey. Best honey that make you strong like man. Okay, okay. I come later cause I pray now. Sank you.’

He hung up and continued to pray like nothing had happened. Abdul let out a massive snort and Saff’s shoulders were moving like he was holding a jackhammer. Dad raised his voice louder, trying to remind us that we were in prayer until finally we finished and shook each other’s hands.

Amira stood behind my uncle with her arms folded. She was not impressed.

‘Ya Allah!’ Uncle Charlie jumped back, startled. ‘Where you come from?’

‘Khorloo? Did you just say “my business”?’ she said. ‘Don’t you remember our contract?’

Uncle Charlie stood up and hugged her tightly, laughing nervously. ‘You know what I mean. I mean for you...and little bit me? Okay?’

She smiled. ‘Okay.’

He looked back at us with his eyes wide. ‘She very scary.’

We packed the hasira away, but just before my brothers and I could make our getaway and play some Mario Kart, Dad called us over.

‘Today we pick your aunty from airport. So, no games and go help clean so we not late.’

Picking up a relative from the airport was a big deal for us. Instead of a handful of people going, like most normal people, every cousin in the area came along for the ride.

‘Yallah Abdul and Saff go help Khorloo fix chairs,’ Dad ordered. ‘Tariq, come with me, I want to talk to you.’ My brothers moaned and groaned before Uncle Charlie put them both in a chokehold and dragged them away.

Dad walked around the mulberry tree and picked a few for Mum. ‘She working very hard today.’

I nodded, unsure why I'd been summoned, until he began talking about Mr Archie.

'I like this man,' he says picking more mulberries. 'He tough and strong and knows what you boys need.'

'He's also made us join a footy team with some racists from Cronulla,' I retorted, tearing the ends of the leaves. 'So clearly he knows *nothing* about us.'

Dad's hands were pink and purple, stained with mulberry juice, as he gestured for me to sit beside him on the garden bench. 'I never raise you like this. I never raise you to stereo other people.'

'I'm not stereotyping, Dad. He could've chosen the boys from Greenacre, but he chose to put us with white people who hate us.'

'You see what I mean when I say you smart but dumb?' He shook his head, unaware that his white beard had blotches of purple. 'First, you never met these people and already you say they racist. You are racist.'

'What? No, I'm not.'

He turned to me and tapped my face a couple of times. 'You make a judge before you know people. I work with lots of different cultures and they show respect to me and my religion. Just because some are racist does not mean everybody racist.'

'Have you seen the videos online and on Instagram?' I asked. 'They're always saying to go back to our country and that Muslims are like cockroaches or like mozzies.'

He tapped my head again. 'Use brain that Allah gave you. Ya Tariq, didn't I raise you to be more respect?'

'Alright, alright, Dad. But wallah if they say anything, you know I'm not gonna shut up. I'll fight back.'

'Stop acting like baby,' he said. 'They probably make you like donut.'

I thought our heart-to-heart would get me out of mowing the lawn, but no such luck. Our lawnmower was really old, and when you used it for too long, it sounded like an army tank. Without fail, every few weeks, our mower was in repairs either because Abdul tried to run Saff over or Dad sucked up one of Amira's tools she'd left on the ground. We usually ended up borrowing Mr Wallace's from next door.

My brothers set up the tables and chairs for the night's feast under our vine-leaf pergola and all three barbecues were now lined up, ready to go.

We had a couple of plum and zaroor trees across our back fence that Amira picked for guests. Dad barricaded the part of the yard where he grew cucumbers, tomatoes, mint and parsley with a thin wired fence. If I wanted to stay alive, this section was not to be touched by the mower.

After hours of gardening and listening to women sing and dance as they cooked and cleaned, I finally had the chance to rest. Saff and Abdul were trapped with Uncle Charlie collecting honey from the hives, so it was my chance to have our room all to myself and play any videogame I wanted. Anything with guns were my go-to games when I wanted to forget about the world. I zoned out, killing off characters one by one, until I was the last one standing.

The day was almost over and it was time to head to the airport, three hours too early, to pick up Auntie Salma. Mum stood at the door and waited for each of us to leave, yelling that we'd somehow manage to be late. Feda rushed out of her room and put some lipstick on in the hallway mirror.

‘Yallah! Yallah! Yallah!’ Mum shouted. She sounded like an Arab siren.

My brothers ran out and fought over the mirror before Mum smacked them both over the head. She sprayed us all with perfume and pushed us out the door. She then rushed around the house, turning on all the lights and TVs so that a thief wouldn't be tempted to break in.

That was our highly effective security system.

All my cousins waited in their cars, parked in our neighbours' driveways and on the footpaths, beeping and shouting to get a move on. Dad started our 1985 Mitsubishi L300 Express van, and off we went, followed by the family motorcade.

We all had our designated seats: Amira sat between my parents and Uncle Charlie, Abdul and I sat in the middle row, which left Feda and Saff at the back. Dad fiddled with the radio until he stopped at Um Kalthoom, his favourite Arab singer.

Saff threw his hands in the air. ‘Not this again! I don't even understand what the hell she's saying!’

Dad swayed with the music and adjusted the radio before he explained the lyrics. ‘See here, she says that...that she have endless words in her heart...and...you are my bless and happy.’ It never made any sense to us but we had no choice but to pretend that we understood in order to get him to stop explaining.

Dad never took the M5 motorway, the quick and mostly painless route to the airport, because he believed it gave people cancer. Don't ask, I've never understood. Instead, he always went the long way around, through the suburbs, with a million more traffic lights which meant more music and singing.

Uncle Charlie now joined my dad, only he sang at the top of his lungs – not in time and not the right words. To make things worse, because we had all of Punchbowl following us, we had to pull over every five minutes to make sure all the cars made the lights and no one was left behind.

*God forbid anyone use Google Maps!*

We finally arrived at the airport and parked our cars. Everyone opened up their boots and took out bouquets of flowers and balloons, ten times too big.

Dad unwrapped a gigantic Australian flag and stuck it on top of the van through a hole he had drilled. He needed a quick and efficient method to find his van in the car park and apparently that was the best way to do it. My aunties and uncles clapped as though he'd thought of a brilliant idea.

Feda rubbed her head. 'I need to get out of this family.'

'Find someone who will marry you first,' I snickered.

'Khalas, Tariq,' Mum snapped in a hushed voice. 'Not here in front of people.'

Dad then pulled out his whistle. 'And this if anyone get lost. I will blow this so you can find –'

'Dad, isn't it supposed to be the opposite?' Feda interrupted. 'Shouldn't the person who's lost blow the whistle so we know where to find them?'

He stared at his whistle, then at her and shook his head. 'Why always you argue? Can't you just once say yes and agree?'

Amira let go of Mum's hand and ran over to me. I put her on my shoulders and off we went, ahead of the pack.

'Hey, Tariq, you know when I become a millionaire, I'm going to let you buy whatever you want,' she said from above. 'Even a Ferrari.'

'Really? How about a Lamborghini?' I asked looking up at her face.

'Don't be greedy or I'll give the car to Saff or Abdul.'

I tickled her behind the knees until she finally agreed to give me both hypothetical cars.

We looked like an army, marching into the airport, hurrying through the doors while people stopped and wondered what all the commotion was about.

Picture this: an Arab man with a whistle around his neck, surrounded by other bearded Arab men, yelling in Arabic, followed by more Arabs who were also yelling in Arabic.

To the outsider or the security guard calling for backup, it might have seemed a little terroristic, but it was just an extra-paranoid man, with a purple spotted beard, leading a bunch of men and women having a regular conversation twice as loud as average humans.

Dad blew his whistle a couple of times and waved his hands in the air. 'Yallah. Yallah. We're here. Everyone take seat.'

An old woman looked at me. 'What a strange man.'

'Hey! That's our dad,' Amira said, annoyed.

I pinched her leg. 'Don't listen to her,' I told the woman. 'She's adopted.'

We found a couple of seats while the rest of my family stood around and waited. The kids all ran up to the glass barrier to see who came through the arrival doors.

Dad walked around, counting everyone and marking them off his list.

*Yes, he carried a roll of names.*

Huss: Where you at?

Tariq: Airport. My Aunty's comin 2day.

Ibby: You guys doin a barby?

Tariq: Yeah.

Ibby: Done. I'm in.

PJ: I'm in too.

Huss: We'll be there when we see the smoke in your street.

Two hours went by with me answering Amira's 'Would You Rather?' questions until we heard my cousins shout with joy that she had arrived. Aunty Salma walked out pushing her trolley, with seven Louis Vuitton suitcases stacked on top of each other. She looked like an Arab movie star covered in jewellery and a face full of plastic surgery. She wore a bedazzled



denim onesie, which made her look like a disco ball. Aunty Salma stopped to take a couple of selfies in the middle of the ramp, then continued to push her trolley in her red high heels until she found us and waved.

The kids all ran up and bombarded her with hugs. You could tell she was uncomfortable by how she tried to shuffle out of their hugs. Next, Mum and all the women rushed up to her, suffocating her with flowers and balloons. They tried to do the whole three-kiss-and-hug greeting, but Aunty Salma thought it would be better to respond with air kisses. My uncles then took over the luggage before a mini-fight broke out as each tried to outdo the others, arguing over who would carry her suitcases.

If you didn't know us, you'd think Aunty Salma was getting kidnapped. Security ran up the ramp, explaining to my family that they needed to wait until people reached the bottom. There was a massive line of people wanting to get out and my family were blocking the way.

My brothers and I waited until she walked over to greet us. She looked like she'd come out of a tornado. Her red lipstick was smudged and her long black hair was a mess.

Dad blew his whistle one more time and we gathered outside the doors. He counted us and marked off his list and back we paraded to our van. It was only when we were halfway home that Dad realised that the Australian flag was still stuck on top of the van, flapping in the breeze.

Aunty Salma sat between Abdul and me, still trying to catch her breath. Her arms were clutched to her chest and she looked around our van like it was a moving rubbish tip. Mum asked about her flight and how everyone was doing in Lebanon, in particular my grandparents. The last time Mum had visited Lebanon was before Amira was born, so she wanted to know every detail – details my aunty couldn't be bothered to share.

'Don't tell me you still have those bees, brother?' she asked Uncle Charlie in her American accent.

'Yes, Amira and I have business,' he replied proudly from the backseat. 'MashAllah, is doing very well. I show you when we get home.'

'No,' she said, looking in her compact mirror. 'I don't want to go anywhere near them.'

Uncle Charlie's smile slowly disappeared and his shoulders slumped. 'Okay. Up to you.'

Saff leaned forward and whispered in my ear. ‘Man, she’s savage. I feel like we should say something for Khorloo.’

I nodded.

A couple of minutes went by in silence before Saff leaned forward again. ‘I meant *you* should say something.’

‘Why me?’

‘Cos I’m the oldest and you have to listen. Plus, Uncle C always has our back. He gave us money to buy the PS4 remember?’

I took a deep breath. ‘You know, Khala, you can save a lot of money with Khorloo’s bees?’

‘What do you mean, Tariq?’ Aunty Salma asked.

‘Like, instead of all the botox you get on your face, you could just get some of his bees to sting you.’

I could hear my brothers try to hold their laughter while Mum shook her head at me in the rear-view mirror.

‘I don’t do botox,’ Aunty Salma said. ‘It’s a new treatment in Beirut that only certain people can afford. So no, I don’t need my brother’s cheap bees.’

My uncle patted my hair a few times. Mum still stared at me through the mirror.

We arrived home, and the women rushed out of the cars and ran inside to get everything ready. The men sat around the tables, smoked a few packets and waited for the food to be set up.

‘Yallah, food is ready,’ Dad called out, officially opening the buffet.

People leaned over each other, filling their plates as Uncle Charlie threw sizzling chicken from the barbecue onto their plates. Even though Aunty Salma insulted him almost every minute, he still fixed her a plate of food with extra tabouli. The kefta and lamb skewers almost took out a couple of people’s eyes and the tabouli was gone before you could bat an eyelid. Aunty sat in the middle of everything, which meant that not only did everyone lean over her to get more food, but also that garlic oil dripped into her hair. My cousins laughed and ate while Mum ran from one side of the pergola to the other, making sure everyone was looked after.

The boys arrived and wasted no time digging in. We sat away from the main crowd, under the mulberry tree, where my dad had set up some lights.

Ibby and PJ licked their fingers like they hadn't eaten in weeks then stole from Huss's plate when he wasn't looking.

'So I heard Mariam gave it to ya?' Huss asked with his mouth full.

Ibby cracked up. 'Bro, Uber put it on him too. Wallah that guy kills me.'

'First of all, no one "put it on me" and secondly, it worked out alright in the end,' I said, swinging on my chair. 'There's a girl called Jamila and she's now my partner for this poetry thing.'

'Is she hot?' PJ wiped the garlic oil from the side of his mouth with a piece of chicken.

'Yeah, but she's also different.' I had done a quick search for her online but I couldn't find any trace of her.

'Different how?' Huss asked. 'Like Mariam different?'

'Nah, not like Mariam. I don't know, man. If anyone put it on me, it was her.'

Ibby slid my plate his way. 'Bro, I wanna meet this girl now. The only girl in Punchbowl who's put it on Tariq. I already like her.'

Feda came over and sat with us. 'If someone tells me one more time to be more like my cousins who are married, I'm going to explode.'

'But you should've been married by now,' I said. 'You're getting older you know.'

'Watch your mouth bro,' Huss said. 'Don't talk to your older sister like that.'

Huss was always around women at home and treated Feda like she was his sister. Feda and Huss always talked when he came over. She was the oldest in our family, and when Huss's dad left, she basically took care of him like a younger brother. Feda would help with his homework, and when Huss's mum was too busy working at Big Haji's shop, she'd sit in for parent-teacher interviews.

'I'm studying and working,' she said now. 'I don't have time to deal with the whole marriage thing.' She shook her head. 'Wait, why am I even explaining myself to your fat head?'

All the boys nodded and Huss gave Feda a high five. 'How do you live with that head? Wallah I'd knock him out if he spoke to me like he spoke to you.' I knew Huss was just adding fuel to the fire so I kicked him a few times under the table.

‘But he’s the golden boy!’ she mocked. ‘God forbid he treats people like humans instead of his slaves.’

‘Hey, hey,’ Ibby interrupted. ‘Wallah I luv ya, Feda, but Tariq’s my boy, man. He’s done stuff for me and all of us that I won’t forget. But yeah, he does have a big head.’

They continued to make fun until Dad came over with more food. ‘You need to be strong for sport camp. And Huss, I tell Mr Archie if you make any trouble, for him to call me.’

*Damn! I’d completely forgotten about camp.*

‘I don’t want to go, but this Archie man, he’s different,’ Huss complained. ‘Especially how he’s been spying at our school for all of Term 1 and we didn’t even know. I don’t trust him.’

‘Why don’t you boys actually try doing what he says?’ Feda pointed out. ‘I don’t know if you guys know, but another article came out and the school is in a lot of trouble. It’s not a joke.’

Huss scowled but didn’t say anything.

Ibby laughed out loud. ‘I can’t wait for our holiday camp. No school, no seeing my family. Bro, I’m just gonna sit and chill.’

PJ stood up and rested his hands on his stomach. ‘Man, your mum makes the best food. I’m going inside to pack some for tomorrow.’

Ibby stuffed in a few more bites of tabouli before he jumped up and followed him.

‘I’m not scared of Mr Archie you know?’ Huss muttered. I nodded and smiled, too tired to argue. It wound him up anyway. ‘I’m serious. I’m not!’ he said, standing up. ‘It’s just he came to the shop on Friday and told Big Haji about some of the stuff I’ve done. She was so upset. Wallah if something happened to her, I was going to kill him.’

Feda stood up as well. ‘Relax, Huss. Just give it a shot, yeah?’ She patted his back and gave me a look to keep my mouth shut. ‘Do it for Big Haji, even if you won’t do it for yourself. Think about how hard it’ll be for them if you have to go to another school, further away. Who’d help your mum and grandma if you’re sitting around on a bus all day?’

My brothers came over with a few of my cousins before Huss could say anything else and challenged us to a game of backyard footy.

‘First to five wins,’ Abdul said, throwing the ball to me. ‘Feda will ref.’

‘Loser has to go with Uncle Charlie to his dentist appointment tomorrow,’ I said.

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## Chapter 8

My alarm clock shook me out of my peaceful sleep at 4:30 a.m. My brothers tossed around in their beds, mumbling as Dad flicked the light switch on and off until I got up.

‘Yallah, yallah,’ he called. ‘I have to leave for work so I take you with me.’

Before we headed out, Mum got up and gave me one final hug.

‘Mum. I’m only two hours away,’ I reassured her as she held me tight. I saw her eyes light up, and knew what she was thinking. ‘No, Mum. You can’t visit.’

Her eyes began to fill with tears and she kissed me again as Amira walked out of her room, rubbing her eyes. ‘Tariq, you going now?’

I knelt down and hugged her. ‘Yeah, Bob. Make sure you don’t burn the house down.’

‘Get me something nice,’ she whispered.

‘I’m trying to sleep here!’ Feda shouted from her room. She’d just started a run of night shifts and was especially sensitive about her sleep these days. Abdul and Saff yelled from their beds, ‘Piss off already!’

It was still dark outside and I could hear the garbage truck a couple of streets away. Dad walked me to school, reminding me at each step what he expected of me.

‘You are Muslim, Tariq. You need best behaviour and show respect,’ he said. ‘If I think this Mr Archie was bad, believe me, I take you out of this school and put you somewhere else.’

‘Dad, I feel like he doesn’t let things go. It’s like, he’s been here for a week and it’s just been lecture after lecture about everything we do wrong,’ I said. ‘We do stuff right, too.’

‘Then show him the right stuff. Please Tariq, I expect you be good and remind boys, especially Huss, to control anger. You not animals, okay?’

He hugged me goodbye and left. I walked over to where Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed waited under the flickering streetlights outside our school.

‘Mornin’, Tariq,’ Mr Archie said, shaking my hand. ‘I thought you would’ve changed your mind.’

‘Why? Did I have a choice?’

He laughed to himself. ‘Ahh, this is going to be a fun week.’

I sat on the brick wall beside our flagpole. Huss and PJ arrived, headphones on, too tired to talk. A speeding car came flying around the corner and slammed the brakes in front of us.

‘Hurry up! Get out of the car, ya jahash,’ I heard Ibby’s brother yell.

Ibby tumbled out of the car, trying to grab all his things before his brother sped off with the music pumping. He wore a Bulldogs jersey, black shorts and thongs like we were still in the middle of summer. Ibby always overheated, even in subzero temperatures.

‘Shoo, we ready, sir?’ he said with a spring in his step. ‘Where are my new white friends?’

Mr Archie tilted his head to a blue bus parked across the road. It was them, all four Cronulla boys with their families.

‘Be nice,’ Mr Ahmed warned as we all walked over. He wasn’t coming to camp with us – he had to make sure the other boys didn’t blow up the school.

Some of the Cronulla mums stared at us as we approached. They were probably trying to figure out if they’d seen us on the news in a report about terrorism.

We shook the other boys’ hands and introduced ourselves, but that was about it. We huddled in our separate groups until they told us it was time to get on the bus. Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed tried to get us all talking, but we just eyed each other, trying to figure out where we all stood. I started sussing out the Cronulla boys as we waited.

Target one was Matt Shelton, a blond, shaggy-haired and tanned boy, hunched over in his trackies and brown ugg boots. He had a surfer vibe and even smelled like the ocean. He chewed the inside of his cheek as he looked around with bright blue eyes like he’d been dropped from outer space. He looked nervous.

Next was Lee Lin, a weirdly tall East Asian boy who looked like one of those giant inflatable tube men you saw outside of car dealerships. He wore red glasses. I couldn’t work out how he was supposed to play in a footy team – I’d only ever seen Asians play video games, never rugby league.

Riley Mascot was target three. He wore a red beanie and had extra-pale skin, so pale that he almost looked transparent. He also looked like he hadn't slept in months, with huge grey bags under his eyes. He held a book under his arm as he huddled close to Matt and Lee.

And then there was the other guy. Aaron Furner. The only boy who didn't look at us when he shook our hands. He seemed angry, like we'd already done something to piss him off. Hiding under his grey hoodie, he stood a few metres away with his mum, his back towards us. He wasn't standing with his own team, either. His mum was tall, thin and blonde, and looked at us like we were a bad smell.

This guy was going to be a problem. I could feel it.

Mr Archie opened the luggage compartment of our minibus, and Aaron shoved me aside to chuck his bags in before mine. I turned back to see if anyone else had noticed. Mr Archie tapped me on the shoulder, clearly expecting me to ignore it.

*So this was how it was going to be?*

I obviously needed to show Aaron who was the alpha male, but I definitely couldn't do that in front of Mr Archie.

Our bus driver, a tiny old woman named Beth with smudged pink lipstick, had a cigarette hanging from the side of her mouth. It felt like a sauna inside, the heating turned up way too high.

'Hey twits! Make sure you don't dirty the place, I just got her cleaned,' she yelled as we boarded. She sounded like she had swallowed a chimney.

Ibby sat in front of me, fiddling with his seat belt and praying we'd get to camp in one piece. We all looked up as Mr Archie began to lay out the rules and expectations of the camp.

'Whether you like it or not, you're all on the same team now,' he finished. 'So, I suggest you get used to that.'

I leaned my head against the window as the sunlight slowly hit the rooftops and reflected off windows. Everyone was too sleepy to talk. Huss snored loudly in his seat, PJ plucked a few bars on his guitar and Ibby made himself a lafet labna with zaytoon. I turned to watch the other boys. Aaron sat at the front of the bus on his own, like he was avoiding everyone.

It had only been half an hour and I already wanted to head back home. The old bus rattled and shook and I could taste its fumes slowly seeping through the windows. Beth drove like she was being chased by the cops,



and it felt like she was dipping into every pothole she could find. Mr Archie tried to get her to calm down, but that only worked for a few minutes before she was back to stunt driving. I could hear Matt begin to make some weird sounds. He rested his forehead on the seat in front of him and then called to Mr Archie. The principal gave him a vomit bag.

‘Just breathe, lad,’ he said. ‘If we need to stop, I’ll tell her to pull into a service station.’

I picked up my things and moved a few seats towards the back. Matt’s face didn’t look good and his groans grew louder.

Huss woke up. ‘What’s happening?’

‘It’s this Matt guy, man,’ Ibby answered. ‘Wallah I think he’s going to vomit. Boys, you know what happens to me if I see or smell that stuff.’

And then it happened. Matt vomited all over the floor near Ibby’s feet. Ibby pulled his legs up with a scream, which freaked Beth out. The bus swerved into oncoming traffic and Mr Archie leaped to help steer it back to safety.

Ibby meanwhile yelled at Matt to move away. I could hear Matt apologising to Ibby through bouts of vomit. PJ began to gag, unable to handle the smell when Riley and I helped Matt away from Ibby and sat him down closer to the front of the bus. Huss, now wide awake, filmed a panicked Ibby pleading to get off the bus.

Beth finally pulled over. We hustled off the bus and took deep breaths of the fresh air while Beth and Mr Archie sorted out the situation on the bus. Matt went to the toilets at the servo to clean up while the rest of us sat on a bench.

Well, not all of us. Aaron stayed on the bus, his face still covered by his hoodie.

‘What’s the deal with that Aaron guy?’ I asked Riley and Lee. ‘Is there something wrong with him? Like, he doesn’t seem normal?’

‘It’s because he’s an alien from outer space,’ Lee said with a wide grin. ‘He’s been sent here to collect information and report back to his –’

‘He’s fine,’ Riley interrupted. ‘He’s just probably tired.’

PJ stared at Lee blankly and then back at me. ‘Don’t tell me that I have to share a room with this guy and his dumb jokes.’

Lee laughed to himself. ‘I think my jokes are funny.’

‘He doesn’t like Arabs,’ Huss said in Arabic. ‘That’s why he’s still on the bus.’

‘Yeah, probably,’ I replied. ‘Let’s just wait until we get to camp. I swear I don’t think these boys play footy.’

Huss nodded. ‘Like look at the Chinese one,’ he said, still in Arabic. ‘There’s no way he can run with those spider legs and catch a footy.’

PJ walked over and joined the conversation. Except PJ couldn’t speak Arabic. ‘I don’t think the Chinese one and the small kid play footy,’ he said in English. ‘I think we’re screwed and this is just some dodgy plan from Mr Archie. Huss was right.’

‘We can hear you.’ Riley shook his head.

‘Look, I get it,’ Lee added. ‘I’m this lanky Asian guy – I’m Vietnamese, by the way, not Chinese – and I wear glasses and look like I’m more into video games than footy.’ He took off his glasses and cleaned them on his shirt. ‘I do like video games more than footy, but that doesn’t mean I can’t play. You should check out my YouTube channel AsianInvasion04. I have over –’

‘Oh my god, Nintendo, shut the hell up!’ PJ cried.

Mr Archie came back with Matt, who slouched against the bus, still holding his stomach. His blond locks were pressed flat against his face. ‘Lads, we’re already running late, so we need to hop back on so we don’t miss the morning induction.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ Matt said again to Ibby. ‘I didn’t mean to scare you, dude.’

Ibby nodded before hurrying on the bus. ‘No one sit next to me. I wanna sleep.’ He sat as far away from Matt as possible. The bus still smelled of puke.

We finally survived the road trip from hell to arrive at a place called Nooralong Camp, surrounded by large open fields. The car park was full of other buses, and we dragged our bags through the main entrance to an open hall where the other schools had already assembled. We looked and smelled like we’d come out of a swamp. The woman onstage welcomed us to an awkward broken applause just as someone shouted ‘What’s that smell?’

‘Your mum!’ Ibby shouted back before Mr Archie gave him a death stare.

The woman then suggested that we all head to our cabins to settle in and get ready for the day's events. I didn't know how I was going to survive the week with this team if a simple bus ride had been so dramatic.

The sign on our cabin door read: THE F TEAM. It didn't sit well with Ibbey.

'They give us the letter F, like in F for FAIL! Is it because we're from Punchbowl?'

Mr Archie tried to explain how ridiculous his theory was, pointing out that the other half of the team was from Cronulla.

Teaming up Punchbowl and Cronulla was a recipe for disaster. It had failure written all over it. Ibbey might be as dim as an avocado, but I didn't think he was that far off the mark after all.

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## Chapter 9

I knew Mr Archie had an idea that camps were supposed to be a time when boys bonded, got to know each other, built campfires, held hands, sang songs and became best friends.

The man had been watching too many cheesy kids' movies.

On that first day, we arrived late enough that we didn't get a chance to have breakfast. The pink-and-black jerseys and shorts that waited on our beds were just icing on the cake. Mr Archie shouted like a drill sergeant until we all put on the ugly new kit and left our cabin. Matt felt better since he'd gotten off Beth's death-bus, but he was jumpy about going near Ibby after Ibby had repeatedly threatened him during the vomit episode. The other boys at camp whistled at our hot-pink uniforms.

As well as a colour-coded uniform, each team was assigned their own camp instructor. The F Team's instructor was Captain Black, whose biceps burst out of his shirt and whose calves looked like they had swallowed watermelons. He was an American ex-Navy SEAL, and liked to be referred to as Captain Black as though he was some sort of superhero. Mr Archie sat back as we were put through test after test until our muscles ached and our bodies almost gave up. It wasn't that I was unfit, but I'd never had to swing on ropes, roll in the mud or run fifty laps around a field like I was training for a war. Captain Black blew his whistle and yelled in our faces when we complained of exhaustion. Mr Archie kept notes on a clipboard and was going to decide at the end of camp which position we would be playing in the team based on our attitude and performance.

As it turned out, Aaron also wanted the halfback and captain position.

*Over my dead body.*

'He's good, bro,' Huss and Ibby kept telling me in Arabic. 'And he's a little dodgy, too. He keeps close to Archie like he's trying to score extra points to be captain.'

So not only did I have to survive Captain Black's drills, but I had to keep a close eye on Aaron and make sure he didn't claim my spot on the team

while my back was turned.

‘I don’t think they really know how to play,’ PJ said to me again, trying to tame his afro in a top knot. ‘Like, look at that Riley kid – he uses a puffer.’

‘Yeah, so?’ Ibbby asked. ‘I use one too if I need to breathe better.’

I could see what was weirding PJ out, though. Even though Matt, Lee and Riley were on their school footy team and knew the game well, there was something missing in their style of play. If a play went wrong, they’d just pat each other on the back and say things like ‘Good try’. On the other hand, we wanted blood if things went wrong, especially PJ, who had been told a million times to ‘Calm down and stop choking Huss.’

‘Use your anger to drive you forwards, not backwards,’ Captain Black yelled. ‘Right now, I’m seeing a bunch of guys who look more like a circus than a football team. Remember, you have this week to show me that you can stick together no matter what comes your way.’

Huss rolled his eyes. ‘Does he know we’re only playing along so we don’t get expelled?’

‘Wallah that Captain Black guy is doing my head in,’ Ibbby said, trying to catch his breath. ‘I thought I was going to chill at camp. Khara, I’d rather be back at school eating manoush.’

‘Let’s just get through this week and cruise when we get back to school,’ I said, watching the other teams train. Their sessions looked more relaxing than ours. None of their instructors were yelling or throwing balls at their heads.

Aaron was still mostly keeping to himself, but whenever we’d pass each other on the field, he kept *accidentally* shoulder-checking me.

*Anger management strategy no. 4: Respond when you’re calm.*

Enough was enough. It was time to have a little chat.

‘Ey, watch it, yeah?’ I said as I stopped the ball with my foot. Mr Archie was on the other side of the field. ‘I know what you’re trying to do and if your shoulder touches me again, I’ll drop you.’

He sneered at me and kicked my foot away. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. And I’d like to see you try to drop me.’

Huss, Ibbby and PJ stood behind Aaron, covering me from Mr Archie’s view.

‘You know it’s not worth it, right?’ Lee broke in as he fixed his shorts. ‘Like, what’s going to happen? You two punch each other and feel all macho for a minute, but then you *both* lose the chance to be captain.’ He then grinned and widened his eyes like a serial killer. ‘Actually, you *should* punch each other. Then I’ll swoop in and become captain.’ He picked up the football and walked off.

Aaron and I were so close that I could feel his breath on my face. My fists were clenched and I wanted more than anything to dropkick his head over the posts.

‘Archie’s watching,’ PJ warned, pretending to stretch. ‘Another time, Tariq.’

‘Lads!’ we heard Mr Archie yell. ‘What’s taking so long?’

Aaron shook his head and pushed through us. Riley and Matt followed, trying to talk to him, but he brushed them off and jogged towards Mr Archie.

‘Man, Nintendo is weird,’ PJ said. ‘But he was right, you know. Get that captain badge and show that jahash the Tariq that smashed the finals last year.’

‘We’ll get him another time,’ Huss promised. ‘Play it low.’

Dad’s words echoed in my mind. *You smart but dumb*. Now was not the time to give into my anger, but to play smart and stay controlled. Aaron was just trying to get a rise out of me so he could steal the captaincy.

The weather was warming up and Captain Black announced our next activity: hiking.

‘Nah, I’m not doing that,’ Ibby said, shaking his head. ‘I don’t do heights and mountains and walking up things. I have a medical certificate, sir.’ He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and waved it around. ‘See? It’s right here.’ It was obviously from one of the dodgy Lakemba doctors we all went to if we needed to miss a test or an excuse not to go to class.

Before Ibby could blink, Captain Black snatched the certificate and tore it to pieces.

‘Did you see any certificate?’ he asked Mr Archie as the pieces flew away. ‘I know I didn’t.’

Ibby’s clutched his chest, gobsmacked. ‘Um, because you ripped it?!’

‘Don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Captain Black said, and walked off as though nothing had happened.

We all laughed – except for Aaron. His face stayed stony cold and still.

*What was with this guy?!*

We trekked up the steep track, using long sticks to keep our balance. The ground was bumpy and uneven. PJ lost his temper, kicking rocks and bits of wood.

‘Take control of your anger,’ Captain Black advised. ‘Tell your body that you’re walking along the beach. C’mon guys, this is a cakewalk.’

‘Something’s wrong with him,’ Ibby puffed, leaning against a tree. ‘I’m serious. He needs to get his head checked.’

‘Just breathe, mate,’ Matt said, putting his hand up for a high five. ‘You can do this.’

‘Piss off, man.’ Ibby brushed his hand away. ‘If you try to high five me again, I’m going to launch you over the mountain.’

‘I wanna go back down,’ PJ complained. ‘There’s no *point* to this. How’s it going to help our footy skills?’

‘It’s spending time with your team so you can get to know one another before you start your big games,’ Mr Archie replied. ‘We still have lots to do, and we don’t want to be the only team that fails the program.’

It seemed like we were never going to get to the top of the track. The mountain just got steeper. Huss started muttering about some plans to get Aaron out of the way.

‘I’ll push him off the mountain when no one’s looking. Who’s going to know?’

‘Literally everyone here,’ I answered. ‘Look, I don’t want to waste too much attention on him. I’ll get it done my way.’

Huss nodded but didn’t say anything.

We finally reached the top of the track as Captain Black and Mr Archie lectured us about ‘team effort’ and what we needed to do to make this team *successful*.

‘And would you look at that view, lads,’ Mr Archie exclaimed, like we gave a damn about some trees and the river below while our feet throbbed. He took a few photos to use for our school image upgrade. Too bad most of them had our middle fingers raised.

Captain Black unpacked his bag and placed some helmets and rope on the ground. He picked up a harness. ‘Okay, I need a volunteer.’

Mr Archie looked at me and Aaron. ‘Remember, to be captain of this team you’ll need to make sure the lads stick together no matter what.’

‘A volunteer for what?’ Huss asked wiping the sweat from his beard. ‘Aren’t we walking back down?’

‘Yes,’ Captain Black said, smiling. ‘We’re walking *down* the mountain.’ He gestured to the rock face that dropped away from the track.

Ibby stood up and clung to Mr Archie. ‘I can’t, sir! I can’t! Wallah I’ll die! Please don’t make me do this!’

Captain Black spread out the equipment, unfazed. ‘The only way you could convince me to exempt you is if you had a doctor’s certificate. Then I’d be obliged to listen.’

Mr Archie laughed quietly to himself as Ibby spluttered and Captain Black walked over to Riley to give him a helmet. ‘You’ve been pretty quiet. You can go first. Take off the beanie and put this on.’

Riley also seemed hesitant to go. ‘Can’t I just leave my beanie on?’ ‘Can’t wear a helmet over a beanie,’ Captain Black replied. ‘No grip. Anyway, it’s too hot. I don’t want you overheating with your beanie on.’

We all watched as Riley was strapped into a harness. I noticed that his hands and knees were trembling even though he never mentioned any fear of heights. He turned his back to us as Captain Black gave him the helmet, and then he took off his beanie.

*Oh. My. God.*

His hair was as white as snow, like an old man. I’d never seen a kid my age lose the colour from his hair.

‘Is he sick?’ Ibby whispered.

‘He was born like that,’ Matt answered. ‘That’s why he wears the beanie.’

Now I understood why Riley had turned his back – he didn’t want to see our reactions.

‘So, you have white hair?’ Captain Black said, unbothered. ‘You should embrace and celebrate your differences. It’s what makes you unique.’

I clicked my fingers in Ibby’s face until he stopped staring. ‘I think you look cool without the beanie,’ Lee said. ‘I told you, you could be in an X-Men movie.’

‘Okay, okay,’ Mr Archie said, giving us a look to change the subject. ‘Let’s just do this and head back so we can have a bite to eat, lads.’



One by one, everyone had their turn to abseil down the mountain, until it was just Ibby and me left. I spent twenty minutes trying to convince him that it was safe and nothing bad was going to happen. Captain Black eventually got fed up with his whimpering and crying. He forcefully strapped the harness onto Ibby's body and dragged him to the edge. Ibby dropped back, screaming that he was going to die.

He didn't die of course, but Huss recorded him crying and yelling about how much he loved his mum. I strapped in, met Ibby halfway down the rock face, and helped him reach the bottom.

Mr Archie shook my hand and smiled. 'Well done, Tariq. That's what I want to see more of.'

PJ helped me up as the boys cheered for Ibby. Aaron's face remained still and cold. I'm not going to lie, it felt good to be praised by Mr Archie.

We headed back to the main hall where lunch was being served. It was the first time we saw the other teams up close. There were eight teams altogether, A through H. The four teams with the most points at the end of this term would make it to the semi-finals in Term 3.

We saw some of the Greenacre boys sitting with their buddy team and they looked like they were all getting along. We chatted for a bit, and they said that their morning had been pretty cruisy and their instructor was heaps laid back.

'Our one's from hell,' Ibby said, before describing what had happened on the mountain. 'Wallah, I believe he's Shaytaan's brother.'

'Okay, lads stop the chatter and go and get some food,' Mr Archie said, breaking us up. 'Maybe get to know your own teammates instead of lads from the area.'

We were waiting for food, exhausted and hungry, when a group of boys pushed in. Lee tried to explain that there was a line, but they ignored him.

'Hunter, just go wait like everybody else,' Riley protested. 'We're tired and hungry and you're coming back for seconds.'

He was speaking to a stocky guy with red hair and a gap between his teeth that was wide enough to shoot a couple of goals through. 'Hunter Carter, Captain Team A' his name tag read. Jake and Scott, two dudes with ash-blond hair stood close to him like bodyguards. They pushed Riley around before yanking his beanie off and throwing it across the floor.

‘Who do you think you are, albino freak? You’ve grown some balls now because you hang around with some mozzies?’ Hunter jeered at Riley. ‘You and Noodles can piss off back to where you came from.’

I looked back at the Wolf Pack.

‘Trays or chairs?’ Ibby asked, scouting the place.

‘Definitely chairs,’ Huss said.

‘Nah, I think trays,’ PJ countered.

We left the line and confronted Hunter and his goons. To our surprise, Matt, Riley and Lee were standing with us too. At this point, Aaron was the only one sitting at our table with his plate of food.

Huss took a deep breath. ‘Hey, ranga. Go back to the end of the line or –’

‘Or what?’ Hunter asked, with his chest puffed out and his nose up in the air. ‘You’ll blow us up?’

Huss’s beefy legs were shaking, the first sign of him losing it. I stood in support to make sure Hunter knew we weren’t messing around. ‘Give Riley his beanie back and go to the end of the line, you racist pig, or we’ll smash you and your friends.’

Lee came closer. ‘Archie’s outside.’

I turned to look for Mr Archie, but before I could blink, Huss grabbed one of the trays and smashed it over Scott’s head. Jake tackled Huss to the ground before I took Hunter by the shirt and threw him up against the wall. Ibby and PJ took care of the rest of their team as they ran from their table. Some instructors tried to stop the fight as the other schools gathered around and watched us turn the place upside down.

I still had Hunter pinned up against the wall and as I was about to throw a final punch, I turned to see one of the A Team boys charging towards me. Then Lee tackled him to the ground.

‘What the hell, Nintendo?’ I asked, helping him to his feet. ‘You almost killed yourself.’

‘I think I might have lost some feeling in my body.’ Lee wobbled, trying to keep his balance.

Mr Archie and Captain Black rushed in to stop the fight.

‘Those animals attacked us for no reason!’ Hunter cried out to his principal. Team A’s principal, Mr Wilson, was older than Mr Archie and had nothing like his muscles. He had a pointy nose and fluffy white eyebrows that hadn’t been brushed in years.

Huss now charged at Hunter but was stopped by Captain Black. 'Don't lie, you dog!'

'This sort of behaviour is unacceptable,' Mr Wilson said, hovering around Mr Archie and waiting to see his reaction. 'I demand that these boys be reprimanded and face the full consequences of their actions.'

'Bro, you started it,' Ibby yelled at Hunter. 'You took Riley's beanie and laughed at him.'

'They're lying,' Hunter replied. 'I was just getting food.' 'Everyone out!' Captain Black ordered. All the schools left except for Team A and Mr Wilson. 'That means you too, Mr Wilson.'

His face fell as he reluctantly left with his team. Clearly, he wanted to stick around and watch us get punished.

We sat and waited with icepacks as Mr Archie paced back and forth, trying to gather his thoughts.

'It's not their fault,' Lee finally piped up. 'Hunter's a bully who's been doing stuff like this for a long time. I don't know why he's even allowed to be in this competition.'

'I don't have control over other schools' decisions, lad,' Mr Archie said. 'We were supposed to pick students who either had potential or needed direction, which I guess explains why some of you were chosen, too.'

'But these guys were the first to throw a punch,' Aaron said dryly. It was clear to me now. He hadn't spoken the whole time, but as soon as the chance came to make me look bad, he took it.

'At least we stood up for your boys. You just sat there and ate while your team needed help,' I snapped back.

'So bashing people and leaving the cafeteria in a mess is what I was supposed to do?'

Aaron's close-lipped smile and his hands in his pockets only added to his smug attitude.

'Nah, bro,' PJ said to Aaron. 'You're missing the point. If anyone laid a finger on my boys, they'd be lucky to walk out of here alive.'

'So, murder is supposed to show that I've got your back?' Aaron asked, laughing to himself.

I turned to Riley who sat quietly. 'How haven't you punched him in the face yet? He watched you get put on by these guys, and now he's blaming us for sticking up for you?'

‘Enough!’ Captain Black shouted. ‘You used physical violence to deal with a problem and that’s unacceptable.’

‘I don’t want to be in this program anymore,’ Huss said, still angry, knees shaking. ‘I’m out. I don’t care what you do to me. It’s not like anything worse can happen that isn’t happening already.’

‘You think it’s that easy to leave?’ Mr Archie said, standing in front of him. ‘You will see this program through to the very end. I don’t *care* about what *you* want. You boys doing whatever you’ve wanted all this time is why we’re here in the first place.’

We were ordered to clean the hall before being placed under cabin arrest until Mr Archie came back with a verdict. We sat on our bunk beds in silence, and even though part of me hoped that we were just kicked out of the program, I knew that our school was too important just to give up.

‘Ey, Nintendo.’ PJ finally broke the silence. ‘You’re actually alright. I saw how you helped Tariq and took that kid out.’

‘Thanks,’ Lee said, beaming with pride. ‘You alright, Riley?’

‘I’m sorry, boys,’ Matt walked over with his head in his chest. ‘I should’ve helped, but Hunter is a psycho.’

‘All you ever do is say sorry,’ Huss said. ‘Next time, try actually doing something.’

Riley had his earphones in and was facing the wall when Ibby bounced onto his bed. ‘It’s not bad, bro. Like, your hair is actually different, but good different, yeah? Isn’t it, boys?’

‘Yeah, well,’ Riley said, pulling out his earphones and sitting up. I never noticed how small and frail his body was, but then anyone looks like that when compared to Ibby. ‘People call me a freak or “Snow Boy” most of the time. It’s why I keep my beanie on.’

‘Really?’ Ibby asked, confused. ‘They don’t call you Ghostbusters?’

I threw a pillow at Ibby. ‘Oi.’

Riley smiled, then shook his head. ‘No, they don’t.’

‘See boys, he can take a joke! Unlike *some* people.’ Ibby pointed to the top bunk where Aaron lay.

‘I know you’re talking about me.’ Aaron rolled over.

‘Shut up, Mayonnaise. I wasn’t trying to keep it a secret,’ Ibby retorted.

‘Mayonnaise?’ Matt asked.

PJ sniggered. ‘Cos he’s oily and white.’

Before Aaron could respond, Mr Archie walked in with Mr Wilson and the whole of Team A. Apparently, the only way to keep us both in the comp was to shake hands and apologise. We did it, not because we meant it and definitely not because we felt bad at all, but because we knew that we had a chance to smash their heads more on and off the field if we could stay in the comp.

‘It was the only way to keep you lads in,’ Mr Archie said once the other team had left. ‘I’m not going to dwell on the situation, but let me tell you one thing. If you ever lay your hands on anyone else in this program, you’ll all be expelled from both the program and your schools.’

Huss was still furious. It was as though all of Mr Archie’s words went in one ear and out the other.

‘Tariq and Aaron, outside with me,’ Mr Archie said. ‘We need to talk.’

He closed the door behind us. I could see the other boys’ heads peeking through the blinds.

‘I don’t know what’s going on between you two, but it has to stop, and it has to stop *right now*. You both have so much potential but are falling far short of the captain role.’

Aaron and I argued again, refusing to see eye to eye on anything Mr Archie was expecting from us, the ‘two potential leaders of this team’.

‘Enough. Show some respect towards each other,’ Mr Archie said in a stern voice. ‘And have some respect for *yourselves*. I’m not saying you have to be best friends, but at least be civil with one another.’

I felt like I was six years old again when Dad use to force me to shake hands with my cousins after a fight and apologise.

‘Aaron, you can go inside. I need to talk to Tariq.’ Aaron slunk into the cabin without a backward glance.

Mr Archie and I went for a walk to the footy field. He put his hand on my shoulder. ‘I admire your resilience and your courage for defending your teammates, Tariq. And heck, I can’t believe I’m saying this, Team A probably deserved it.’

*Wait, what?*

‘But rules are rules,’ he continued. ‘I was once a lad, too. Most of my youth was spent trying to survive the boys that targeted me on the streets, who were all three times my size. I was raised by a single mother in a

working-class neighbourhood in Belfast. It wasn't much different to Punchbowl.'

'So you had to watch the rich kids in neighbouring areas get all the glory, too?' I said.

'And all the local politicians shower them with gifts while my friends and I watched from the back gates. Yeah, I've been there, lad.'

'Didn't it make you want to punch them?' I asked, thinking about all these times our school had been left behind.

'Maybe at first. But then I realised I was only cutting my opportunities short,' he explained. 'They called us animals but it didn't mean we had to act like it. Words have power, Tariq. But their words can't define who *you* are.'

'So I should've just stayed quiet?'

'No, lad. Just don't swing chairs and trays,' he said with a bit of a laugh. 'See, my ma was a strong lady who didn't accept excuses. She told me I always had a choice in any situation: revenge or compassion. She said that revenge only served my own ego. It achieves nothing else. And now, I'm telling you the same. Just *think*, Tariq. That's all I'm asking you to do. Think before you act.'

'Your ma sounds like a ballsy lady,' I said. 'My dad always tells me that I'm "smart but dumb".'

'I know, lad. We talk on the phone.'

*Okay, that's not weird at all.*

My eyes followed the patterns of his sleeve tattoo until I saw a woman's face. 'Is that her?'

'Her seventy-seventh birthday. Right before she passed.' I looked at his tattoo again. 'And where's your dad on here?' 'I don't consider alcoholics to be worthy of a place on my body,' he said simply. He then told me the stories behind the rest of his sleeve tattoo: the Irish flag with two swords crossed just above some Celtic patterns that wrapped around his arm, along with a pair of shamrocks and a pot of gold with the quote 'See you on the other side'.

I wouldn't say that we hugged it out and it was all good. But for the first time since we'd met in our school hall, I felt like Mr Archie was a human being after all, and not just some spy sent by the government to make our lives miserable.



## Chapter 10

On the second day of camp, the organisers decided we should do a bushwalk. Which would have been fine, I guess, except that it *started* at 10 p.m.

We trained during the day, with Captain Black and Mr Archie trying to find ways we could work together. We did team-building exercises, like trust falls. They didn't work. We either dropped each other or couldn't get the timing right when someone was going to fall and then failed to catch them altogether.

We did a trivia quiz thing, where we had to answer questions about rugby league teams and the person who answered the most correctly got rewarded with a break – something this Captain Black guy didn't generally believe in. PJ won.

Now Day 2 was almost over, and the only thing left to do was the night bushwalk and campfire competition with the other schools. The first team to finish the trail and build a campfire near the river would win. The last team would have to make and serve breakfast to the rest of the schools in the morning.

All the teams met under the floodlights on the footy field and waited for the race to begin. When we passed Team A, Huss ran his finger across his neck.

Hunter nudged his mates. 'Hey, look at this rat. He thinks we're scared of him.'

Huss heard him, and doubled back. 'Khalas, Huss,' I said, blocking his way. 'I told you, we'll get him later. If you do anything stupid now, Archie will kill us. Everyone's watching.'

'Who cares about Archie?' he grunted, still trying to push towards Hunter with closed fists.

'Just relax, bro. We'll deal with it when the time's right.'

'You only care because you want to be captain,' Huss said with disgust. 'I thought we said we wouldn't take this sports comp seriously?'



‘I’m *not* taking it seriously. But remember what you told Dad this morning.’

Dad had called just after breakfast to check up on us.

‘See, Tariq, I knew you and Huss good boy. You make me very proud,’ he’d said. ‘Is Huss good? Does he have everything he need? Let me talk to him.’

‘Salaam, Uncle,’ Huss said.

‘Huss, you being good boy, yes?’ Dad boomed over the phone. My parents still act like it’s the olden days and they need to shout over the phone to be heard. Aaron huffed in annoyance and moved to the far end of the cabin. Fine by me – he should’ve kept moving, right out of the cabin.

‘Yes, Uncle,’ Huss answered.

‘You show other boys how Muslims behave. You show how we strong, clever. Good Australian.’

‘Wallah, yes, Uncle.’

‘You stay out of trouble. You make me so proud.’

Huss had rolled his eyes, but he was also grinning. ‘Yes, Uncle. Nothing to worry about.’

Ibby snatched the phone. ‘Uncle, we didn’t use trays and chairs to smash some guys. That didn’t happen, yeah?’ He smiled till his eyes disappeared, then he gave us a thumbs up like he had everything under control.

PJ and Huss tackled him to the ground while I pretended that the reception was cutting out and hoped Ibby had spoken too quickly for Dad to understand. ‘I’ll call you tomorrow, Dad. Salaam.’

‘Alright, alright,’ Huss said now. He hated disappointing my dad, so I knew I could rely on him not to start shit this very second. It wasn’t just enough to get Hunter back – we also had to get away with it and leave no clues that lead back to us.

‘Trust me, his time will come and we’ll destroy him – *without* anyone pointing the finger at us.’ I turned Huss around and we caught up with the rest of our team.

Captain Black gave Aaron and me each a torch. ‘These two will be your leaders and the only source of light you’ll have to guide you through the bush.’

‘Unlike the hiking or abseiling we did yesterday, this challenge requires you lads to work as a team and figure out how to make it to the finish line

in complete darkness,' Mr Archie explained. 'Which means no fighting, no arguing, and if things get hard, *talk* to each other. Captain Black and I will be waiting on the other side for you. Good luck.'

'Have you done bushwalks before or lit a campfire?' Aaron asked me. 'Or don't you people do that?'

'Nah, *we people* have never started a fire or walked at night,' I replied sarcastically.

'Relax, it's just a question.'

'Can we hurry?' Ibby asked hopping up and down. 'Wallah, I think a spider crawled down my top.'

'Does anyone have any ideas?' Aaron asked, accidentally flashing his light in PJ's face.

'Are you normal?!' PJ yelled. 'You friggin' blinded me!'

'Why doesn't one of you lead at the front and the other bring up the back, and that way we'll be surrounded by light?' Riley suggested.

'Yeah, maybe...' I said. I didn't want to follow Aaron anywhere. I wanted to say I'd go in the front, but I didn't really know which way we needed to go. 'Who's got a good sense of direction?'

Lee hovered near the edge of the bush and sniffed a few times. 'Can you smell that?' There was something funky in the air, like the socks Abdul left in his gym bag for weeks.

Huss shoved Ibby. 'Take a shower, bro.'

'What? It's not *me!*' Ibby protested.

The starting flag waved high in the air and the other teams took off, rushing into the bush. No one wanted to be the team to wake up extra early to cook and serve breakfast. The other teams seemed like they had figured out some sort of plan, and here we were waiting for PJ to be able to see properly again.

Matt walked a few metres further into the trees, then called back to us. 'It's the smell of mangroves. That means the river is nearby.'

'All we have to do is follow the smell and we'll get to the river and the campfire site,' Lee said. 'We won't be the first team, but you know, at least we won't be on breakfast duty.'

'Alright, let's do this,' I decided. 'No one else has come up with anything better, anyway. Aaron will go with you to light the way. The rest of you, follow these guys. I'll be at the back.'

PJ clutched at my shirt. 'I hate the dark.'

That was an understatement. Back when we were juniors, Huss and I used to shut PJ in our tiny sports shed and switch off all the lights. We thought it was the funniest thing in the world until one day PJ totally lost it. He kicked the door out, then broke down, crying uncontrollably. Mr Ahmed had to drive him home. We hadn't known that PJ's mum would shoot up with random guys in their house when PJ was a kid, and they'd lock him in his room with the lights switched off. I felt like shit when Mr Ahmed tore into us later. I honestly thought he was going to kill us.

'Relax, PJ,' I said now, and made sure to shine the torchlight in front of him. 'We're just walking, it's all good.' Suddenly Ibby yelled that he'd stepped on a snake. He was trying to climb Huss like a tree. Huss worked out, and his solid body was built to handle things like that.

'Get off, ya hmar!' Huss shoved Ibby again, and he crashed off into the bush.

'Can everyone just chill out and follow Matt and Lee?' I said, fed up.

'We're almost at the river,' Matt called out. 'I can hear the water.' We all rushed behind him.

'The campfire is mine,' Aaron said. 'My dad and I used to always do them together, so I know what I'm doing.'

I didn't bother arguing. Building fires wasn't my thing, and I didn't think the rest of the Wolf Pack would have been much help either.

Beneath our feet, the ground changed from branches and bush to a sandy beach.

'We're here,' Matt called out.

'Wait, what?' Lee grabbed Aaron's torch and swung it around. There were no other teams anywhere. 'And we're *first*?'

'Holy shit,' Riley said. He looked at Aaron. 'Uhhhhh, I guess you need to build a fire now?'

'Okay,' Aaron took charge and started bossing everyone around. 'We'll need some dry pieces of wood, large and small to make the fire,' Aaron said. 'How about Huss and PJ get them and Ibby can –'

'Wait, where's Ibby?' I asked looking around. 'Don't tell me we lost him?'

Just then we heard a scream. 'SNAKE!' We turned to see Ibby running with his knees high up and his eyes wide with fear. His top was soaked in

sweat and his tongue hung out the side of his mouth.

‘Wallah, I almost died,’ he panted. ‘You dogs! Why didn’t you wait for me?’

‘I’m impressed,’ Matt said, his hand raised for yet another high five. ‘You got lost but managed to make it here anyway.’

Ibby stopped huffing and puffing. ‘I did?’ Matt nodded. ‘Wallah, I did!’ Ibby repeated, a huge smile on his face. ‘But also, all the other teams are nearly here.’

As he said the words, the other teams arrived on the beach and were on a roll with their campfires. They knew exactly what to do and where to go. Huss, Ibby, PJ and I just stared at them.

‘White people, man,’ PJ said. ‘They know all this camping sort of stuff.’

Aaron had the boys running to and from the bush, collecting firewood. I helped him build the fire, smaller sticks and bigger ones all piled together like a pyramid. He stuffed bits of dried grass through random holes. ‘Now we need to get a spark and then catch it with that kindling,’ he said searching the ground as he spoke. He picked up two large, flattish rocks.

‘What’re you doing with those?’ I asked.

‘They’re flints.’ He passed them to me. ‘We have to strike them together, so that they make a spark.’

I had a few turns but starting a fire was much harder than I thought. The boys had collected enough wood but I couldn’t get any spark. Aaron took over, banging the rocks together over and over again.

‘I thought your dad taught you this stuff?’ I asked, hearing the shortness in his breath. ‘You sure he knew what he was doing?’

I could see glimpses of sparks from the teams around us. It was now down to whoever could start the flames first.

Aaron threw the rocks on the ground and sat back. ‘*You* try then.’ ‘What are you doing?’ I said, picking them up. ‘Why’d you give up? We still have a chance.’

He shook his head a few times and wiped his face with his shirt. ‘Obviously my dad didn’t teach me shit!’

He stormed off to sit alone beside the water.

‘What the hell was that?’ Huss asked looking after him. ‘Bro, he is *not* normal.’

Riley tried the rocks himself. 'It's a long story. Let's just leave him alone and try to get this done.'

'Majnoon,' Huss said, shaking his head.

I wasn't sure if Aaron *was* crazy, but obviously something I'd said about his dad pissed him off. I had two options here. I could go and apologise if I'd hurt him, and convince him to come back and help us with the fire, or I could ignore him and try to get the fire started myself. If Mr Archie were watching, the first option would probably score me some points and show off my leadership skills.

I'd just stood up and was about to walk over to Aaron when the A Team jumped and cheered as one of the instructors declared them the winner. Their fire rose high in the night, as one by one, the other teams' fires caught alight. All except ours. We couldn't even get a spark. The other teams toasted their marshmallows while we sat next to our cold pile of wood.

'Were you going to go and talk to Aaron?' Huss asked, tracing his finger in the sand and not meeting my eye.

I shook my head. 'Nah, man. I was just going for a walk.'

Being close to the river had me needing the toilets, which were back near our cabins. I was headed there when I heard footsteps behind me.

Aaron.

'Your dad must be so proud,' I said, annoyed that his tantrum had lost us the challenge. 'You said you knew what you were doing.'

I heard his breath quicken. In the moonlight, I noticed his tightly clenched jaw and fists.

'*Don't* talk about my dad,' he snapped.

'I didn't say anything about your dad, asshole. Chill out. I swear you need medication.'

Other voices filtered through the trees. Aaron and I ducked down and saw Hunter and his boys laughing as they threw a box of matches into the bushes and headed back out to the river.

'Let it go,' Aaron said, standing up. 'Hunter isn't worth it.'

'The guy just *cheated* and you want me to let it *go*?' If there was one thing Aaron should know about me, it was that I didn't let things go.

'Trust me, you don't want to tangle with him,' he said. 'Anyway, everyone will just think you're a sore loser. It's not worth it.'

‘It is to me. They cheated. *They* should be the ones to serve breakfast. Not us.’

‘So you’re going to go out there and snitch to Mr Archie in front of everyone.’

‘Nah, I’ll do what I did to him in the cafeteria,’ I said. ‘I fight my own battles. Oh, but that’s right. That’s not your style. You’re too weak to stand up for anyone.’

‘Don’t say I didn’t warn you,’ he said, and walked off.

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## Chapter 11

Day 3 began with Captain Black and Mr Archie standing in our doorway and blasting their voices through a megaphone again, this time way too early in the morning.

‘You have ten minutes to get dressed!’

Lee rolled off his top bunk when Ibby screamed, in a panic because he thought we were being invaded. We scrambled and staggered like drunks to get dressed in the same (now grotty) pink uniform.

While other teams slept, tucked away nice and warm in their beds at five in the morning, we had to get our training session in early so that we could make breakfast. The air was cold and heavy on our chests as we trained under the floodlights. Captain Black yelled like a psycho anytime we tried to catch an extra minute of sleep. Once training was done, we headed to the main hall to help with breakfast. I hadn’t had a chance to tell the boys about Hunter’s team cheating. Huss was going to lose it when he heard, so I had to choose the moment wisely.

When the tables were set, it was time to cook breakfast – something I knew nothing about. At home, Mum always made the food and my sister Feda cleaned up after, so making us boys do this stuff was weird. I hung back as Ibby charged into the kitchen, excited to be let loose to cook on this scale.

‘What’s wrong, Tariq?’ Matt asked as he pushed past.

‘This is women’s work,’ I said, gesturing to the kitchen. ‘It’s some bullshit that they’re making us do it.’

Matt stopped in his tracks and stared at me. ‘Dude, that’s messed up. Men cook stuff all the time, what are you talking about? Look at Ibby!’

Ibby was babbling to Mr Archie as he tied an apron around his waist.

‘Sir, I’m so excited,’ he said, almost bouncing out of his skin. ‘This is like the best punishment ever.’

‘I watched you closely in Term 1, cooking with Miss Nada in Home Ec,’ Mr Archie said to him. ‘You have a real talent, lad, so I expect to see you

show the rest of the lads some of your skills.'

Captain Black spoke from behind me, almost making me jump out of my skin. For such a big guy, he moved very quietly. 'Unless you plan on living with your mum and making her cook for you for the rest of your life, I suggest you get over yourself and learn how to fry an egg, *bro*.'

He moved past me to give us our instructions, while Mr Archie stood to the side with his clipboard, still taking notes.

'Each of you will work with a partner to prepare three items on the menu,' Captain Black said. 'Eggs – scrambled and fried – beans, tomatoes, hash browns, mushrooms, spinach, toast, sliced fruit, bacon, sausage and freshly squeezed orange juice. Once that's done, you'll make sure that the cereal tubs and the milk jugs are full. Any questions?'

Huss, Ibby and I all raised our hands. 'We're Muslim, so we can't work with bacon.'

Captain Black nodded. 'Anyone else have any issues?'

'I can't work with bacon either.'

*Aaron?*

'You're Muslim?' Ibby asked, shocked.

'No, I'm Jewish. Well, technically half Jewish.'

'That's why he's such an arse,' Huss muttered to me. 'He's a Yahooda.'

Okay, quick recap. So, if you don't already know, us Arabs and Jews aren't necessarily the best of friends, mostly due to the whole Israel-and-Palestine, colonised-land situation. Basically, one country has the freedom to do almost everything and the other gets stopped at checkpoints, shot at in the streets, taken away by soldiers in the middle of the night, no matter their age, gender or health status. Well that's what the YouTube videos show at least, no matter how many times my dad says that I shouldn't judge a whole people based on some people's actions.

'Alright, easy fix,' Captain Black said. 'Riley and Matt, you take care of the bacon and sausage. Do the tomatoes while you're at it. Ibby and –'

'No, sir,' Ibby called out. 'Let me work on my own doing the eggs. I don't need any help. Plus, they'll just stuff it up.'

Captain Black shrugged. 'Fine. Lee, PJ and Huss take care of the spinach, hash browns, fruit and juice.'

That left Aaron and me with the mushrooms, beans and toast. I was fixating on the fact that he was Jewish. I'd never met anyone Jewish before



– not that I knew of, anyway. I was pretty sure the minute I opened my mouth I would say something that would get me into shit with Mr Archie, so I stayed silent as we got started cranking open the cans of beans. Mr Archie walked around and watched us prepare breakfast.

‘Did you know that people who eat half a fresh grapefruit or drink grapefruit juice before each meal lose more weight than people who don’t?’ Lee sliced one in half.

‘You saying I’m fat, Nintendo?’ PJ said.

Ibby had three pans working, frying and scrambling his eggs like he was on a cooking show.

‘It smells good, lad,’ I heard Mr Archie say. ‘But make sure we don’t leave here with a heart attack. Cut back on some of that butter.’

‘I luv ya, sir, but don’t tell me how to cook. This is the only thing I’m good at in my life.’

‘I’ve seen your skills in footy, lad,’ Mr Archie said. ‘You have some real talent there, too. Don’t sell yourself short – it just makes it easier for other people to do the same.’

Ibby flicked the pans, the eggs flying high then landing perfectly.

Matt whistled at Ibby’s octopus hands.

‘Get me some salt, Goldilocks,’ Ibby said shaking the eggs. ‘Yallah, yallah.’

‘Sorry, Chef. Coming right up.’ Matt bolted across the kitchen with the salt.

‘When my mum got sick and was in the hospital, I had to learn this stuff or else I’d have died,’ Ibby explained to Mr Archie. ‘My brothers were never home and Dad was working overseas sending us money.’

Huss snorted. ‘Your brothers wouldn’t have done you any good even if they’d been around.’

That was true. Ibby’s brothers, Salah and Kassem, were both construction workers, and more likely to use him as a punching bag than feed him. It was one of the reasons he spent so much time at my place.

‘Mum would never have let you starve,’ I called across the kitchen. ‘She’s convinced you’re one meal away from anorexia.’

‘Yeah, Tariq’s mum’s a feeder.’ Ibby salted the eggs with a flourish and threw in another cube of butter as Mr Archie shook his head.

‘How’s your ma now?’ he asked, discreetly moving the butter away from Ibby’s reach.

‘It’s been exactly a year and four months, sir, since she last had to do any doctor stuff.’

When Ibby first told us about his mum’s *not-so-serious* operation, he had been completely chill. He told us that she had to stay a few extra days to get some scans done, which was normal for women who were overweight. It was Salah and Kassem who let us know that Mrs Nasser actually had breast cancer. They hadn’t told Ibby how serious it was because he was too attached to his mum. One Friday night after that, we were playing cards, and Ibby said something shitty about Huss’s dad always coming and going. As usual, Huss lost it and retaliated. ‘At least there’s a chance he might come back again. What chances does your mum have against the cancer?!’

Dad had held Ibby as he cried his eyes out. It took weeks for Huss and Ibby to talk again, and they only did so after my dad spent weeks lecturing them about forgiveness and letting go of anger.

‘You’re a strong boy,’ Captain Black said to Ibby now, his arm tight around his shoulder. ‘And you’re built for this game.’

Ibby’s eyes welled with tears. ‘Sir, I know this is a moment, but wallah, I can’t feel my arm.’

Mr Archie continued to take down notes as we finished up breakfast prep. I thought this was the perfect time to get as many points as I could to seal the deal as captain.

‘Let’s go boys, we only have half an hour until the other teams arrive,’ I called out. ‘We’re almost there.’

Aaron stared at me and immediately picked up on what I was doing.

‘I’m almost finished with the beans,’ he called out. ‘I’ll come around and help everyone once I’m done.’ The boys all looked at us like we were insane.

Mr Archie came to stand behind us. ‘One of the key elements of being a leader, lads, is being genuine.’

*Well, that plan failed fast!*

Captain Black and Mr Archie spoke for a bit, pointing and taking down notes.

‘Just so you know,’ Aaron said under his breath as he put some bread in the toaster. ‘I’m not going to stop until I’m captain.’

‘And what makes you think *I’m* going to stop? You don’t have the skill and you’re not at my level.’

‘We’ll see,’ he said, taking out the tray of toast.

‘Yeah, we *will* see.’

So now it was officially on. Aaron needed to be put in his place and I needed the Wolf Pack to know what had happened with Team A in the woods.

While the Cronulla boys were setting up the cereal containers, I met the boys in the toilets and told them what happened.

‘That little dog,’ Huss said, seething in anger. ‘Why didn’t you tell me before? I would’ve smashed his face in.’

‘Just shut up and listen,’ I said. ‘The only way to get back at Hunter is to stay in the competition as long as possible. Once we’ve made his life hell, we’ll be able to leave. Plus, Mr Archie will suspend us if we make it too obvious.’

‘Yeah, and you have to get captain back too,’ Huss conceded. ‘Then we can leave. I think I know what to do. It’s a cracker of a plan, but we’re going to need Riley, Lee and Matt onside as well.’

‘Why?’ Ibby demanded. ‘What’s wrong with the Wolf Pack riding solo as usual?’

I slapped him in the chest. ‘Come on, bro, white people won’t suspect white people.’

‘Even though he annoys me, I think Nintendo will agree,’ PJ added. ‘Remember what he said about that ranga being a bully and making their lives hell?’

‘I’ll just accept Matt’s high fives,’ Ibby said, shrugging his shoulders like it was a huge burden. ‘That will get Goldilocks on board.’

‘I’ll speak to Riley, I know what to say to get him on our side.’

We had all agreed when we heard the toilet flush. One of the stall doors slowly opened.

Aaron.

Huss strode over to him. ‘If you say anything, you know what’ll happen to you.’

‘Look, Aaron,’ PJ began, while Huss circled him like a predator ready to attack. It didn’t help that he looked like a caveman with his over-grown

beard and muddy clothes. 'I actually think you're alright, but don't make us change your face, yeah? We don't like snitches here.'

Aaron shook his head. 'Don't say I didn't warn you about Hunter.' He walked off while we tried to come up with a Plan B in case Aaron snitched.

By the time we got back to the hall, the other teams had arrived and looked refreshed after a full night's rest. Hunter made his way over to the table where Aaron and I were serving.

He shook Aaron's hand, then glanced over at me with that smirk that made my blood boil. 'Did you poison the food with all your halal stuff?'

Of *course* Hunter was going to try and get to me with the usual dumb shit we Muslims heard all the time.

'Okay, first of all, "halal" isn't a dressing or something we sprinkle on our food, you ignorant fuck,' I snapped. 'It's just how we slaughter our meat. And second, just because something is halal doesn't mean it's somehow poison.'

I served a couple of boys in front of me and tried to ignore him. Huss's plan was too good to ruin by losing my temper.

Hunter rolled his eyes and turned back to Aaron. 'Anyway, some of the boys are hanging at my place Friday night after this camp stuff is over. You'll probably need it too after spending time with them. Get that mozzie stink off you.'

Mr Archie came over as I was processing this. 'Time you moved on!' He walked a sour-looking Hunter away from our table and then stopped by Mr Wilson. I didn't hear much of what he said, but it sounded a great deal like, 'Keep your team away from my lads.'

We were *his* lads? I shook off the slightly fuzzy feeling this gave me before I turned my mind back to what Hunter had said before he'd left. I looked sideways at Aaron.

'Why am I not surprised that the two of you are friends?'

Aaron followed my gaze over to where Hunter was threatening Lee as he served him some juice.

'I'll get you back for taking me out at the fight, you speccky little nerd.'

Lee laughed him off. 'Enjoy your juice, Hunter, and go bother someone who gives a damn about your opinion.'

Hunter and his team filled their plates and sat at their tables. The Greenacre boys came over to ask us about any revenge plans we might

have. We played dumb. The plan was on a need-to-know basis only.

‘Nah, bro,’ Huss said. ‘We can’t be bothered with that stuff.’

PJ rushed over after the Greenacre boys left, sweating rivers. ‘Nintendo’s in and Ibby said he’s almost got Goldilocks to agree.’

I looked across the cafeteria hall to where Ibby gave me the thumbs up. That just left Riley and we were on.

We were almost done serving breakfast when Hunter spat out his juice, yelling something about salt. I raised an eyebrow at PJ, who shrugged. The only person who could have been responsible fixed his glasses and continued to serve drinks.

Hunter started charging towards Lee when Mr Archie stood in his way. ‘You’re already skating on thin ice, lad. Don’t do something stupid now. You’ll regret it.’

Mr Wilson called his team over then, and they all left the cafeteria, all with spiteful looks on their faces.

Mr Archie turned to me, and I put my hands in the air. ‘We didn’t do anything! He’s just a psycho.’

After all the teams had left, we finally had a chance to eat. Aaron wandered over to the kosher platters while PJ joined us, not because he cared about halal but because there was more food left on our table.

‘Still can’t believe he’s a Yahooda,’ Huss said, crunching through a hash brown at the halal table.

Ibby loaded his plate with food. ‘Do you think that’s why he hates our guts?’

‘Maybe.’

We noticed then that someone had crossed out the ‘Halal’ label on our table and scribbled ‘Terrorists’ instead.

‘Well, that’s original,’ I said.

‘Who the hell did that?’ Huss asked, looking around.

‘Who else but that ranga?’ I said throwing the label at Aaron as we walked past him. ‘Hey, *teammate*, tell your best friend to try something less clichéd next time.’

He ignored us and sat on his own at the back of the hall. The rest of us took one of the other tables.

Lee sat beside me. ‘You know, I think I have a better revenge plan.’

‘What plan? What are you guys talking about?’ Riley asked.

‘We’ll tell you later, Ghostbusters,’ Ibby said, his mouth full.

‘Something about getting Hunter back,’ Matt explained, unhelpfully.

Lee unfolded a napkin. ‘So, I was thinking, we could duct-tape his mouth when he’s sleeping and shove tissue up his nose to stop him from breathing.’

We all stared at him.

‘Is anyone else as freaked out by Nintendo as I am right now?’ PJ asked, sliding his plate away from a possible murderer.

‘Hunter and Aaron are close friends,’ Riley confided. ‘Well, I’m not sure how close they are now, but their families do a fair bit of business together. They’re really rich families who have heaps of real estate in the Shire.’

‘Aren’t all you whities in the Shire rich?’ Huss asked. ‘How is this news?’

‘Wait,’ I shushed him, and then looked back at Riley. ‘So, they’re friends? But why doesn’t Hunter go to your school?’

‘He did for ages. But he left a year ago when they moved houses, and he goes to the private school now. Aaron’s dad di –’

‘Why do you care?’ Huss interrupted, glaring at me. ‘Let’s just talk about what we’re going to do tonight.’ He looked over at Riley. ‘Look, either join us and get back at Hunter who’s also made your life hell, or pretend you didn’t hear a word. Which is it?’

Riley nodded. ‘Yeah sure, I’m in. But no criminal stuff, deal?’

Everyone was on board now, but I still wanted to know more about Aaron and his story. If I could get more information from Riley, I had a better chance of defeating Aaron and becoming captain.

## Chapter 12

We couldn't wait for the day to be over so we could carry out Huss's mastermind plan. We decided that none of us would mention Lee's homicidal one again.

Captain Black and Mr Archie put us through another team-building exercise, this time canoeing down the river. Lee and PJ were paired up, and the two of them couldn't stop capsizing. I think their canoe spent more time upside down in the river than the right way up. Mr Archie obviously had a sick sense of humour, because Aaron and I were once again forced to partner up.

'C'mon, lads, it's your chance to discuss some set plays or game strategies you have,' Mr Archie said, strapping on a life jacket. 'Remember, that captain spot depends on your communication and attitude too.'

*Oh, I totally had this. I'd communicate the shit out of Aaron.* I could see Huss's brain going a million miles an hour as he mentally went through each of the steps to pull off his plan. He was totally checked out of the canoeing, paddling mechanically, and Riley had to work double-time to keep their canoe from colliding with other teams or beaching itself.

I'd only known Lee, Riley and Matt for a couple of days but they were harmless. Not anyone I'd ever hang out with on my own, but also not anyone I'd ever get into a fight with. Aaron, on the other hand, was still a dark horse. I definitely didn't trust him, no matter how many joint activities Captain Black and Mr Archie kept forcing us into. He was meant to be captain of Lee, Matt and Riley's school team, but he barely even spoke to those guys. The only person I'd seen him be even a little bit friendly to was that khazir, Hunter. What was he even doing here, at this camp, in this competition? Why was he so stuck on taking the captaincy from me when he couldn't be bothered being involved with his own team, let alone the F Team as a whole?

After going around in circles in our canoes for a few hours, Captain Black decided to call it a day and gave us the chance to hang out at our

cabins. There were no night activities planned. It was time to execute our plan.

We waited until Mr Archie would definitely be asleep, until the lights were off in all the cabins. It was past midnight when Aaron was left alone sleeping in the bedroom while the rest of us sat in the living room, preparing. You could always rely on Huss to have two things with him: stink bombs and firecrackers. These were the core of our revenge. Huss shuffled a deck of cards, and the two people with the lowest cards had to carry out the plan.

Riley and Ibby.

Lee threw his card on the floor. 'Damn it! I was so close.'

'I honestly don't get you, Nintendo,' PJ said confused. 'You wanted to lose?'

Lee shrugged, and I could see that Riley was starting to regret joining us, but it was too late to back out now.

'Hunter deserves it,' I reminded him.

'Yeah, I know...' he said, dubiously. He rubbed his sweaty palms against his thighs a few times before closing his eyes to try to control his breathing.

Matt cracked open the front door and gave us the green light that Mr Archie was out. We carried our backpacks through the brush until we reached the back window of the A Team's cabin.

'What if they catch us?' Riley whispered. 'How will we get away?'

'Just take off your beanie,' Huss said. 'That'll buy us some time.'

I turned back to give Huss a look.

'Like, relax. It's a joke,' Huss whispered back defensively. 'You're cool with us joking, yeah?'

'Maybe you and Hunter can hang out together and make jokes about Riley's hair?' I snapped back. Huss glared at me, angry to be told off, especially in front of the Cronulla boys. I refocused everyone before he had any chance to lose it. 'They won't catch us, Riley. Stick to the plan, and we'll be sweet.'

PJ was slowly unzipping his bag when Lee sneezed so loudly, I could have sworn he'd woken up everyone in the camp.

'A'an Jad?' Ibby said staring at me meaningfully. 'Why did we bring this guy with us?'



‘Because I would’ve murdered you in your sleep if you hadn’t,’ Lee answered calmly, moving past Ibby to help PJ. Ibby’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head.

At last, Riley and Ibby climbed over the rails of the cabin and onto the verandah. Riley took a few puffs from his puffer and Ibby kissed his ammunition, lit them up and off they went.

BOOM!

BANG!

CRACK!

The guys both leaped back down to where we were waiting, and we bolted back to our cabin, all the while listening to the A Team scream and shout. One by one, the other teams’ cabin lights switched on as we crept back into our beds. We had just tucked ourselves into our blankets when Mr Archie opened the door. I prayed that Ibby and PJ held their laughter until he closed the door and left.

‘They’re all asleep,’ we heard him say to Captain Black. ‘It couldn’t have been them.’

‘Dude, that was the best night of my life,’ Matt whispered.

‘I feel so alive,’ Lee added.

Riley poked his head out from under his blanket. ‘I’ve been wanting to get Hunter back for such a long time.’

‘What did you guys do?’ Aaron asked, waking up.

‘Shut up,’ we all whispered back.

We woke up on the fourth morning to an emergency meeting in the main hall with all the teams, as instructor after instructor demanded the culprits of last night’s prank come forward and confess. We had promised Ibby a week’s worth of McDonalds to keep his mouth shut, and I knew that Matt, Lee and Riley weren’t going to say anything.

‘Promise you’ll have our backs,’ Matt said now, looking a little nervous. ‘I’ve never done anything like this before.’

‘Bro, we had your backs at the cafeteria before you even did anything,’ I said. ‘Just relax and stay calm. And don’t chew your fingernails.’

He nodded a few times and took a deep breath. I checked on Riley who gave me a quick thumbs up. And Lee? He was as cool as ice and almost had *me* convinced that he had no idea what was going on.

The A Team shouted and accused us, frustrated at how obvious it was that the F Team was behind the prank. We sat and listened to Hunter complain about how they had had to spend the night in sleeping bags in the cold night and how the firecrackers had almost blown up the cabin.

All the teams watched as we were put under the microscope. The Greenacre boys gave us the nod that they had our backs.

‘We thought it was a *terrorist* attack,’ Hunter shouted. ‘You guys are going to pay for this. You’re all dead.’

Mr Wilson walked over with his lips pressed tightly together and his eyes narrowed. ‘Now, Mr Archie, I don’t want to be the one to blame your students, but all fingers point to your team.’

‘Yes, they are *my* team,’ Mr Archie replied. ‘And if they had anything to do with last night, you’d best believe I will take care of it.’

Hunter stood closer to Aaron. ‘Did they threaten you? Is that why you’re not speaking up? If they are, tell us and your name will be clean.’

We waited to see if Aaron would throw us under the bus. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ he said finally.

‘I would’ve heard them if they left the cabin.’

Hunter’s nostrils flared and his face turned a shade redder. ‘You sure about that?’

Aaron nodded firmly. ‘Yes.’

‘Okay, so you’re with *them* now.’ Hunter walked back to his goons. ‘Don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

‘Wait, wait,’ Lee cautioned, taking off his glasses and polishing them on his shirt. ‘Did you just *threaten* us? That’s it. I want to take legal action. I’m feeling really scared now. Look at my legs. They won’t stop shaking.’ His voice didn’t rise once from a completely deadpan tone, and I could hear some of the boys in the other teams sniggering. Hunter didn’t like being the butt of the joke – I could see it in his murderous eyes as he muttered to his teammates and eyeballed Lee.

Captain Black circled us like a shark, waiting for one of us to crack.

We didn’t. Our prank had finally achieved what Captain Black and Mr Archie’s trust exercises and training hadn’t been able to manage – we were a *team*. Even Aaron had thrown in his lot with us.

Eventually, they dismissed us from the hall, but we knew punishment was coming our way. Captain Black and Mr Archie weren’t going to let this

go. The real test of our new alliance was about to begin.

‘As long as we all stay quiet, they can’t get us,’ I reminded everyone as the teams began to file out of the hall. ‘They can’t punish us if they have no evidence.’

We were ordered to go to our cabins and stay there while Mr Archie spoke to the other instructors, particularly Mr Wilson. Ibbby jumped onto Aaron’s back as we walked away.

‘Bro, you are fully *hectic*, man! Khord, Hunter, that dumb prick.’ The rest of the team high-fived Aaron. The guy had literally said nothing, and now he was back in the group and in the running for the captain position.

‘You think he did it to get points from Mr Archie and make captain?’ I asked Huss when we got into the cabin. ‘Or do you reckon he actually isn’t a snitch?’

‘It doesn’t matter what he did it for,’ Huss said, throwing himself on the couch. ‘We wanted to get Hunter back, and we did it. If we get kicked out of the comp, it doesn’t matter. We were only faking anyway.’

‘Yeah, I know, but if he wanted captain, he could’ve easily turned me in and taken the position. I think he actually didn’t want to dob us in.’

Huss looked back at me. ‘What, so you wanna be best friends with the Yahooda?’

‘Relax, man. I’m just trying to figure out why he did it.’

‘Yeah, well, I don’t give a shit. About him or any of the others from that fucking school, or any of this bullshit.’ He started flicking through his phone.

I eyed him. Huss was never a ray of sunshine, but he seemed even more aggro than usual. Before I could press him about it, though, the rest of team rolled into the cabin, laughing and messing around.

Mr Archie came in not long after. ‘Each school will have to pay \$500 not only as a fine but for any repairs.’

I looked at Huss again, trying to figure out what on earth had been in those firecrackers.

‘I don’t know what to say, lads,’ Mr Archie continued. ‘You know of course that now Captain Black and Mr Wilson are going to come after you ten times harder. Why would you put a target on your backs like that? Just *tell* me if you guys did this, and I can help you.’

Ibbby sat up. ‘Sir, we –’

‘Sir, it’s not us,’ I interrupted. This was one of the tricks that teachers used on us back at Punchbowl. They acted like they were your best friend and promised you *complete confidentiality* – before calling the school counsellor. ‘Does anyone have any evidence that it was anyone in this room?’

Mr Archie chuckled, almost despite himself. ‘I see now why your school file was crystal clear, Tariq. You know what you’re doing.’ He then looked at Aaron. ‘So, you *sure* no one in this room paid a visit to Team A’s cabin?’

‘Yes, sir. I didn’t see or hear anything.’

Captain Black came in, jaw so tightly clenched that I thought he’d shatter his teeth. ‘So some of the instructors are going to be reviewing the cameras.’

‘There’s cameras?’ Matt blurted. I shot him a quick look.

Captain Black took a seat next to Ibby, our weakest link. ‘You sure no one wants to say anything now? The punishment will be much less severe if you come clean.’

Silence. I could see Ibby sweating bullets, but I was seriously impressed at how well he was keeping his shit together.

Huss smiled. ‘If your cameras revealed anything helpful, you wouldn’t be here still trying to get us to confess.’

Captain Black and Mr Archie looked at each other.

‘Okay, while that gets sorted, let’s not waste time and miss training,’ Captain Black announced, slapping his hands hard on his thighs and making Ibby leap a few metres off the couch. ‘I have just the *perfect* place you boys need to see.’

## Chapter 13

BEN'S FARM, read the the sign we drove past. Orange- and brown-leaved trees and a white rail fence ran down the sides of a long driveway. We stopped at last in front of an enormous yellow barn. A bunch of sheep were scattered around the nearby paddock. Everything smelled terrible.

Captain Black introduced us to an old man in a green plaid shirt and muddy black knee-high boots. He was easily eighty years old. I assumed this was Ben.

He walked over to his ute and gave each of us a pair of boots and gloves.

'It's not really a farm,' he said. 'It's just my house and a couple of acres. Barbara, my wife, hasn't been well of late, and some of the workers are on leave for the week, so the animals need to be fed and tended to. I appreciate you boys volunteering your time to help an old man like me.'

*Volunteer?*

'Unless one of you tells the truth about what really happened, you'll be working on Ben's farm all day,' Captain Black said.

'Wait, what?' PJ blurted 'Why do you hate us?' His frustration was making his afro puff higher.

'We *told* you, we *didn't do it*,' I said, annoyed. 'And what about all the other teams? Are they going to be doing this too? Or do you only suspect the Punchbowl kids?'

'Actually, Tariq,' Captain Black said, coming up close. 'I suspect this *whole* team – not just the Punchbowl half. And I know my suspicions are warranted. So either you boys can save everyone a bunch of bother and tell me what I already know, or you can enjoy a day in the countryside.' He took a deep breath. 'Ahhh, just *smell* that fresh country air.'

One of the sheep started taking a massive piss in the nearby field.

Captain Black eyed Matt, who was looking at the sheep with complete horror. PJ grabbed Matt's arm and pushed him away from the firing line.

'Man, I love farms,' Lee said, rubbing his hands together. 'My grandparents had one in Vietnam before the American soldiers burned it

down.' He raised an eyebrow ironically at Captain Black. The ex-Navy SEAL didn't bat an eye.

'But wasn't that, like, ages ago? Before you were born?' Ibbby asked. 'So how come *you* love farms?'

'Well, when they came to Australia with Dad by boat in the seventies and settled in Sydney, their backyard was like a mini-farm. Veggies and stuff everywhere, chickens. They had a goat, too, when I was a kid, but it ate all of Bà nôi's flowers, so she made Ông sell it. They kept a bunch of photos of the old farm in Vietnam too.'

'Whoa, Nintendo,' PJ said, taken back. 'Your family came here by boat?'

Lee nodded. 'Yeah, most of my dad's side were war refugees. Uncles and aunts and some of my cousins. A few of them died on the way. And I think Bà lost most of her sisters in the war.'

PJ shook his head. 'I thought refugees were all from Iraq and stuff. What about your mum? She a refugee too?'

'Mum? Nah, she's a full Eastern Suburbs princess. Her parents were totally posh Saigon socialites who moved here when they were pretty sure the war wasn't going to end well for them.'

'Well, we're glad you're here,' old Ben piped up. 'I prefer Australia now with all these cultures and different people than the Australia I knew growing up.' I looked at him in surprise.

He shuffled us across the paddock to a tin shed, where the smell of manure burned our noses. Matt swallowed a couple of nausea pills. All the while, Ben told us about the jobs around the farm.

'The cows got milked this morning, so they're all good. But I haven't had the time to clean out the dairy, so that needs doing. Careful of the bull there, by the way, he's a cranky old thing.' He gestured to where a black-and-white bull stood glaring at us over a wire fence. 'Best stay well out of that paddock.'

Ibbby swallowed nervously. 'Um, is that fence strong enough?' Ben thought he was joking and laughed. 'I'll need you to move the sheep over the road to that field over there. Take the alpacas too, of course.'

'The al-what-as?' Huss muttered.

'The goats need drenching, so you'll need to get them over to the race. I'll show you how to drench them, it's really easy.'

‘Um, Ben?’ Riley asked. ‘What’s drenching?’

‘It’s a worm treatment, mate,’ he answered, without breaking stride. For an old guy, he sure moved fast. ‘You syringe it into their mouths.’

Ibby looked like he was going to pass out at the mention of ‘syringe’. I could hear Captain Black sniggering behind us.

‘Chook house needs cleaning too. Pretty sure there’s a rotten egg in there somewhere, from the smell, but you’ll probably need to get everything out because I couldn’t find it when I looked yesterday. It’s well hidden.’

Well, that sounded awesome. I actually wished I was back at school, at Miss K’s poetry thing. At least then I’d be smelling Jamila’s coconut hair, not a hundred types of animal shit and – apparently – a rotten egg.

Ben set us up as it began to drizzle lightly, then disappeared with Mr Archie and Captain Black. Probably off watching camera footage of our shitty farm day, laughing all the way. The dairy shed was covered in cow manure, a stinking, slippery sea in the rain. Our boots didn’t do much good as we slipped and slid across it with shovels, scraping everything off the concrete and into the next field. I could hear Matt gagging the whole time. At last we left Aaron to hose the cleared concrete down and made our way over to the sheep, who ran around like morons when we tried to move them.

‘Gotta work as a team, lads,’ Mr Archie called from over near the house, where he had come to watch us. ‘Think like a sheep dog.’

‘Did he just call us dogs?’ Ibby panted.

The alpacas were much smarter than the sheep, and much more aggressive. They spat phlegm at us as we rounded them up, hitting Lee right in the chest. We raked away the leaves and the chicken shit and scraps in the chicken pen, where the stench of rotten eggs was really strong. I made an executive decision and ordered Matt to sit this one out – far out, away from all of us in case he lost the battle with his puke. The chickens flew around and pecked at us. One huge black rooster, the size of a small child, stood sizing PJ up, and I was pretty sure someone was about to lose an eye.

‘Someone’s going to need to go in there and find that egg,’ Aaron said, gesturing to the little chicken house at one end of the pen.

‘Be my guest,’ I retorted.

‘Hey, *I’m* not volunteering!’ he said. ‘Aren’t *you* the one who’s obsessed with being captain?’

‘I’ll go,’ Riley sighed. ‘Just don’t start fighting, yeah?’ He pulled off his beanie and covered his nose and mouth with it before climbing into the chicken house. He did eventually find the egg. Unfortunately, he found it by stepping heavily on it, so the foul, exploded thing covered one of his boots for the rest of the day.

By the time we had to tackle the goats, we’d been at this crappy work for three hours. I was soaked to my skin with sweat and rain and aching from head to toe. That was when one of the goats decided he didn’t like Arabs and head-butted me in the groin.

‘All you have to do is admit that you boys made a mistake and all will be fine,’ Mr Archie said. ‘You won’t be punished for your honesty.’

I blinked back tears and tried to focus on not kicking the goat in the head. None of us made a sound. I had to admit I was surprised and impressed not only by Ibbey’s self-control, but also by the Shire boys’ loyalty.

‘Hey, Riley,’ Lee called out from across the race. ‘Look. You have a twin.’

We turned to see one of the goats with a mohawk of white hair sticking up between his ears.

Huss looked over at me. ‘You gonna tell him off for being mean to Riley too?’

Before I could reply, Riley laughed. ‘It’s okay, we’ve been friends since Year Seven. He’s been saying that sort of shit to me for at least that long.’

‘Okay, lads, you can have a break now,’ Mr Archie said, calling us over to the back verandah of the house where he’d put down bottles of water and a plate of sliced oranges. ‘I need to talk to you about a few things.’

We sat in our soaked clothes and muddy boots, breathing in the cleaner air and pouring water down our throats.

‘I need to address a few things moving forward so we all know where we stand,’ Mr Archie began.

‘Are we in trouble, sir?’ PJ was trying to pull bits of grass and dirt from his hair.

Huss looked at him like he was insane. ‘What the hell are we doing here if we’re *not* in trouble?’

‘Just listen,’ Mr Archie interjected before an argument could start. ‘First, this animosity you guys have with Team A needs to stop, or at least be got



under control. I understand that Hunter and his friends aren't innocent in all this, but I expect Mr Wilson will be having this same conversation with them, too.'

All the members of the Wolf Pack rolled our eyes as one.

'That Mr Wilson guy is probably their leader,' Ibby said, picking up a slice of orange. 'He blamed us straight away without knowing anything.'

'Regardless,' Mr Archie continued. 'Whatever they're doing, I'm the head of this team, and I'm telling you to sort yourselves out. I don't want to see any more stupid pranks that could jeopardise your places in this competition. Remember, when they go low, you go high.'

'You haven't seen how low they can go, sir,' Huss argued.

'Nor have I seen how high *you* can go, lad. Second,' Mr Archie said, when Huss opened his mouth to continue arguing. 'I know you guys have come up with nicknames for each other, but I'm worried that some of them might cross the line and start to make people uncomfortable.'

My brain went through all the things we'd been through over these last four days and being *uncomfortable* was the least of our worries.

'I get it, banter helps form bonds, but just be mindful that words have power. This competition was created so that you could play some footy with a new team and build relationships with different people. It wasn't created so that you could come up with new ways to insult each other.'

I rolled my eyes again. 'Sir, have you *met* any guys like us before? Insulting each other is what we *do*.'

'Ey, Nintendo,' PJ said. 'Would you prefer Nintendo or Wii? You know Wii rhymes with Lee but it's up to you.'

'He means no names at all,' Huss said, shaking his head. 'In case we hurt anyone's precious *feelings*.'

'So Ghostbusters is out?' Ibby asked.

'It's alright, Mr Archie,' Riley said. 'It's better than "freak" or "Snow Boy". Ibby's just kidding, not bullying me or anything.'

'So long as there is mutual respect between you and you are all okay with it,' Mr Archie said. 'That's all I'm saying.'

'Do your parents have white hair like you?' I asked Riley. 'Is it something that's passed down?'

'Not sure about my biological parents, but my adopted parents have normal hair,' he replied.

‘Ey?’ Ibby asked.

‘He’s adopted,’ Lee stage-whispered, making Riley smile. I thought he looked a bit sad, despite the smile.

‘Yeah I’m adopted. Worked out well for me. My parents are the best.’

Mr Archie clapped once to get our attention back. ‘Look, lads, I’m not naïve. I don’t think everyone is meant to be friends and live happily ever after. But respect? That I *do* expect from each and every one of you in this competition and throughout your lives. I’m close to making up my mind about who will captain this team and what positions the rest of you will play.’

I felt my body tense up immediately as I heard him say that the positions would be finalised in our first proper training session the next Tuesday. He left us there to chill for a bit longer before we finished up with the goats, then headed back to camp.

Despite his loyalty to the team, Aaron and I still kept our distance. I knew he was slowly making progress with Ibby and PJ, talking to them about cars and footy games.

‘Wait, wait, wait,’ PJ interrupted him. ‘You support the Bulldogs?’ ‘Yeah, been a supporter since I was born.’

‘But aren’t you Jewish?’ Ibby asked. ‘Like, why would you support the Doggies, then?’

Huss was sitting next to me and talking, but my attention was on the conversation on the other side of the bus.

‘Half-Jewish,’ Aaron answered Ibby. ‘On my mum’s side.’

Ibby hugged him tightly. ‘First you didn’t snitch, and now you’re a Doggies supporter? Like, wallah, to think we almost killed you.’

‘Ey, Tariq,’ PJ called out. I turned around. ‘This Mayonnaise guy goes for the Doggies. We can’t touch him no more.’

Aaron’s eyes met mine for a second before I went back to my conversation with Huss. I couldn’t let him see that he mattered to me in any shape, way or form. But in my mind I knew this did change things. I couldn’t be the guy that punched a fellow Bulldogs supporter. I’d just have to beat him on the field and hope that being captain was enough to get him off my back.

‘Who cares that he goes for the Doggies?’ Huss said to me then, like he knew what I was thinking. ‘He’s still that ranga’s friend.’

I knew Huss wouldn't get it. He wasn't a Bulldogs supporter. Actually, he never watched any NRL games with Ibby, PJ and me at my place. He'd usually hang out with my sister Feda or even help Uncle Charlie with the bees. He had only joined the school team to hang out with us and miss classes on a Friday, and then he stayed because it turned out he was pretty great at footy.

When we at last dragged our aching bodies off the bus, we found out that marshmallows, a campfire we didn't have to build and an 'open sharing session' was planned to finish off the last night of the training camp.

'You'll cook your marshmallows and listen to your teammates and Mr Archie and I will help guide your conversations,' Captain Black told us. 'Just a warning, most boys your age find this the hardest activity and would rather do a thousand push-ups than talk about their feelings.'

'Feelings?' Ibby asked with disgust. 'What's that got to do with footy?'

'Communication, lad,' Mr Archie said. 'If you're going to play with a new team, it's best you get to know each other a little. Believe me, it'll make a huge difference to your game, especially for the captain.'

Aaron and I straightened up.

After the soaking we'd had on the farm all day, it was nice and warm sitting around the fire, hearing the river rush past. For the first time since we got here, I felt calm. There was no noise, no chaos, no running laps around the field, and especially no sign of Hunter and his team.

Captain Black went straight for the deep stuff. 'One thing you've never told anyone before.'

We all looked around, unsure of who was meant to go first. This was probably my last chance to show Mr Archie that I should be the captain, so I decided to lead by example.

'I'll go first,' Aaron and I both said at the same time.

It was clear he was thinking along the same lines as I was.

'Jinx,' PJ called out.

'You can go,' Aaron said.

'Nah, you go.' I didn't want him to do me any favours.

'Ya Allah,' Ibby said, rolling his eyes and waving his marshmallow stick. 'I'll go first.' He cleared his throat. 'I want to be a chef when I finish school. I want to cook in the best restaurants and then one day open my own place in Punchbowl, making the sickest Lebanese food.'

‘Why?’ Captain Black asked.

‘I don’t know. I just want to,’ Ibby said, peeling the melted marshmallow off his stick. ‘Everyone knows I love food.’

‘You *do* know why,’ Captain Black replied seriously. ‘Let the group really know your reason.’

Ibby chewed the marshmallow slowly. ‘I guess...I guess it’s because I want my food to be something that keeps, you know, like...families together. When Mum got sick, I felt like I was by myself. The only time I saw my brothers was when we had food on the table.’

‘I think you’ll make a great chef one day,’ Mr Archie said with a smile.

‘Maybe if there are boys who don’t have anyone to cook for them, like if their mums get sick, they can come to my place and I’ll give them a discount.’ Ibby then laughed, one of those laughs that covered up a whole lot of tears.

I patted him on the back. ‘You good bro? We’re here, yeah?’

PJ put him in a chokehold. ‘Man, I luv ya, bro.’

Next up was Lee.

‘I first started my YouTube channel about my gaming videos just for fun. But then when more and more people started subscribing, I realised I could actually make money,’ he said. ‘I’m saving it so my parents and grandparents and I can go visit Vietnam.’

‘No one’s been back since they migrated?’ Captain Black asked.

‘No. My parents work all the time. But I also think my Bà has always been too scared to go back. Like, in her head, it’s still a full-on war there, or something?’ Lee shrugged. ‘But I reckon if we all go as a family, she’d be alright. And maybe we can try and find out some more about what happened to her sisters and the other people in Dad’s family who never made it out. If they wanted to, I mean.’

‘That’s so good, Nintendo,’ PJ said. ‘I know you say some weird stuff but I respect ya man.’

‘How about you, PJ?’ Captain Black asked. ‘Anything you haven’t told anyone?’

PJ’s big brown eyes suddenly looked small. ‘My boys know everything about me. They’ve always had my back.’

Mr Archie tilted his head towards the Shire half of the circle. ‘These lads don’t know you yet.’

‘Ummm. Well, I play guitar and sing at my church with my Grandma Ceci.’

PJ’s Grandma Ceci was always super chill, and spoke softly to the point that if you didn’t concentrate really hard, you’d miss everything she said. She took care of PJ since his mum went to jail about a year ago and baked us banana bread when we hung out. Grandma Ceci sang us songs while PJ played his guitar and was always one of the first volunteers to cook at our school events alongside my mum.

‘Anything else you want to add? Maybe about your family?’ Captain Black asked when PJ shook his head.

PJ had only spoken about his mum a couple of times, and both those times he had broken down and cried. When he got the news that she’d been caught with drugs and had her sentence extended, he completely lost it and started throwing chairs around the school hall. Mr Ahmed was the only one who had been able to calm him down.

‘Alright, who’s going next?’ Mr Archie asked when it became clear that PJ wasn’t going to share anything else.

‘Does it have to be deep?’ I asked. I’d been lucky my whole life with my family and friends. I had no hidden depths like my friends did.

‘No,’ Mr Archie said. ‘You share whatever you feel comfortable with.’

‘Wait, what?’ Ibby said skewing another marshmallow on his stick. ‘I thought it had to be serious.’

‘It’s okay, lad. The point of this gathering is to get to know each other on a deeper level and show that we’re all going through our own difficulties and challenges,’ Mr Archie reassured him. ‘It’s also about trying to find ways to communicate. If you talk about things and get them off your chest, you’re less likely to want to punch people in the face.’

We laughed, then Captain Black looked at me from across the fire. ‘How do you feel about your school possibly closing?’

‘Me?’

He nodded.

‘Obviously I don’t want it to, but it’s not in my control.’

‘Really? It’s not in your control?’

I could feel the tension now. He wasn’t smiling and his eyes never wavered from me. Why was he asking me these questions? What about the other boys?

Mr Archie added some more wood to the fire. ‘What would you do if you saw the gates shut for the last time, chained and locked, and you could never see your teachers or your friends again?’

I was quiet for a minute. ‘Everything I know about myself and my life revolves around that place. If it closed down, I’d be no one.’

I could feel the boys stare at me in silence.

‘Do you know what it feels like to wake up and read the stories in the news about how there’s no future for boys like us, or that we’ll never be anything but criminals. Do they know what it does to us? How it affects us? How little parts of us believe them when they say we’re nothing?’

My hands were shaking. I had planned to share something about wanting to play for the Bulldogs but something just snapped in me under Captain Black’s pressure. ‘I’d be broken if the school closed.’

Mr Archie sat beside me. ‘You are more than what they say about you, lad. I will do everything in my power to see you graduate from the place that will make you the man I know you can become.’

My eyes felt hot and I nudged Huss to go next.

‘Sometimes the teachers do my head in, but wallah, I’d be shattered if the school closed, too. I wouldn’t see these boys every day and eat manoush.’

‘What’s manoush?’ Matt asked.

‘The best morning pizza, bro,’ Huss said licking his lips. ‘Like, the cheese melts in long strings and the fatty oil runs down your hands. It’s the best.’

Captain Black looked at Aaron. ‘What about you, kid? Wanna let these boys know something about you?’

Aaron took a deep breath. ‘I never wanted to join this competition but my mum forced me to.’

The boys laughed.

Mr Archie sat back in his spot across from me. ‘Lad, you should’ve seen what I had to go through to get these boys to agree. Actually, come to think of it, *most* of you didn’t want to be here.’

‘You can give me more than that, kid,’ Captain Black said.

Aaron looked around at each of our faces, stopping at me. ‘I’m here because my mum thought that getting out of the house and trying something

new would get my mind off the fact that my dad died five months ago in a car accident.'

The fire crackled. Aaron looked at Captain Black. 'Is that enough for you?'

Captain Black looked over at the rest of us. 'You guys have any questions for Aaron? Seems to me that he's not really communicated much with any of you this week.'

I'll admit it was good to see the instructors grilling someone other than me for once.

'So, you're friends with Hunter?' PJ asked. 'That shithead ranga who's always on at Riley and Lee?'

Aaron dropped his gaze and began to fidget. 'Our families –'

'Come on, mate,' Matt interrupted. 'You were closer than "oh, our families work together". That excuse got tired a long time ago.'

Lee piped up. 'Pretty sure it was you who came up with that shitty "Snow Boy" joke, wasn't it?'

'Seriously?!' Ibby asked. 'And you're all still so nice to him?'

Aaron stood up. 'Okay, I'll own that. Hunter and I were mates for a long time. And yeah, I did a lot of stuff with him that I'm really not proud of.' He looked over at his schoolmates. 'I was...I wasn't a good captain.'

'You were a bully,' Riley said quietly.

Aaron nodded. 'I know I should've done this a long time ago but...I'm sorry, man. For calling you that stuff. For all of it.'

'What changed?' I asked, curiously. He looked at me, not understanding. I gestured between him and Riley. 'You know. These guys were only worth bullying before, and Hunter was worth your friendship. What changed?'

Aaron went quiet for a minute. Mr Archie had just opened his mouth to end the silence when Aaron finally found the right words.

'I guess lately I've been thinking about what kind of person I want to be.'

'Because of your dad?' Ibby asked.

Aaron shrugged. I got the feeling he was all talked out for the moment. Riley went over to stand next to him, hand outstretched.

'It's all good, mate. No hard feelings.'

Lee nodded as his two teammates shook hands. 'Water under the bridge.'

‘Yeah,’ Matt agreed. ‘Just don’t be a shithead after all this, yeah?’

Mr Archie nodded with approval. ‘Well done for taking ownership of your past, Aaron. And I’m equally impressed with you other lads accepting his apology and moving past it.’

Huss had the weirdest expression on his face. ‘That’s it? “Sorry” and it’s all good?’

‘Words can have a big impact, boys,’ Captain Black said. ‘You have to think about what comes out of your mouth, because once words are set free, no matter how big or small, they have power.’

‘But we’re just joking around,’ Ibby said. ‘People call me fat all the time but I just ignore it. Like, I accept it?’

‘Why?’ Mr Archie asked. ‘You don’t need to accept anything you don’t want to.’

PJ poked his stick in the fire. ‘I don’t like it when people call me coconut. It makes me feel dumb. But I don’t want to be the guy that chucks a sook because someone says stuff.’

Captain Black stood up and walked around the campfire. ‘Mr Archie mentioned respect to you boys when we started this exercise. Did you ever think that it also extended to respecting yourselves?’

‘Self-respect doesn’t mean *chucking a sook*, PJ,’ Mr Archie said. ‘It’s about recognising your own power and your own worth and not letting anyone tread on that.’

‘So, what do I do?’ PJ asked. Ibby sat up, also eager to know.

Captain Black looked at Mr Archie and smiled. ‘Well, I’m glad you asked. This is the perfect opportunity to start to develop a sense of worth.’

‘At camp?’ Huss asked, dubiously.

‘At *your age*,’ Mr Archie explained. ‘This stage of your life is what can make or break you, what sets you apart from those who make the right choices or those who give into their anger and their disadvantages and end up trapped in the same cycle as those who went before them.’

‘So, we should talk about what’s bothering us?’ Matt asked.

‘Yes,’ Mr Archie said, looking directly at me. ‘Don’t be the lad that sweeps things under the carpet, then explodes and goes into a rage. You’ll only end up hurting yourself and your team.’

After all of that deep and meaningful pep talk stuff, it was Matt’s turn.



‘I love surfing. When I catch a wave, I feel like I’m on top of the world. It’s the best feeling being in the water.’

‘I hate the water,’ Huss said.

‘Nah, dude, I love it. It’s not just surfing for me. It’s...freedom. I feel like I can do anything when I’m in the water.’

Last but not least came Riley.

‘Um, besides chasing ghosts, I love to draw.’

‘What?’ Ibby shuddered, and hunched his shoulders. ‘Ghosts?’

‘It was a joke, Ibby.’

The boys cracked up and it was the first time I saw Riley actually laugh properly. He took off his beanie and placed it beside him. ‘You’ve all seen my hair now so I guess there’s no point in this being on my head.’

‘What do you like to draw?’ Aaron asked.

‘Mainly trees. I know it’s weird but –’ He stopped for a second, looking over at Aaron. ‘I don’t want to keep bringing it up, but when you and Hunter started, you know, I would sit under trees and just sketch. It’s what calmed me down.’

Aaron stared at the ground.

‘Part of dealing with your anger is also dealing with the guilt when you’re confronted,’ Mr Archie explained. ‘It’s your past now, Aaron. Don’t make it your future.’

We talked a little more about trying to come together as a team, about training and how it would all work. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Mr Archie would pick up the boys from Cronulla in the morning for training and drop them back at their school. Fridays would be game day, and because our school needed help with our image, Mr Archie had fought for the games to take place at Punchbowl Park.

‘More positive news for the area,’ he said.

We headed back to our cabins and slept like the dead. We had done so many activities during the week but not one of them had been as draining as the campfire counselling session. It took a different level of strength to let people know how I felt, and then there was all the stuff the other guys had talked about. It was a lot to take in. Knowing that Aaron’s dad had died recently sort of made sense of why he had been acting like such an ass. We weren’t best friends now and we probably would never be, but I didn’t feel the need to punch him so badly anymore. Of course, Huss wasn’t convinced

and thought that this comp and Aaron were both fake. He was still only here so Big Haji wouldn't see him expelled.

The next morning, our things were packed and we were waiting for the bus when Mr Archie called Aaron and me over.

'I know you lads didn't get off to a great start, but I'm proud of what you shared last night. You both stepped it up and the boys responded to your open and honest leadership.'

We both nodded, trying to figure out if there was a 'but' coming.

'But...'

Of course.

'But I must say that during the work on Ben's farm, I thought you lads were going to break and confess you brought the firecrackers,' he said. 'I'm not going to lie, I'm impressed.'

'Impressed with what? We didn't do it,' I said.

Aaron agreed. 'We were all sleeping.'

Mr Archie nodded a few times and smiled. 'I did one last sweep of the bush around Team A's cabin. I think this belongs to one of your teammates.'

He handed me Riley's inhaler.

Aaron and I stared at him, trying to figure out where he was going with this.

'Let's just say, you both now owe me,' he said, still smiling. 'You will have a few, shall we say, *extra* responsibilities, and since both of you want to be captain, you'll have to take one for the team.' He walked off like nothing had happened.

Without speaking to each another, Aaron and I headed over to Riley, who sat with his eyes closed.

'I think you might need this,' I said, handing over the inhaler. He sat up. 'Where'd you find it?'

'In our cabin,' Aaron swiftly replied. 'You must've left it there when you were packing.'

The bus – and crazy Beth – swung wildly into the parking lot. It looked like her driving skills hadn't improved over the last few days.

## Chapter 14

Saturday morning, I had hoped to relax and chill and sleep in my own bed. Unfortunately, Aunty Salma had other plans. While I'd been away at camp, she had decided that her mounds of luggage needed more space, so my brothers and I were forced to vacate our room and cram ourselves into Feda and Amira's room. Abdul and Saff shared an old mattress on the floor. My bed was made out of different couch cushions from the living room, which slipped and slid around on the cold tiles during the night. It was 'aab – rude – not to accommodate guests, my parents said, even if it meant my brothers stepped on me during the night every time they went to the toilet.

*Welcome home, Tariq.*

'My bed is literally being used for her makeup,' I said to my brothers as I tried to fix the cushions back in place with a fitted bedsheet. 'Why didn't you guys fight back?'

'Tozz feek,' Abdul said, annoyed. 'While you were off on holidays, we had to totally rearrange the house and set up the perfect lighting for her billion selfies.'

'So we have to sleep like this until she leaves?' I protested. 'How the hell did she bring everything over here in the first place?'

'I'm sleeping!' Feda snapped.

'Alright, alright, stop yelling.' Saff tried to calm things down.

'We have to get up anyway. I think we're taking Aunty Salma out.'

Without warning, Amira jumped from her bed and landed on me, her knee driving deep into my guts.

'Seriously, Bob?'

'Me and Uncle Charlie have almost sold out of our jars of honey,' she said, her hair tangled around her like a lion's mane. 'Khorloo said that you can sell some at school.'

'Huh? How am I supposed to sell black market honey at school for that crazy embarrassment of an uncle? A pillow came flying across the room and hit me in the face.'

‘Don’t talk about Khorloo that way,’ Feda said, now awake. ‘He does a lot for you.’

Another two pillows flew my way. ‘Don’t be a gronk,’ Abdul said.

‘He’s been copping enough shit from Auntie Salma without getting it from you, too,’ Saff added.

‘Yeah, yeah, but I don’t have time to help him out. There’s this footy comp and the poetry thing on top of everything else. Bob, you know I would, but I don’t have time to sell honey for your business.’

She crossed her arms and scrunched her face. ‘You’re not my favourite anymore.’

Abdul and Saff popped up from their mattress, each trying to take the newly-vacated spot as Bob’s favourite.

‘Ya Allah, *fine!*’ I said, giving in. ‘Alright, I’ll help you.’

She kissed my face a few times before bouncing onto Feda’s bed. ‘He said yes,’ I heard her whisper.

‘No one can say no to you, habibti,’ Feda whispered back.

Now that Auntie Salma had settled in, it was time to take her sightseeing using my parents’ ‘List of Places to Take Imported Lebanese Family’. On today’s agenda was the Royal Botanic Gardens.

The morning was as crazy as usual, with Mum in a panic and Dad trying to stuff the car with unnecessary things. We fought over the bathroom, and Amira clawed her way through to get in there first.

‘I’ll sneak you some Nutella.’ Abdul tried to strike up the first bargain in the weekly bathroom negotiations.

‘Don’t listen to him, Bob,’ Saff said. ‘He can’t even reach the cupboard.’

‘I’ll take you to Bunnings to sniff the fumes in the paint section,’ I offered.

No movement. Weird, because that usually worked.

‘C’mon Bob. I already said I’m going to help you sell some honey,’ I tried once more.

Feda pushed me out of the way. ‘Step aside, you morons. Bob, I’ll let you wear my makeup and help you straighten your hair.’

‘That’s the dumbest deal ever,’ I said, trying to inch closer to the door. ‘You know she hates that stu –’

Amira opened the door just enough to pop her head out. ‘With glittery stuff on my eyes, too?’

We stared at her in shock.

‘Some boys said I look like a boy.’ She opened the door a little more. ‘They said my head looks like a football.’

‘Who are these boys?!’ Saff demanded.

‘Where do they live? What do they look like?’ Abdul added. ‘We’ll kill ’em!’

Feda rolled her eyes. ‘Chill out, they’re eight-year-olds.’

‘But why does she like girly stuff now?’ Saff asked.

Abdul shook his head. ‘It’s too early for Bob to be into that stuff. Next minute, she’ll be on Instagram.’

‘Relax,’ Feda said. ‘It’s just some makeup. It’s not going to hurt anyone.’

While my brothers and Feda argued about what Amira should and shouldn’t like, I leaned closer to the door. ‘I’ll speak to Ibby, PJ and Huss, and we’ll make sure those boys never tease you again, okay?’

We all eventually managed to get dressed while Aunty Salma painted her nails. Abdul and Saff were furious because my parents made them wear the same red Adidas shirts and black shorts. It was my dad’s latest genius move to establish peace in the house.

‘Until you stop fighting about clothes, that’s when you can wear different things,’ Dad said. ‘Everyday same argument, now you have nothing to argue about. So you stop fighting, then maybe your mum let you wear different clothes.’

No wonder my dad liked Mr Archie so much – they both had the same sort of wild approaches to problems.

Instead of eskys, my parents used old cucumber and tomato styrofoam boxes they kept from the markets. My dad made us pack green plastic chairs, a fold-up table and our bright yellow gazebo with my dad’s Australian flag. Uncle Charlie had to take the ice-cream truck to help ease the load, and, thank God, Abdul lost scissors paper rock and ended up in the truck.

It took us about fifteen minutes to find parking at the gardens. My dad, with his fluffy white beard, wearing his white abaya, popped his head out of the window and asked random people if they were leaving their car spots. My uncle zoomed up and down with the ice-cream music on blast, which caused more commotion as a long trail of kids ran after the truck.

‘Ya Allah. I have no ice cream!’ he yelled. ‘I have good honey. Come buy honey.’

Saff and Abdul carried the foam boxes, still arguing about whose fault it was that they looked like twins. I tried to take advantage of the chaos and quietly slip away, but my uncle grabbed me by my collar and handed me a box of honey jars.

‘Yallah, you help Bob and me sell these to Australian later.’

As I placed the box of honey jars under one of the gigantic fig trees, I saw a couple of people pack their things and move away, but we were used to that by now. The rest of the family settled our tables and chairs in Mum’s favourite spot, with a view of the Quay and the Opera House.

‘Shoo haydar?’ Aunty Salma said, unimpressed with the view. ‘The bridge isn’t even that big.’

‘Maybe we should inject it with some botox,’ I said under my breath.

Mum kicked me beneath the table and raised her eyebrows.

The table was set with our traditional Lebanese breakfast: olive-oil drenched yoghurt, watermelon and toasted haloumi, boiled eggs and homemade crunchy falafels. My uncle set up the honey jars on the mini fold-up table as he and Amira discussed how they were going to split the millions of dollars they’d make.

Aunty Salma in her ladder-high heels decided she wasn’t hungry and went to take photos with an old man who was feeding lorikeets with a bag of bread. She raised her phone to the sky when a lorikeet landed on her shoulder. She smiled from ear to ear, gesturing for us to come over. We turned away and pretended not to notice, no matter how many times Mum told us to get up.

‘Yallah, I’ll go,’ Uncle Charlie said, tucking his singlet in his pants. He thought it would be hilarious to put a fistful of bread all over his sister’s hair. It didn’t take long for her to be swooped by all the birds in the gardens. As though my family didn’t make enough noise settling in, Aunty Salma now screamed and squawked loud enough to wake the dead.

‘Make her stop,’ Saff said covering his ears. ‘She sounds like a dying cat.’

Eventually, we packed up our portable restaurant and headed towards the Opera House. Even though it was almost a half-hour walk, Dad liked to check out the scenery and Mum loved smelling the flowers.

‘Okay, everybody stay here. I forgot to get something from van.’ Dad rushed away. He eventually came back holding a red megaphone. ‘Okay, we now go on walk and I show you around.’

Saff closed his eyes and prayed to disappear. ‘Ya Allah, please take me.’

Dad was now the self-proclaimed tour guide and tried to convince Auntie Salma that we had the best city in the world. We walked through the gardens and stopped at different plants and trees where Dad read all the information signs through the megaphone. He couldn’t pronounce half the words so he’d just make them up. Amira was up on my shoulders because once again she was too tired to walk.

At long last we reached the gate where the gardens opened onto the Opera House forecourt, when a man yelled out to my dad. He was a tall, muscular man, with a snake tattoo on his forearm, someone I never thought my dad would know.

‘As Salaam Alaykoom, Abu Jihad,’ Dad said. ‘How are you?’

‘Hamdulillah. I’m good, Hajj.’

Dad ushered me, Abdul and Saff forward to shake Abu Jihad’s hand. ‘These my sons.’

‘Ah, salaam, boys, strong sons,’ Abu Jihad smiled, just as the smell of coconut floated along the breeze. ‘My daughter JouJou and my younger son, Jihad.’

‘He’s in my class,’ Amira pointed at Jihad from my shoulders. ‘He’s the one that helped me when those boys said I had a football head.’

In any other situation, I would’ve clapped the kid on the back and thanked him for standing up for Amira, but I couldn’t move my eyes from his elder sister.

It was Jamila. Here. Where she was about to meet the whole circus that was my family.

‘Mashallah, your daughter is beautiful!’ Mum exclaimed with a smile. I’d seen that smile before. ‘How old is she?’ she asked. ‘And where you live? What school you go to, habibti?’ There was only one reason Mum grilled girls for this sort of information, and she wasn’t subtle about it.

Jamila’s hair waved in the wind as she answered Mum’s questions in perfect Arabic. Her eyes then caught mine and she twitched an eyebrow, as if to ask *‘I wonder if you’d look at my short dress now, in front of your*

*family?*' I could feel the sweat dripping down my back and my face burned. No girl had ever made me this nervous.

Amira tugged at my hair and leaned down to whisper, 'Stop staring at her, weirdo.'

Jehad came over, so I put Amira down and they talked for a while as Jamila made her way to me. She tucked her hair behind her ears. 'Tariq, right? From Poetry?'

'Uh. Yeah.'

She then smiled, but that just made me more nervous. 'Should I be worried?'

'Worried about what?' My tongue felt ten times too big, and I sounded like I was talking through a mouthful of cotton balls.

She looked at her dress. 'Well, I wouldn't want you to get too distracted in front of your whole family. Might be embarrassing for you. Again.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'Not going to do it again.'

She smiled.

'Like, seriously. Wallah. Am I off the hook now? Or are you still going to kill me?'

'Jury's still out,' she said, before turning to Amira and Jehad. 'So, this must be the girl he doesn't stop talking about. Something about the monkey bars?'

'Yeah that's our Amira. She's been trying for the last month to get all the way across without feeling like her hands are going to fall off, but still no luck.'

Jamila squinted against the sun. 'Maybe she should wear gloves. You know the ones with rubber grip? That could help her hold on.'

I shook my head and laughed. 'So, all this time she's been trying to finish it and all it would've taken is gloves?'

'JouJou,' her dad called. 'Yallah, we need to go.'

'I'll see you at next week's class, Tariq,' she said, with a quick glance my way as she walked off.

I liked the way she had said my name. It was a dumb move with my family all around me, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from her.

'You know,' she called without turning around. 'The flowers in the gardens are much nicer than the ones on my dress. Maybe you should stare at them a little more.'



How had she known I was looking?

Okay, I needed to make a good impression on this girl, especially to make up for coming across as such a sleaze the two times we'd met. I racked my brain for a plan.

*I could grow a beard?*

Who was I kidding, no I couldn't. The most I'd be able to manage would be a patchy moustache, and I was pretty sure that wasn't going to help me *not* look like a sleaze.

Someone flicked my ear from behind.

'Ow!' I glared at Feda, who stood there, looking like she was trying really hard not to laugh. 'Shouldn't you be off killing sick people?'

'I don't need to go to work on my day off to do that, little bro. Plenty of sick people here, right in front of me.' She looked to where Jamila was walking off with her family and then back at me with a grin. 'Love life's going well, I see. Maybe you could use some help.'

'Maybe you should shut up.'

This time she did laugh. 'Whatever. If you need some advice about how not to come off as a total perve, you know where to find me.'

'Yeah, unmarried, still living with Mum and Dad. You're a real pro at love lives, aren't you?'

For once, the dig didn't get a rise out of her. She just sighed and looked at me with what might even have been pity. 'Tariq, did it ever occur to you that one of the many reasons I'm still single is because more guys don't listen to decent advice from their sisters about how to behave? She seemed nice. It would be a shame to let her slip away.' She patted my cheek and wandered off.

## Chapter 15

Our school had its first official review team come in on the Monday after camp. Mr Archie let us know that the men in suits were going to pop in here and there to jot down the changes we were making and take that info back to a department panel.

‘Don’t concern yourselves with them,’ he said. ‘Your job is to follow the rules and make sure you do everything in your power to stay out of trouble.’

Mr Ahmed had managed to keep the boys on track while we were at camp, with only a few boys being asked to leave the school for breaking their contracts. Enrolments going down was one of the big factors in the possible closure of the school. Mr Archie said that we needed to have at least 200 students, but right now, we were at 186.

As well as the review team, there was also an intense BBL meeting with Mr Ahmed and Miss K. They had written out a list of expectations for me.

- Control your anger.
- Be respectful.
- If you see trouble, try to stop it or tell a teacher.
- No physical violence.
- Be committed and hardworking.
- Before making a decision, think of the consequences.
- Be supportive and fair.
- Take responsibilities more seriously.
- Work towards effective communication.

‘You forgot “Save the world”,’ I said. ‘It’s been two weeks with all these changes and you guys need to relax.’

‘You boys have been relaxing for years now,’ Mr Ahmed said. His office had boxes stacked all over the floor, with labels like *School Policies* and

*Student Records.* ‘We, including staff, need to be more proactive and do what we can to help the school.’

‘If you’re serious about your footy career, then this comp is perfect,’ Miss K added. ‘You’ll have a chance to win a scholarship with the Bulldogs, and you never know, it could change your life.’

I knew winning the comp could open doors for me but it was hard to focus with so much going on at one time.

‘Great! I have faith in you, Tariq. I know you can not only meet these expectations – you can actually exceed them.’ She gestured to dismiss me, then added, ‘Oh, and don’t forget we’re heading over to the girls’ school for the poetry workshops tomorrow.’

As I left the office, I heard Mr Ahmed ask her if I had made amends with Mariam. He had almost chewed my head off when I ghosted her.

‘She got him back good,’ I heard Miss K say, and the two of them laughed like it was the funniest thing ever.

*Thanks, guys.*

Our first official training session began on Tuesday at the crack of dawn, with Matt accidentally converting to Islam. He’d been hounding Ibby to teach him a few Arabic words to help ease his anxiety since most of his days were now going to be spent in our hood. Ibby thought it would be funny to teach him the Shahada.

‘Now repeat after me.’ Ibby held Matt’s face and looked deep into his eyes. ‘Ash-hadu an La ilaha il-lal lah, wa Ash Hadu Ana Muhammadan Rasulu-lah.’

I sat on the bench and watched the colour drain from Matt’s face when Huss explained what he had said. Ibby hugged Matt a few times and referred to him as Mohammed. We all laughed when he tried to get Matt to wear his taqiyah.

‘Dude,’ Matt pleaded. ‘I’m not racist or anything, but is there a way you can undo it?’

‘Matt, they’re just joking,’ Mr Ahmed said, giving Ibby his cap back. ‘Don’t worry, you’re not Muslim.’

‘Yes, he is,’ Ibby said. ‘It’s done. You’re one of us now.’

Matt was laughing nervously, not wanting to offend us, when I noticed Riley struggling with his boots.

I walked over. 'You alright, bro? We're about to start soon.'

'We should've just left Hunter alone.' He stopped trying to fix his boots and looked up at me. 'He's not going to stop now.'

'What do you mean? Did he do something to you?'

He showed me some photos on his phone. 'I don't have any proof it was him, but my bike and our garage door were sprayed with this.'

I zoomed in on the photos to see the words *Snow Boy* and *Traitor Freak* in big, red letters. 'Have you told anyone?'

Riley shook his head. 'It happened on the weekend. I came home from the library and saw it.'

'You don't have cameras?' I asked.

'No, but my dad is thinking of getting some now.'

Huss walked over and wrapped his arm around my neck. 'Yallah bro, we're waiting for you guys.'

I told him about the situation.

'It's not our problem,' he said in Arabic. 'Let his people deal with it.'

'The guy needs help, bro,' I replied, also in Arabic. 'If we can help, then why not?'

'Nah man, he wouldn't do the same for us.'

I turned back to Riley to find he had already walked off. He didn't need to understand Arabic to read Huss's body language.

'I'm not saying to go SWAT on this Hunter guy, but at least let's see what the situation is,' I said. 'It's not a joke. The guy vandalised his house.'

Huss shrugged. 'Look, Riley's alright, but I'm not going to go out of my way to help him.'

'Let's go, lads,' Mr Archie called as I was about to argue the point. 'We need to get started.'

There was something about the angry red letters on Riley's house that made me feel sick. I imagined someone coming over to my home and doing something like that, and how it would make my family feel.

But I needed to be smart about making Hunter pay.

Mr Ahmed and Mr Archie had set up the field and the recent rain wasn't going to stop their drills from hell. We huddled around, trying to keep as warm as possible in the cold wind. A couple of birds picked out rubbish from the bins.

‘Hey, Aaron,’ Ibby called out. ‘Look, the Yahooda long-nosed birds came to help you.’

‘We’d probably win more games if they helped out,’ Aaron replied, unfazed.

Ibby turned to me and nodded. ‘I like him. He can take a joke.’

‘Remember, words have power,’ Lee sang operatically. ‘Jokes can be harmful, too.’

He was so random. PJ obviously still couldn’t make heads or tails of Lee’s sense of humour, but by now I found it funny, and so did Aaron. Ibby tried to tackle him to the ground but Lee escaped like a slippery fish.

Mr Ahmed high-fived Lee. ‘Good, we’ll need you to be that evasive during our games too.’

‘Before we begin our training session, we’re going to take our first official team photo,’ Mr Archie told us.

We gathered around, our eyes still puffy and our shoulders slumped. Mr Ahmed asked Aaron and me to stand in the centre.

‘That’s better. We want the captains to look like leaders.’

*Captains?* Plural?

Aaron and I turned to each other in surprise as the flash burst on the camera.

‘Now we’ll have your reactions forever,’ Mr Archie smiled.

All that energy and time at camp I’d spent trying to prove that I was better than Aaron had been for nothing. I should’ve known they’d pull something like this.

‘I don’t know what’s worse.’ Huss was trying not to laugh. ‘Not being captain at all or only being half a captain.’

‘Telhas teeze,’ I muttered, but once I got over the shock, I had to admit it was pretty funny that Aaron and I had been lumped together yet again.

Mr Archie ran through the other positions. Huss was fullback and goal kicker, Lee and Matt were wings, PJ and Ibby forwards, and Riley was dummy-half. Mr Ahmed took the boys for some warm-up drills while Aaron and I stayed to get feedback from Mr Archie. He still intimidated me and I somehow always ended up agreeing to something I didn’t want to do.

‘Here’s the deal,’ he said. ‘Truth is that you both deserve to be captain and because you lads owe me, I expect you both to put your differences aside and actually start to think about the team instead of yourselves.’

‘How are both of us supposed to be captain on the field?’ I asked.

‘And what if we disagree?’ Aaron said.

Mr Archie shrugged. ‘It’s your job to figure it out and bring the team together. As the BBL, Tariq, you should already have the skills. Start to put them to good use.’

Aaron sighed, then shook his head. ‘Footy is not supposed to be this hard, sir. Can’t you just choose one of us?’

‘The decision’s been made. You will do whatever you need to, both on and off the field, to make this partnership work or risk letting Hunter and his team become the competition champions.’

He then swung the net of balls over his shoulder. ‘Oh, and before I forget. You’ll be spending time outside the comp trying to figure out how to win some games.’

‘Like how?’ we both asked.

‘I don’t know. Go to each other’s places. Eat some pizza. Watch a footy game together,’ he said, walking away. ‘You never know how many things you lads will have in common until you let go of the past and move forward. The team depends on it.’

Fantastic. After years of skating under the radar, all of a sudden I was supposed to be the new Muslim superman or something.

‘It’s like they don’t get we have other things on,’ Aaron said, almost echoing my own thoughts. He sighed. ‘Fine. Let’s just try and work it out and see what happens.’

‘Just don’t chuck a tantrum if something doesn’t go your way, and storm off like you did at camp,’ I sniped at him.

He raised an eyebrow at me. ‘And just don’t smash people with food trays and throw chairs if we lose a game.’

Training was harder than we were all used to. We practised drill after drill and failed each and every one. We were all still adjusting to our new roles and teammates, but if we were anything like this in our first game, pretty much every team was going to smash us. The only positive I could see was that Lee was seriously trying to be the new Usain Bolt. His speed was unlike anything I had ever seen. When he ran down the line, his cheeks flapped in the wind and we’d struggle to keep up.

Aaron and I tried to take control of the drills, but we both had different set plays in mind. He wanted to play on the fifth tackle, but I wanted to

grubber the ball to try and find open space.

‘Sir, they’re calling out different things,’ Ibbby complained to Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed. ‘Who do we follow?’

‘They’re your captains, boys,’ Mr Ahmed said. ‘Let them know how you feel.’

Matt rested on his knees, trying to catch his breath. ‘Can’t you guys share set plays? Like, one of you take one set and the other waits his turn?’

‘That’s the dumbest idea ever,’ Huss said, turning to Aaron. ‘Just let Tariq take over. You’re not that good, anyway.’

‘Maybe if you would pass the ball when I called it, we’d have a shot at being “that good”,’ Aaron fired back, wiping his forehead with his jersey.

‘*What* did you say?’ Huss’s pride had taken a hit and it wasn’t going to go down well.

I pushed myself in front of Huss. ‘Relax, bro. Just try to pass when you’ve made a break and you’ve got support.’

‘What, you’re on *his* side now?’ Huss sneered, redirecting his anger at me. ‘Kol khara, bro. You and him can go jump.’

‘At least we know how to play and we’re not hogging the ball,’ Aaron said, storming closer. ‘I’m your captain, you do what I *tell* you to do.’

Oh shit. I don’t think Aaron had any idea how close he was to literally getting his head ripped right off.

Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed watched from a distance as I tried to hold Huss back. ‘Huss! Huss, CHILL! We’re on the same team in the comp! Remember the contracts!’

‘*Fuck* the contracts,’ he shouted, shoving me away. ‘Fuck the comp and fuck you, bro. Why aren’t you saying something to the Yahooda? You and him best mates now?’

‘You can’t do anything to me,’ Aaron said coolly. ‘Check yourself before you try to come at me.’

I turned back to Aaron, keeping my shoulder between him and Huss. ‘Can you stop pushing him, you idiot? *Both* of you relax. Archie and Ahmed are right there. Do you wanna screw this team over before we’ve even begun?’

Huss breathed heavily like a raging bull. ‘Don’t act like you give a shit about this team, Tariq. *You’re* the one that said we’d just be faking it so Mr Archie couldn’t suspend us. Remember?’

Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed were now close enough to hear everything. I felt my stomach drop as I saw the cold disappointment in their eyes. The low clouds rumbled in the sky.

‘Pack up, lads,’ Mr Archie said, not even looking at me. ‘Training is done.’

I glared at Huss. ‘Why the hell did you go and say I was faking it, ya hmar?’

His eyes still sparked with rage. ‘What? Too chickenshit to say it in front of your new friends?’

I felt like I’d been punched in the stomach.

Huss grabbed his bags and stormed off.

‘He’s not normal,’ Aaron said. ‘He literally lost the plot over nothing.’

‘I had it under control but you just couldn’t be quiet for one second?’ I snapped back at him.

‘You expect me to be quiet when he’s threatening me and calling me things like Yahooda? What? You think I don’t know what that means?’ I tried to walk away but Aaron followed. ‘You need to do something about him. He’s the weakest point in this team and you seem to be the only one who can say shit to him.’

‘You think after all *that* I can do shit about Huss?’

‘He’s a goddamn liability, and you know it. He’s got no place on this team and I’m amazed you guys bother with him at all.’

I turned around and shoved him in the shoulder. ‘You think I’ve forgotten that the only reason your team puts up with you now is because they decided to buy your bullshit apologies for being an arsehole all these years?’

He narrowed his eyes. ‘At least I’m *trying* to do something different, instead of sitting back and complaining how nobody gives me a shot just because I live in Punchbowl.’

At those words, I felt the fight go out of me. It was like I was sinking into the ground with each step I took. Everyone around me expected me to move mountains, and I had no idea what the hell I was supposed to do.

‘Listen, Aaron, Huss is my best mate. He’s been my best mate since before we could even walk. I don’t know what you expect me to do but –’

‘But what?’ he interjected, standing staunch in front of me. ‘You too scared to tell him that he needs to back down?’



‘What, like how you told Hunter to back down when Riley’s house and bike were graffitied over the weekend?’

The other boys, who had been trying to pretend they were invisible all this time, suddenly all turned to stare at Riley.

‘What did that khanzir do?’ Ibbby demanded.

‘Graffiti?’ Aaron repeated. ‘What are you talking about?’ ‘Whatever, man,’ I said, pushing past him as Riley tried to downplay what had happened. ‘Don’t act like you don’t know what Hunter is capable of. How about you pull up your mates, then I’ll consider pulling up mine.’

Ibbby: Hey, Hussy...Huss the Hog. We’re waiting for you at Tariq’s.

PJ: Don’t forget it’s movie night.

Ibbby: Bob said if you don’t come in 5 min,  
she’s never going to talk to you again.

Tariq: Stop chucking a sook and come. Mum  
made you macaroni bi laban.

*No response.*

Huss lived on his phone and I could see that he’d read the messages. So he was choosing to ignore us.

Ibbby threw a few cushions at me. ‘Just say sorry, Tariq. He feels you didn’t have his back.’

‘He’s the one that snitched on me to Archie and Ahmed. They didn’t speak to me all day. He didn’t have *my* back.’

PJ scooped up a few spoons of macaroni like he hadn’t eaten in days. ‘Yeah, but Hussy didn’t mean it. He does stuff like that when he’s angry.’

‘Wallah, I am so fucking *sick* of that excuse!’

Amira lay down in my lap and looked up at me through her glasses. Auntie Salma had bought her a pink fairy skirt, which she now wore over her overalls. ‘Haram for Huss. It was an accident, Tariq. Just message him one more time.’

Mulan was locked out of the Emperor’s palace and now had to find another way to help her friends even though they had left her in the mountains and turned their backs on her. I didn’t want to message Huss. I was still pissed at him for exposing me to Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed, but

I knew if I didn't check up on him, it would grow into a much bigger problem. Huss didn't let things go. He brooded and festered until he exploded.

Tariq: Let's just forget about it. Bob is waiting for you. We're almost finished *Mulan* and about to start *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

Huss: Yallah be there in 5.

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## Chapter 16

Between the potholes, missed red lights and a completely unused left blinker, I was lucky to survive Miss K's drive to the girls' high school for the next poetry workshop. She squinted over the steering wheel most of the way there.

'You sure you don't need glasses, Miss?' I asked, gripping my seatbelt. 'You've crossed a red light again and –'

'Orange light, thank you very much,' she said. 'My fiancé bought me this new car and I'm getting used to it.'

'Miss, you've been engaged for like a million years. When are you going to have your wedding?'

'Soon,' she said, then looked at me. 'And no, you won't be invited.'

Anwar leaned forward to poke his head between us. 'Hate to break this up but, Miss, I'm finding it hard to work with Mariam. I'm trying to stick to the topic of "Place", but all she does is rap Cardi B songs. C'mon, Miss, it's not fair.'

Miss K turned into the school parking lot before driving up onto the kerb.

I turned around and pushed Anwar's head back. 'You almost made Miss lose control of the car.'

'Relax, it was just a small bump,' she said. 'Anwar, we'll talk about this later. All of you just go to the office and sign in while I get some things from the car.'

Ibby: Huss, where are you? I'm waiting for my V.

PJ: It's your turn to shout us manoush.

Huss: I've got some stuff to do. I'll see you boys later.

Tariq: Make sure Archie doesn't catch you  
jigging. He'll kick you out, yeah?

I turned back to see Miss K carrying a few heavy bags. 'You're not superwoman, Miss. Let me help.'

'Thanks, Tariq,' she said, shaking out her arms. 'You can be a gentleman when you want to be.'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah. Am I going to cop another lecture?'

She smiled. 'I get it. There's been a lot to take in over the last few weeks. How are you holding up?'

We walked towards the office. 'Besides Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed not talking to me and Huss mad about the Cronulla captain, yeah, everything's sweet, Miss.'

'I heard what happened at training yesterday,' she said. 'I was disappointed to hear that you were just *pretending*.'

I didn't have an answer for her, so I changed the subject, putting the bags down. 'What the hell is in these?'

'Books,' she said, gesturing at me to keep walking. 'Our library is about to go under renovations, so I thought the girls' school could make use of them.'

By the time I reached the library, I thought my arms were going to fall off. Mrs Pepper welcomed us in and gave me a wink. 'Thanks for bringing those in for us, Tariq.'

'He's really sweet when he wants to be,' Miss K said, smiling. 'Okay, Tariq just put them next to the computers and get to your partner.'

Jamila was already typing away on her laptop, with a pen held between her teeth, when I made my way over to our desk.

'Hey,' I said, putting my bag down opposite her.

She tapped away a bit more then looked up. 'Hey.' She put the pen back between her teeth and resumed typing. Her hair was up in a ponytail today, with a purple bow just behind her right ear. I tried to remember some of the conversations I had rehearsed in my head to try not to come off as a creep.

'So, what are we going to do for our presentation?' I asked, feeling my heart beat a little faster. 'Do you want to talk about it?'

Jamila looked up from her laptop again. 'Yeah, sure. What did you have in mind?'

I looked around the library as I sat down beside her, and realised that most of the people here already knew what they were doing. They'd had an

extra week to work it out, of course. ‘Honestly, I’ve never done anything like this before, so I have no idea.’

‘Did you have an idea about a place we could write about?’

I was staring at her laptop while I tried to think, when I noticed her wrists were covered in drawings of flowers and vines. ‘You drew those?’

‘Tulips and roses. They’re my favourite.’

‘So, are you into tattoos?’

Jamila smiled. ‘No. I hate the idea of anything permanent on my body. I can wash this off.’

This was promising too. I forgot all about finding an idea for our presentation in favour of getting to know her better. ‘So, you’re new right?’

‘Yeah. We moved here a few weeks ago from Campbelltown. You know the day your friend got stung by a bee and the whole ice-cream truck thing?’

I tried not to wince when she brought that up. It might be better to stick to the topic at hand. ‘So, I was thinking about writing about my school. You know, it’s going through a lot of stuff right now, and maybe if I write something about it, I could help somehow.’

I started to tell her about all the things that had happened over the last few weeks, how our school was in deep trouble. She tore a piece of paper from her book and passed me a pen. ‘Don’t worry, it’s not the one I had in my mouth. Look, a good place to start is to write down everything that you just said. Write what you like about your school and your community and everything. Then we can weave it together with my piece about *home*.’

I sat up straight and accidentally bumped her knees. ‘That wasn’t on purpose, I swear. I don’t want you to think that I wanted to touch you or anything. I would never want to touch you.’

She swallowed a laugh. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ I said feeling the sweat collecting around my neck. ‘It was an accident, I swear.’

‘I believe you, relax.’ She started twirling her pen between her fingers. ‘Look, I think it would be really good to do slam poetry for our project.’

‘I still don’t get this slam stuff, though.’

She exhaled. ‘Remember, it’s just spoken-word poems that you perform live. Think of it almost like rap. It’s, like, punchy and emotive, I love it.’

I tried to swallow, but my mouth was as dry as the desert as I watched her talk with her hands about some Bankstown Poetry Slam place that she loved going to.

‘It’s awesome now because I don’t have to travel so far to get there. I’m happy I’m back in the area.’

‘You lived here before?’

‘I only lived in Campbelltown for a couple of years because my mum was from there, but then she moved to Dubai and my dad wanted to be back next to our cousins.’

‘Were there any Lebbos there?’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘Lebbos?’

Now my palms were sweating too. ‘You know what I mean.’

‘I do, but it’s a degrading word for our people. Doesn’t it bother you that people associate that word with negative connotations?’

I shrugged. ‘Yeah, but if I use the word and take pride in it, then doesn’t that mean the power is with me? Like, they can’t hurt me if *I* own the word.’

She stopped twirling her pen.

‘But I get what you’re saying,’ I continued. ‘I think it just depends on who you’re with and the intentions behind the word.’

Jamila stared at me for a second. ‘And you’re from Punchbowl Boys?’

Before I could reply, Mrs Pepper walked over and sat beside Jamila. ‘We going alright here? You figured out what you’re doing?’

Jamila caught my eye and smiled gently. I was so shocked at the friendly expression that I didn’t notice her handing Mrs Pepper the page I’d scribbled on.

‘Here’s what Tariq has done so far.’

## **THINGS I LIKE ABOUT PUNCHBOWL BOYS**

- My friends are there.
- It’s close to home.
- I can take my sister to school and still be on time.
- Mr Ahmed treats us like his younger brothers and helps us try to stay out of trouble.

- Miss K is like my school mum and gives me advice about school and girls.
- It's a place that has helped some boys stay off the streets.
- I get to play footy every lunch.
- It's a part of where I live and it's where my brothers went to school too.
- My teachers give us chances even when we stuff up. It's a place where they earn money and help their own families.
- I can keep an eye out for my cousins and make sure they're not hanging around with anyone in gangs.

At last Mrs Pepper put down the page.

'It's a good start. Lots of heart.' She gave me a penetrating look. 'I can't wait to see what you do with it.'

I couldn't decide if she was talking about the poetry, the school or my heart.

## Chapter 17

On Thursday evening, the night before our first game, Amira and Uncle Charlie made us sit around the living room and colour in the sticker labels for their honey business that Feda had gotten printed.

‘Couldn’t you have paid extra and got them in colour?’ Abdul asked, blowing on his fingers. ‘My hands are killing me trying to stay within the lines.’

‘Most kids nail that skill in kindy,’ Feda replied, powering through sheet after sheet of stickers.

Mum and Dad sat outside under the pergola and watched the light rain fall on the garden while Uncle Charlie washed jars in the shed. Auntie Salma scrolled through her phone and showed us pictures of her villa.

‘Lebanon is beautiful,’ she said. ‘Would you like to come and visit one day, Tariq?’

‘Nah. I’d rather stay in Australia.’

She slid down from the couch then and onto the ground beside me and Amira. She was bored and wanted gossip. ‘Why? Is there a girl you like? Is that why you don’t want to leave?’

I shook my head. ‘No. It’s just I don’t know how to speak Arabic properly and –’

‘It’s okay, Tariq,’ she said, bumping her shoulder against mine. ‘I won’t tell anybody.’

I looked around the living room to see my siblings staring at me with a range of expressions on their faces.

‘Golden boy like *one* girl?’ Feda said, rolling her eyes. ‘Tariq’s way too popular to like only *one* girl.’ Was she covering for me? I knew she had her suspicions about Jamila. She was probably just being a psycho for the fun of it.

‘No,’ Auntie Salma protested. ‘He’s not like that. Right, Tariq?’

*Anger management strategy no. 4: Respond when you’re calm.*



‘She’s just trying to cover for the fact that she’s old and no one wants to marry her,’ I blurted out.

I saw Feda stiffen. Abdul and Saff gave me a look to shut my mouth. My brothers fought and pulled pranks like little kids, but they were quick to shut me down when I went too far, as I knew I had just done.

‘What?’ I said, defensively. ‘She started it.’

‘I’ve made something of myself, Tariq,’ Feda said in a cold voice. ‘And guess what? I didn’t need someone to come along and whip me into shape. Let’s see how far you get. You and your mates are hanging on by a thread.’

‘What’s your problem? Is it that time of the month?’

Her face tightened. ‘*What* did you just say?’

‘You heard me.’

‘Hey! Watch your mouth!’ Saff intervened, standing up. ‘Don’t talk to her like that.’

My parents hurried inside to see what was going on, drawn in by our raised voices. Abdul wasted no time dobbling me in. Mum looked at me with disappointment. ‘Why? What kind of animal language is this?’

Auntie Salma put her arms around me. ‘You were very mean to your sister.’

‘What kind of man say things like this?’ Dad demanded. ‘Say sorry and hug her.’

‘Baba, please. I’m not a kid, and I don’t want him to touch me.’ Feda kept colouring labels like she wasn’t bothered, but I could see her hands were shaking.

Dad came closer and jabbed me on the forehead. ‘How many times I say don’t say bad stuff to Feda? Is your brain not work? What kind of man are you?’

‘Alright, sorry,’ I muttered. Feda didn’t look at me.

‘You’re lucky I didn’t use belt but you have game tomorrow,’ Dad said. ‘If I hear bad talk from you ever again, you see. You see what I do.’

I barely got any sleep that night. Not only did the couch cushions move around on the floor, but I could feel the anger still radiating off Feda and filling the room. I knew I’d lashed out unfairly at her, but I didn’t know how I was supposed to make it right.

The next morning, I took Amira to school as usual.

‘You watching me today with the monkey bars?’ Amira asked as we walked through the gates. ‘I think I can do it now.’

‘I’m sorry, Bob, not today. I’m late already for school and it’s game day.’

We hadn’t had training yesterday because Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed got called into an early meeting with some of the men in suits, so it looked like we had to play our first game with only the one disastrous training session as a team.

‘Hey, football head!’ I heard one kid yell as I was about to leave.

I turned back to see a bunch of boys beside the playground equipment pointing and laughing at Amira. She fumbled with her glasses and shuffled behind me. ‘That’s them,’ she whispered.

‘Stay here.’ I stalked over to the little shits. ‘That’s my sister you’re teasing,’ I said through gritted teeth. ‘If I hear you’ve teased her one more time, I will end you.’

They stopped laughing.

‘We’re telling the teacher,’ the kid in the middle of the pack said. ‘You can get into trouble.’

I bent down to his level. ‘See that tree over there? I’m going to hang you by your shorts, each and every single one of you, if you go near her again. That’s how much I care about you telling the teacher.’

I headed back to Amira. ‘They’re not going to bother you again,’ I assured her. ‘They’re not allowed to say that stuff to you.’

She looked at me strangely. ‘Thanks, Tariq. But...’

‘But what?’

‘Why do you get mad when those kids are mean to me, but you say mean things to Feda?’

I was staring at her, speechless, when a kid accidentally walked right into me and fell over.

‘Jehad?’ I said helping him up to his feet. ‘You alright?’

He fixed his glasses as Amira explained, ‘My brother took care of those bullies. We can play now and they won’t tease us.’

‘Really?’ he asked me. ‘What did you say to them?’

‘Yeah, what did you say to them?’ I heard a familiar voice repeat behind me.

Jamila stood there in her green uniform dress and a pair of blue-framed sunnies. ‘Don’t tell me you told off a bunch of eight-year-olds?’

‘Oh hey,’ I said, trying to be cool. ‘Nah I just said that they needed to be respectful, especially because Amira is a girl and that’s no way to speak to girls.’

Amira piped up again. ‘But yesterday with Feda, you –’

I nudged her in the back to shut her up and spoke loudly to distract Jamila. ‘Especially because Amira can’t defend herself.’

Jamila smiled at Amira. ‘Oh, I don’t know about that. Looks like Amira can defend herself perfectly well.’

I held my breath, praying Amira would keep quiet. Thankfully, she was shy around strangers and clammed up when Jamila spoke to her directly. Instead, she grabbed Jehad by the hand and they ran off to the play equipment.

Jamila adjusted her bag on her shoulder as she gazed after them. ‘They started with Jehad too, and teasing him about his glasses. I told him that he needed to be strong enough not to let them get to him, and to tell a teacher if things got out of hand.’

‘What?’ I asked, shaking my head. We were both walking towards the gates. I knew I was running super late to school, but I wasn’t going to pass on an opportunity to spend some time with Jamila. ‘He should fight back. This whole telling-a-teacher business doesn’t work.’

‘I disagree, but also, that’s not the point,’ she argued. ‘The point is helping him to develop a thicker skin and teach him that no matter what words people throw at him, they don’t reflect who he truly is unless he *lets* them.’

I opened the gate for her and caught the time on my watch. 8:51 a.m.

‘Oh man, I’ve got to go,’ I said reluctantly. I still had to pick up my gear and head to Punchbowl Park for the game.

She smiled and tucked her sunnies on her head before walking off in the opposite direction. ‘I’ll see you later.’

I made it to Punchbowl Park in the nick of time. All the schools and coaches had arrived to play the first round of the comp. Bright orange banners that read rugby league schools competition 2020 were scattered around the park, with freshly painted footy fields marked out. I didn’t expect it to be so serious with real referees umpiring our games and each team with their very own flag.

‘You’re late, bro,’ Ibby called out. ‘You’re the captain and you’re late.’

‘Shut up, man. I had to take Bob to school.’

Mr Archie was talking to some of the other school coaches and I noticed Mr Wilson and the A Team on the opposite side of the field. Keeping distance between us was probably a good thing. If Hunter came anywhere near me, I didn’t think I would be able to control myself, and I was in enough trouble with Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed already.

Matt and Riley stretched and Lee ran along the sidelines to warm up. Ibby and PJ tackled the blue pads with Mr Ahmed, while Huss lay on the bench, listening to his music. He hadn’t been at school for the last two days, but when I asked him where he’d been, he vaguely said he needed to ‘take care of a few things’.

‘So is he just going to sit there and not at least warm up?’ Aaron asked as he tied his laces. ‘Can we rely on Huss to play properly in the team?’

‘He’ll play,’ I said, still watching him. ‘I know Huss. He’ll never give the game away.’

‘How are we going to do this?’ Aaron asked. ‘You captain first half and I’ll do second?’

‘Okay, lads. I need you all sitting down,’ Mr Archie called out from beside the posts before I could answer. ‘I need to go through a couple of things.’ He had a whispered conversation with Mr Ahmed before they both nodded.

‘There’s been a change of plans,’ Mr Ahmed said. ‘I know we said Aaron and Tariq will co-captain, but upon reflection, we think that might get tricky, especially since we’ve only had one training session together.’

I felt my heart sink. When Mr Archie looked at me, I knew it was all over.

‘Aaron will be your captain. You will follow his orders on the field and listen to his plays.’

Ibby and PJ’s eyes grew wide.

‘But, sir,’ Ibby began, ‘Tariq is really go—’

‘It’s not up for discussion,’ Mr Archie interrupted bluntly.

My throat felt like I was swallowing a brick. He’d seen me all week, but he’d chosen to strip me of captain in front of everyone right before our first game. He was making a point, and all I could feel was a rising tide of anger. I turned to Huss, who shrugged as if to say I should get over it.

‘It’s just a stupid comp,’ he whispered. ‘Like you even care about it enough to be upset.’

I wanted to snap at him that he’d screwed me over with his tantrum at practice, but Mr Ahmed was talking again.

‘You’ll be playing Team A for your first game,’ he said. ‘We don’t need to remind the Punchbowl boys of their contracts, and we don’t need you Cronulla boys messing around, either. Your principal assures me that any of you will be suspended for any violence.’

Five minutes to kick-off.

When the others went back to their warm-ups, I followed Mr Archie, who was setting up a table with water bottles and orange slices.

‘Why wouldn’t you just tell me at school?’ I demanded. ‘You waited to embarrass me in front of everyone.’

He didn’t even look at me. ‘You need to stop being so preoccupied with how *embarrassed* you are, Tariq.’

‘Why am I being stripped of the captaincy?!’ I was putting all my energy into not shouting at him. ‘You *know* I’m a good captain. I bet if Aaron was from here and not Cronulla –’

At that, Mr Archie, whipped off his sunnies. ‘Don’t start that nonsense with me, Tariq. You lost captain because you *pretended* to be a leader.’

‘Yeah, maybe at the beginning I didn’t care, but now I do. I didn’t know anything about you and thought you just wanted to make our lives miserable so I wanted to get you off my back.’

‘Stop using where you come from as your excuse, Tariq,’ Mr Archie said, his lips pressed together in disgust. ‘You don’t get to decide that you’re serious now just because I took away something you wanted. You either take things seriously, and *care*, or you don’t.’ He turned back to the table. ‘The decision is final. Aaron is your captain. You support him on the field and do your job.’

My job! That was all anyone could talk to me about these days. My blood was boiling and talking to Mr Archie was like talking to a brick wall. I tried to appeal to Mr Ahmed, but he also told me he was disappointed.

‘And what makes it worse Tariq is that you’re the BBL,’ he said. ‘What kind of example are you setting?’

I hadn’t realised how things could blow up in my face like this. I stalked back to the rest of the team, fuming, ready to punch Aaron in the face if he

seemed even the slightest bit smug.

‘Don’t fly off the handle,’ Riley advised, strapping on his headgear. ‘Maybe it’s just a test from Mr Archie to see how badly you really want to be captain.’

I sat on the bench and felt the energy drain out of me. ‘Everything is a fucking test with that guy.’ My chest was tight and my eyes burned. I just wanted to pack up and head home, but I knew that would just make a bad situation worse.

Huss sat next to me. ‘Seriously, though, why are you losing your mind over something that’s so dumb? Who would want to be captain of this team anyway?’

‘You don’t get it,’ I said, watching the boys warm up. ‘I *want* this now. I want to be captain. I deserve it, and I’m a better captain than Aaron.’

Huss looked at me consideringly. ‘I’ll take care of it. Just watch me on the field and I’ll make sure you’re the captain for the next games.’

I stood up and shook my head. ‘I don’t need anything from you. You already screwed me over once. Just back off and play the game.’ He looked as though I had slapped him in the face as I walked away.

The A Team ran onto the field with black marks smeared across their faces like war paint. They grunted and shoulder-charged each other, geeing themselves up for their first match.

‘Ya Allah! Not these hayawanaat again,’ Ibby said, annoyed.

‘You know my surfboard was stolen?’ Matt told us. ‘It’s all ramped up again since camp.’

‘Hasn’t it been stolen before?’ PJ asked. ‘Do you guys not lock your houses in those richo suburbs?’

‘I was at the beach. I left it to get some water and when I came back, it was gone.’

‘Why you telling us this?’ Huss said. ‘We’re not here to save you or Riley or anyone from your area.’

Matt chewed his fingernails. ‘Why are you pissed again? Relax, I’m just telling you guys what happened. I’m not asking for anyone to save me.’

‘Enough chat,’ Mr Archie called out. ‘Let’s go, on the field now!’

Hunter and his team lined up with their arms across each other’s shoulders as the referee explained the rules. Hunter mouthed the word *freak* at Riley before looking at me with a smirk.

‘Twenty-five-minute halves,’ the referee said. ‘Keep it clean and good luck.’

The teams broke away, but Hunter and I were still glaring at each other.

‘I know what you’ve done to Riley and Matt,’ I said.

‘Prove it,’ he said, his chest puffed out. ‘Isn’t that what you guys said after you trashed our cabin?’

He stepped a little closer, nostrils flared. ‘You dirty terrorists will get your day, too. Just wait and see.’

Lee came between us and pushed me gently by the shoulder. ‘Not now. Coaches are watching.’

‘Piss off, Noodles. Your time is coming, too,’ Hunter said, before running off and calling his team for one last huddle.

Aaron did the same. ‘I know we haven’t trained together much, but let’s just think of it as some backyard footy. I know Hunter wants to get under our skin, but let’s be smart.’

Huss yawned loudly before walking away, not listening to the rest of Aaron’s pep talk.

‘Huss, I haven’t finished,’ Aaron called, but Huss kept on walking. Aaron’s captaincy skills were slowly falling apart and the game hadn’t even started. ‘He’s your mate,’ Aaron said to me. ‘Make sure he does his job.’

‘That’s your job, *captain*,’ I said. ‘He’s your problem.’ It may not have been Aaron’s fault that I’d been demoted, but I’d be damned if I was going to help him take the job that should have been mine.

The game began with Aaron kicking off. The A Team looked like a solid unit with every player getting into their position quickly. It was as if they had been one team for years. Hunter ran straight and hard towards Riley, who was smashed down before Ibbey and I could make the tackle.

‘Nice headgear,’ Hunter sneered as he roughly rubbed Riley’s head.

They played the ball quick and fast and made a couple of breaks, but not enough to get past the try line. Mr Archie yelled at us from the sidelines but we didn’t understand a word he said. Anytime he was angry, his Irish accent became thick and incomprehensible.

Unlike their strong sets and long gains, our team looked like a bunch of blindfolded people running to catch a ball. Matt struggled to hold onto tackles and Lee was pushed to the ground a few times. Aaron called out

instructions, which Huss completely ignored, and eventually the A Team scored two tries.

‘Huss, play the game properly,’ I shouted in Arabic. ‘Stop messing around.’

‘You said you wanted to be captain,’ he replied, also in Arabic. ‘I’ll help you.’

‘Not like that, Huss! Just play the game. I’ll take care of being captain.’

There were five minutes left to the half when we had our closest chance to score. Riley played the ball from dummy-half and passed it to Huss, who ran down the line. Aaron and I chased in support, but Huss chose to go at it alone instead of passing and got taken out.

‘I was free!’ Aaron shouted, throwing his hands in the air. ‘I called out to pass.’

‘Why would you do that, Huss?’ I asked.

Huss brushed off his clothes and walked back to defence. ‘Tell him if he speaks to me like that again, I won’t be responsible for what will happen.’

‘You better warn him,’ Aaron said to me. ‘I let it go at training, but he’s really pushing it. You said he wouldn’t throw away the game!’

I was sick of being the go-between for Huss and Aaron. The first half had come and gone and we still had no points on the board. It was fourteen-nil and we didn’t even look close to scoring. We sat on the sidelines, out of breath and muddy while the A Team did a couple of drills on the field.

‘If you lads don’t get it together and start acting like a team, you will spend every morning with me until you get it right,’ Mr Archie warned. ‘Aaron, I need you to command more on the field. Take control.’

As much as I appreciated seeing Aaron fail as a captain, it meant that we were about to lose to a team that called us dirty terrorists, had vandalised Riley’s house, threatened Lee and stolen Matt’s things. This whole day was a nightmare and for the first time ever, I would rather have been benched than be on the field. The second half went exactly like the first: we dropped the ball, we fought and argued with each other and Huss continued to act as though Aaron wasn’t the captain.

The final score was a completely pathetic 20–0.

The A Team celebrated, shook only Aaron’s hand and walked off the field. Mr Archie was speechless with anger and headed off to watch the last ten minutes of another school’s game. I took off my jersey, lay on the



ground and was trying to catch my breath when Aaron came to stand in front of me, his jaw clenched.

‘Huss ruined so many chances,’ he said. ‘Why is he even here?’

I opened my eyes, annoyed. ‘Why don’t you ask him?’

‘He’s your mate. Why don’t *you* do something? I know he’s doing this stuff so you can be captain.’

I stood up. ‘Bro, get out of my face before I break yours.’

He didn’t move. ‘Do something about Huss. I’m serious. I don’t know about you, but I want to win and I don’t want to get smashed like that again.’

“Do something?” Like how you “did something” about your mate Hunter?’

His face changed. ‘No one saw Hunter do anything to the boys. For all we know –’

‘Yeah, you’re not going to convince me, so save your breath. And don’t tell me to do something about Huss when you stay quiet for your so-called mates.’ I grabbed my bag and walked off. ‘Take care of your own house, Shire Boy. Don’t tell me how to run mine.’

## Chapter 18

I spent Sunday at Sans Souci Beach, where we were showing Aunty Salma around. Feda walked with her along the long, winding path just below the hills that my brothers and I slid down on pieces of cardboard. She wasn't *not* speaking to me since our argument last week, but she was curt, and I noticed her eyes slid across mine most of the time.

On the drive back, Aunty Salma and Dad sang Um Kalthoom songs together. As soon as Dad parked the van, everyone rushed out to make it to the shower first. Dad called me into the living room.

'You fix things with your sister,' he said, without preamble. 'She is very busy with her job, and I don't want her to be stress at home. You fix it.'

'Baba, I –'

'No excuses. Since you were baby, Feda look after you. She is like your second mum. You don't speak to her like that.' He headed for the TV to get his daily news fix. The first story was mobile footage of some boys from our school punching each other, surrounded by other boys cheering them on.

'Were you involved in this?' Dad asked with his eyebrows raised. 'Tell me truth and I won't get upset. I call Mr Archie if you lie.'

'That was last year, Baba,' I said, walking closer to the TV. Their faces were blurred by the report, but I recognised a couple of the guys who were throwing punches. At least two of them had been expelled by Mr Archie weeks ago. 'How did they even get this footage?'

Tariq: Did you boys see that video about  
Eddie and Bill's fight on the news?

Ibby: Yeah man. Which snitch gave them that video?

PJ: I was at church and my cousin Jerry told  
me about it. Archie and Ahmed are going to  
be pissed, man.

Tariq: Huss, did you see it?

Huss: Can't talk now.

'Forty thousand subscribers now,' Lee said, proudly showing PJ his phone. 'AsianInvasion001 is my YouTube channel. Wanna watch one of my videos?'

'Nintendo, stop waving your phone in my face,' PJ said. 'Or I'll launch it over the fence.'

Ibby tried to jump on PJ's back. 'Bro, what's wrong?'

'Nuffin, bro. Just get out of my space, man.' PJ trudged away, breathing heavily into the cold air.

We were back at Tuesday training with Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed, who weren't in the mood to deal with any of our excuses, and were in foul moods because of the old leaked video.

'Your game on Friday was a disaster,' Mr Archie called out as we ran laps around the field. 'You will have to work twice as hard to prove to myself and Mr Ahmed that you are a team.'

Aaron slowed down when he reached Huss. 'You going to explain why you tried to throw the game?'

'Piss off, man,' Huss said. 'I don't owe you shit.'

'You hogged the ball. You didn't pass. You didn't even listen to Tariq when he called for the ball,' Aaron continued.

Huss turned to me. 'He thinks I tried to throw the game?'

Aaron now stopped and took a few breaths. 'Yeah, *he* does.' The rest of the boys were on the other side of the field with Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed.

'What about you?' Huss said to Aaron. 'You saw that ranga smash Lee's head in the ground but you didn't do anything. Maybe *you* threw it for your Shire mates?'

Aaron scowled. 'I didn't do shit for Hunter. We're not mates and *everyone* saw how hard I was playing.'

I stood near Huss. 'Didn't do anything to stop him creaming your team though, *captain*.'

'It's complicated.'

We heard Mr Archie call our names.

Huss laughed out loud. ‘Complicated? The whole park heard that ranga give it to Riley, and you’re telling me your friendship with him is *complicated*?’

I watched Aaron’s face turn a shade darker in anger.

‘You of all people should know Hunter is a snake, because let’s face it, you were one too until *very* recently,’ I said.

‘Lads!’ we heard Mr Archie shout. ‘*Move!* Right now!’

We sat beside the goalposts to listen to feedback from Friday’s game.

Mr Archie looked me dead in the eye. ‘I’m not sure of some of your intentions, I’ll say this now. If any of you don’t want to be here, pack your things and leave. I don’t have time to deal with boys who pretend to care for their school and this team.’

Mr Ahmed tucked the footy under his arm and stared at Huss and me. ‘Tariq’s not your captain. Aaron is. So we expect you to turn to him for guidance on the field.’

Huss pulled out some grass from the ground and laughed to himself.

‘You think it’s funny, lad?’ Mr Archie turned on him. ‘You were away two days last week with no explanation. You showed up to the game and barely played. You really want to laugh right now?’

Huss shrugged and focused on mangling the field grass. I could tell he was shutting down by the way he had drawn his body in. Finally, Mr Ahmed told him to pack his things and leave.

‘We’re not going to accept disrespect,’ he said. Mr Archie looked grim.

Huss kicked a few pads and stormed off. Ibbey and PJ looked at me, but I was just as confused as them. He hadn’t lost control like that in a while. Something had to be up.

‘Tonight,’ I whispered to the boys. We’d get to the bottom of things at movie night.

We trained as normal, trying to find our rhythm as a team and waiting for Aaron to figure out how to drive the game forward. My jaw clenched as I watched Mr Archie give him advice and work with him one-on-one.

Matt looked around to see if anyone was watching before sidling over to me. ‘Hunter isn’t going to stop, dude. Riley said a car followed him home last night before speeding off.’

‘If he’s been bullied for such a long time, why hasn’t he told the cops?’ I asked, still watching Aaron and Mr Archie.

‘That’ll make things worse.’ Lee now came to stand with us. ‘He doesn’t want to make it bigger.’

‘So why you telling me? What can I do?’

Matt tried once more. ‘Dude, we told you because back at camp, it was the first time Hunter had been confronted about anything and we think you could help Riley out. I mean, we can help him out. We’re teammates now, right?’

Ya illahi, this team came with a mountain of baggage.

‘He came, got money, then left.’ I heard Huss’s voice in the living room when I got home. ‘I don’t know why I thought he wanted to stay. How dumb am I?’

‘You’re not dumb,’ Feda replied. ‘Your dad has been doing this to you for a long time and because you’re a good person, you always give him the benefit of the doubt.’

Since we were little kids, Huss had always been around my place, like another brother. I had seen things about his dad that Huss didn’t like to talk about, like the time his dad beat him almost unconscious, or made him ask people for money, and then disappeared.

I had come home late in the afternoon because I was at Amira’s parent-teacher interviews. Mum had taken Auntie Salma to Cabramatta to buy fabrics while Dad finished work in the evening. If Feda was too busy, I usually did Amira’s parent-teacher chats instead of Mum, especially because Amira always liberally ‘interpreted’ the truth to Mum when she didn’t understand what the teachers were saying.

I stood by the living room door now and listened to a little more of their conversation. Huss had told me stuff about his dad, but I hadn’t known that he had made contact so recently.

‘I was away from school because Dad said he wanted to hang out and he wanted to change and start fresh. But he lied again.’

‘You know it’s nothing to do with you,’ Feda said. ‘Your dad leaving and being absent from your life is on him. Not you.’

‘Does it make me a bad person that I still care about him?’ he said.

‘Of course not! You can feel however you want to feel. No one can take that away from you.’

‘Don’t tell Tariq,’ I heard him say. ‘I don’t want him to know.’

I took a few deep breaths and tried to process what I'd just heard. I felt bad for Huss, but I was also cut that he wouldn't trust me enough to tell me about his dad.

'Okay, well, that's your choice,' Feda said. 'But alienating yourself from your friends when you need them most might not be the best idea, Huss.'

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## Chapter 19

All the boys were hanging around the basketball courts on Wednesday morning, giving us shit about our loss against the A Team. Some seniors were taking bets on how long we'd last in the comp, and by the looks of it, after the first round of games, we were on the bottom of the ladder.

'Wooden spoon! Wooden spoon!' they chanted.

Ibby was upset that they had already given up on us. 'Put twenty dollars on us winning the comp,' he said, waving his money. 'Wallah watch and see. We're gonna smash everyone.'

PJ sat on the silver seats and rested his head on his bag. He had kept to himself since training yesterday, and even though he kept saying everything was alright, his bloodshot eyes told a different story. I was about to head over and check on him, when I was halted in my tracks.

'Tariq Nader to the principal's office now', the PA system blared. I heard the boys hollering that I was in big shit all the way up the ramp and into the building. I racked my brains the whole way about what I'd done wrong this time.

I sat in Mr Archie's office, which seemed to be drowning in boxes more than ever. He closed the door calmly – a good sign – and he also smiled at me as he moved around his desk to sit down. I felt the tension in my shoulders ease a little. He got to the point.

'I've thought about kicking you and Huss off the team, but I believe in giving people second chances.' He leaned on his desk. 'Do you know how disappointed I was when I heard Huss say that all your efforts had been insincere?'

'Sir, that was at the beginning. You came in like a tornado and dumped all these new rules on us without any warning. I didn't know anything about you or why you were here. You never gave us a choice about the comp, you just told us it was happening.'

He stared at me. 'So you thought everything I said about your school closing was a joke? I get it, you don't know me, but don't you know your

school? Mr Ahmed? Miss Kyriacou? They were also warning you lads.’ He sighed. ‘As for a choice...well. What do you think is the biggest difference between you lads and the boys from Cronulla?’

I shrugged helplessly. ‘You want me to pick just one?’

‘Choices, Tariq. If you win the lottery of where and when you’re born, you have the luxury of countless choices in front of you. Now, I’m not saying any of those boys have had an easy life or that they don’t each have their own crosses to bear. I’m definitely not suggesting that they don’t make hundreds of mistakes. But the main difference between you and them is that they have so many options and choices in front of them, and they have the scope to learn from their mistakes. But for you lads – for anyone born poor, or black, or even female – you are limited to only a few options. And if you make a mistake? It will define you and cut off all your already limited options.’ He looked a bit sad. ‘If it were up to me, you’d all have every possibility, every choice laid out in front of you to do with as you want. It’s *not* up to me, though, or your parents, or even you. But you did have one choice, whether you realised it or not. You still have one now. You can keep on going as you have been, change nothing, and the school will close, you’ll be redistributed to new schools, and maybe a couple of you lads will rise above the limitations that others have put on you, while the rest of you confirm every prejudice outsiders have about who you are and what you’re capable of.’

I felt like vomiting at the thought. ‘Or?’

‘Or you change what you’re doing and see if that changes the outcome.’

I searched his face, trying to find the right words. ‘I do care about the school. Yeah, I might have faked caring about the comp and the team, but everything I said back at camp was true. I don’t want this place to close.’

‘Then the comp is your best chance.’ He shuffled through a few papers on his desk. ‘Term 3, Week 4 is the official review for our school. We have just under a term to make some major changes.’ He then looked me dead in the eye, the most serious I had ever seen him. ‘Tariq, if you’re going to jeopardise any opportunity the lads have in the footy comp, I need to know now. Man to man.’

‘I’m not, sir. Wallah. I wanna play, even in a team as bad as ours.’

‘The team isn’t that bad. You have potential. But to really make the team connect, you’ll have to take me up on the offer I made earlier. You and



Aaron are the core of the team. You need to find a way to push your differences aside and make things work, even if it means you have to make decisions that could affect your friendships. Being a leader is about doing what's best for everyone involved.'

'I'm not the leader, though, am I?' I tried to keep the bitterness out of my voice, but I know he caught it.

'I stripped you of being captain, but that doesn't mean you can't earn it back, lad.'

My heart quickened. 'You serious, sir?'

'As I said, everyone deserves second chances.' He pointed a finger at me. 'But blow this, and we're going to have a problem, Tariq. Einstein said the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over but expecting different results. I have no intention of being insane.'

I laughed for what felt like the first time in weeks. 'You'd fit right in at Punchbowl if you were, sir.'

After the intense chat with Mr Archie, it was almost a relief to remember it was also poetry workshop day – or, as I had started to call it in my mind, Jamila Day.

I made my way over to Miss K's classroom, but the door was locked and the lights were off.

'School assembly in the main hall,' a note read on the door.

In the hall, the teachers were going around trying to get the boys to settle down. I saw Huss wave from beside an empty seat.

'I snuck you a V,' he said, opening his bag. 'We'll smash a couple after assembly.'

I had been stewing about his overheard conversation with Feda and the fact that he didn't trust me, so my words came out sharper than usual. 'What don't you get about them being banned, bro? Archie's said it like a million times.'

'Relax, man,' he said, his jaw taking on its usual aggressive tightness. 'It's not alcohol.' He then sneaked a few cans to the boys sitting in the rows behind us as if daring me to dob him in.

Ibby tapped me on the shoulder and tilted his head towards PJ, who sat hunched over staring blankly at the ground. 'He won't say anything,' Ibby whispered. 'Maybe he'll talk to you.'

I nodded. 'Give him some space for now.'

A man dressed in a blue abaya and a green cap just like Ibby's came out and sat on one of the empty chairs onstage, followed by a man in a grey suit and another in a polo shirt.

A man we all recognised. A man we all cheered for until we were told to sit down and chill out by Mr Archie.

'I'd like to welcome Sheikh Wessam, our local MP Tony Burke, and Hazem El Masri to our school, and trust that you lads can keep calm,' he said. 'I know you're all excited, but there is a purpose to why we have these great guests at our school. They'd like to share a few words as part of our many community programs.' He welcomed Sheikh Wessam to the mic.

'Salaam, boys. How are we?' he said, smiling. 'I want to start off by saying thank you to Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed for inviting me to speak to you boys. We, the community, have heard about your school situation and I'd just like to say that we're here for you and will do our part to help.' Sheikh Wessam settled into the classic pose of Arab men – his body leaned forward and his index finger was on standby to point every now and then. 'I want to share a story about a young man and the consequences his decisions had on his life,' he began.

'This boy wanted the fancy things in life. The boy wanted money, cars and an extravagant house but never wanted to work for them. He disrespected and used women and turned a blind eye when his male friends did shady things like sell drugs on the street or stealing.' The Sheikh's voice got louder and louder and more aggressive.

Ibby clutched my arm. 'Why is he angry?' he whispered, completely freaked out. All the boys in the hall were tense, looking around to see what the hell was going on. The Sheikh's face was red and the veins in his neck stood out.

Suddenly he stopped and began to smile. 'Angry Arab? Raise your hand if that term sounds familiar to you.'

My mind scattered to all the times I remembered the news referring to us in that way. All the boys raised their hands.

'Wallah, you gave me a heart attack, Sheikh,' one boy called out.

He laughed. 'Who can tell me what the story was about?'

We all could tell him the first part of the story, but as soon as he started to shout, we lost track of the point.

‘Exactly,’ he said. ‘Unfortunately, we have this term *Angry Arab* stitched onto us because – and I hate to break it to you – we are partly to blame as well. We have to hold ourselves to account for part of the bad media coverage of this school. Some of it has been exaggerated – of course it has – but some of it is true. The news reporters didn’t make up the footage of the fights, right? You owe it to yourselves to be part of changing the story.’

Next, Tony Burke told us something similar about having his support, before presenting our school captain, Mohamed, with a medal for his efforts volunteering at the local nursing home.

The loudest roar came when Hazem held the mic.

‘I have something special to announce,’ he said. ‘Stand up if you’re in the new buddy footy comp.’

Huss, Ibby, PJ and I looked at each other before rising to our feet.

‘I want to start off by saying that I’m proud to see this program partnered with the NRL in schools now. I’m even more excited that Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed have asked me to help mentor you boys throughout the competition.’

He pulled out a bundle of tickets from his pocket. ‘I have VIP tickets for you to see the Bulldogs take on Cronulla Sharks at Belmore Sports Ground in two weeks’ time.’

It was like someone had given us a million dollars. Having Hazem El Masri, the first Lebanese Muslim player to win a grand final with our home team, not only mentoring us but also giving us tickets to see the Bulldogs was like something out of our dreams. Ibby couldn’t contain his excitement and burst into happy tears, falling over people to run up onstage and almost tackling Hazem to the ground in a bear hug.

Now everyone wanted to be part of the comp. Some of the other Year Ten boys begged Mr Ahmed to put them in the team, even as reserves.

‘Wooden spoon, ay?’ I said to them.

Miss K found me amongst the boys and smiled. ‘You see? There are people high up who care about you, not just the private school kids.’

‘I know, Miss. But it’s different to see it, and not just hear about it.’

Amidst all the cheering, Huss wasn’t fazed. ‘I like Hazem, but it’s not that big of a deal.’

‘You should be really excited,’ I said. ‘He can help you with your goal kicking.’

He shrugged. 'Yeah, but how much of a difference can he actually make? We're not going to win any games anyway.'

I didn't want Huss to ruin the moment so I walked out of the hall, only to see PJ standing alone beside the toilets. He of all people should have been cheering the hardest – he was the biggest Doggies fan.

'Okay, bro, what's wrong?' I asked. 'And don't say nothing, because we can all see that's not true. We can't help you if you don't communicate with us.'

He took a deep breath. 'It's my mum, man. She wants me to put some money in her account so she has something when she gets out in a couple of months.'

'I've got money if you need. Dad and Mum would help you out in a second.'

'It's not that, bro. She's not clean. She'll use any money I give her on drugs and wind up back in jail, or worse.'

'So don't put anything in her account.'

'You don't get it, Tariq. If I *don't* put money in her account, she'll do something dumb for cash and get caught, which means she'll just have to do more time. I'm screwed either way.'

I didn't know what else to say.

'And what's your reason for not telling *me*?' Mr Ahmed had walked up behind us, and heard everything. He jerked his head at me, and I stepped away. Mr Ahmed would know what to say. Most schools would've called the police if they found a woman, barefoot and barely dressed, hassling the students for money like PJ's mum had done a few years ago. Not Mr Ahmed. He got her into a rehab program and arranged for a community nurse to follow up with her until she disappeared and relapsed.

We never talk about that time out of respect for PJ. He's never wanted to talk about it. But now, I thought, maybe we should have tried harder. Maybe bottling it up all these years hadn't done him any good. Maybe his friends should have been better friends.

I walked into the girls' school library to find Mariam and Jamila sitting together. They were showing each other something on their phones and laughing.

My stomach dropped.

‘Welcome, Tariq,’ Mrs Pepper said, her long white hair now in a choppy bob. ‘We’re mixing it up today and doing a bit of a sharing lesson. Roam freely and get to know other groups and what they’re working on.’

I sat and tried to listen to a group telling me about their project, but my eyes kept straying to Jamila and Mariam, who were talking like they were best friends.

‘Pay attention.’ Miss K flicked the back of my head. ‘It’s not the end of the world.’ I rolled my head back to see her smiling, eyebrows raised. ‘*That* is what mutual support looks like,’ she said. ‘Maybe see what’s going on between them before you start sulking. Use your words.’

I turned back towards her. ‘I’m not sulking.’

‘Sure, sure.’

I gave up and walked over to sit opposite the girls. ‘Am I interrupting something here? A feminist meeting?’

They looked at each other and shook their heads.

‘I told you,’ Jamila said.

‘I know. That’s so bad,’ Mariam replied.

‘What? What did you tell her? What’s so bad?’ I demanded.

Mariam crossed her arms and leaned back. ‘Did you think we were talking about you? Could your head get any bigger?’

I felt the room spin. ‘You’re the one who said you wanted to start fresh with me and chase me around!’

She rolled her eyes and Jamila smirked. “‘Start fresh’ doesn’t mean I want to chase you around, you idiot.’

‘What does it mean, then?’

‘It means I am not wasting any more time bothering about you. Clean slate. That’s what it means. Though now I’m thinking it’s more than you deserve.’

Jamila waved her hand. ‘You have bigger and better things to conquer.’

Mariam nodded with excitement. ‘Like my makeup tutorials on Instagram. JouJou’s famous makeup artist cousin in Dubai followed me and I’m freaking out!’

‘I knew you were going to come over here and assume we were talking about you,’ Jamila grinned.

I pretended to be impressed. ‘Wow. You should have your own show as a relationship expert.’

‘And you can be my first guest,’ she replied calmly. ‘An example of how self-centred boys can be.’

Mariam picked up her things before winking at me. ‘Relax, Tariq. You’re still hot, babe.’ She headed off to Anwar without a backward glance.

Jamila brought out her laptop. ‘So, did you do any work on our slam?’

I was still trying to process what had just happened. ‘Have I done something to you that I don’t know about?’

She shook her head, still typing. ‘No, why?’

‘Um, Mariam? What did you say to her?’

‘About you? Seriously nothing, Tariq. We were just scrolling through Instagram and she began talking about how she wanted to be a makeup artist.’ She looked up then. ‘Believe it or not, we didn’t even think about you until you started staring at us like a stalker.’

‘It’s weird,’ I said, looking at Mariam. ‘All you did was look at her makeup on Insta?’

‘Don’t do that,’ she said, tying her hair up in a knot. ‘Don’t degrade her and her ambitions like being a makeup artist is beneath you.’

Miss K walked over before I could dig myself any deeper. ‘We okay here?’ she asked. ‘Tariq, are you contributing to the slam?’

‘Yeah, Miss,’ I said. She moved away, thankfully without another lecture about taking things seriously.

It was quiet now. Jamila typed on her laptop and I sat there with a blank piece of paper in front of me. I had been looking forward to seeing her but I didn’t know how to speak anymore. She had me thinking about every word a thousand times before it left my mouth.

‘How’s Amira?’ she asked. ‘Or should I call her Bob?’

‘She’s good.’

‘Have you tried gloves for the monkey bars mission?’ she asked.

I shook my head and continued to scribble on the paper.

I heard her laugh to herself. ‘One bit of criticism and you shut down. So fragile.’

‘Criticism? You talk like you know me but you don’t.’

‘I know that you can’t handle that Mariam, who you thought was just obsessed with you, actually has a whole life and goals that don’t involve you at all,’ she said. ‘Did you think she was always –’

‘It’s not Mariam,’ I interrupted. ‘It’s you. I haven’t done shit to you, but you’re so uptight. It’s like you’re Miss Perfect and nothing is good enough for you.’

She slammed her laptop shut. ‘Uptight? That’s how you interpret self-respect? You’re having a hissy fit because I don’t bat my lashes at you or fall head over heels after a couple of words from you. Grow up!’ She packed up her things and left. The whole group watched her go in silence, then turned to stare at me. I turned back to my sheet of paper, which was now covered in angry black scribbles.

*Well done, Tariq.*

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## Chapter 20

We finished Thursday's training session early, which I was extremely thankful for. Not only did I have to adjust to taking orders from Aaron but Matt also pulled me aside to ask if I had given any more thought to Riley's bullying. All I could think was, Huss was right. It wasn't our problem. Riley needed to tell his own people.

PJ was still quiet and worked one-on-one with Mr Ahmed, tackling the blue pads. From the way he was taking it out on each of the pads, I think he was working through some serious rage.

Mr Archie told the Shire boys about the VIP tickets for Saturday's game.

'You will not only get front-row seats, but you'll also meet the players after the game,' he said. 'They know about the competition and wanted to chat with you all. And I mean the Sharks players, too.'

'Like we wanna meet them?' Ibby scoffed. 'Doggies for life, bro!'

'I'm not telling you to change teams,' Mr Archie said, exasperated. 'It's just a meet and greet. And I want best behaviour from all of you.'

'Dad and I always went to Bulldogs games together,' Aaron said to us. 'He was probably their biggest supporter.'

'Yeah, alright, man,' Huss muttered under his breath. 'Like we believe that your dead dad went for the Dogs.'

As soon as the words left Huss's mouth, all hell broke loose. Aaron charged at him and if Mr Ahmed hadn't held him back, a brawl would have broken out. The veins in Aaron's forehead nearly burst out from his brain.

'Don't talk about my dad!' he shouted. 'Let me go!'

Mr Ahmed wrapped his arms tightly around Aaron until his chest began to slowly heave in and out. We all stood back and watched him try to catch his breath.

'Breathe, lad, breathe,' Mr Archie said. 'And Huss, see me when we get back to school.' He looked at all of us and shook his head. 'I don't know how many times Mr Ahmed and I have to remind you about respect and about controlling your anger.'



Ibby raised his hand. 'So are Jews also Angry Arabs like what the Sheikh said?' he asked Mr Archie.

I watched Aaron sit on the silver seat and try to calm himself down. His face was red and his eyes still narrow as he stared at Huss. Huss, who was acting like he'd done nothing wrong.

There was no point in being at training if this was how every session was going to go down.

Even though Mr Archie was changing the look of the school, we were still miles behind most. The science lab was by far the worst room in the school. It was on the ground floor, under the music room, which made all the equipment vibrate. There was no aircon and it always smelled like there was a gas leak. Sunlight filled every part of the room, which not only made the stools too hot to sit on and turned the whole lab into an oven, but also reflected off the whiteboard, blinding everybody.

Our science teacher Mr Sullivan was always 'sick' the day Year Ten had class, so we had an endless roster of casual teachers limping their way through the textbook each week. This week's casual was Mr Fizaan. He had scruffy black hair and looked like he hadn't showered in months. He wore a silver ring on each finger and a black shirt with some old band called AC/DC on it.

'He looks like a shaytaan, bro,' Ibby said, taking out a mini-fan from his bag.

While Mr Fizaan set up, I called a Wolf Pack meeting. I needed to let them know that being captain was back on the table.

'So, you're serious now about the comp?' Huss asked, unimpressed. 'Archie's giving me another shot and I want to prove that I'm good enough to be captain. It'll help our school, too.'

'What? You being captain?' he said dryly.

'Nah. Just trying to make the most of this comp so our school doesn't look that bad. Archie and Ahmed are expecting a lot from us.'

'Those arseholes grilled me and called Big Haji about the fight with the Yahooda at training. They were going to rip my head off,' he said. 'And Big Haji wanted to smash me, too. I swear they're too much. Like, we have our own shit too. Not just this dumb comp.'

I remembered the conversation he had with Feda about his dad, and wondered if Mr Ahmed or Mr Archie knew about it. 'What shit?' I asked. 'You can tell us if there's something going on.'

He shook his head and wouldn't look at me. 'Nothin', man. Just this whole footy thing and Aaron being a khara and our school. I want the school to stay open but these suits have already made up their mind. What's the point in trying?'

'I wanna be captain,' I said bluntly. 'I don't know about you boys, but I'm going to try. Huss, you should too.'

PJ said nothing, only put on his headphones and leaned his head against the window.

'It's his mum, ay?' Ibbby asked. 'We need to cheer him up. I wish I got him the chicken I made yesterday. He loves that one with the yellow rice.' He then took out a box of M&M's and put them in front of PJ, hoping it would perk him up.

It didn't.

Mr Ahmed walked into the lab. 'Boys, remember your contracts. And Tariq, as BBL, I'm counting on you to make sure the room isn't set on fire. Mr Archie told me to personally deliver that message.' He left his number on Mr Fazaan's desk. 'Call me if there are any problems.'

Mr Fazaan took his time placing a bunch of test tubes, beakers, some droppers and safety goggles on his desk. He washed his hands and put on blue gloves.

'Haram, he actually thinks he's going to get through his lesson,' Ibbby said.

In the row in front of me, a boy named Benji was stretching back a slingshot he'd pulled out of his bag.

'Okay, boys,' Mr Fazaan said holding up a test tube filled with green liquid. 'Today we're going —'

BANG! The test tube shattered, spilling the liquid all over his clothes.

I kicked the back of Benji's stool. 'Pack it away now.'

Ibbby kicked his stool again for good measure. 'Wallah, if we get into trouble from Archie, I'm going to shove that slingshot you-know-where.'

'It's okay, boys,' Mr Fazaan said. 'No need to panic. Not sure what happened there.'

'Do it again,' one of the boys whispered. 'Aim for the next tube.'

‘Do it again, and I will break your legs,’ I countered.

The heat in these rooms always made the boys do stupid things. When Benji stashed his slingshot away, someone else started blasting rap music through their iPhone dock while Mr Fazaan, still determined to teach, yelled over the noise. Others ran in and out of the room, then a couple of boys started a wrestling match. It was like watching headless chickens running around. When Mr Fazaan stood up to try and break up the fight, two boys covered his stool in glue.

Ibby looked at me, frustrated. ‘Don’t they get that Archie’s going to kill them?’

I stood up and shut some of the boys out. ‘Khalas! Stop being gronks. Didn’t Ahmed and Archie just tell us that our school is in deep shit?’

‘Relax, bro,’ one boy shouted. ‘We’re just having fun.’

PJ stood up and threw his bag on the floor. His body towered above us like a giant till everyone shut up and sat back in their seats. I’ve seen PJ lose his temper twice, and both times the other boys ended up in hospital with broken bones. Now that the class was quiet, Mr Fazaan sat back on his stool just as a loud siren rang throughout the whole school.

‘FIRE!’ the boys shouted.

Everyone jumped out of their seats and ran out of the room even though we all knew it was a practice drill. Mr Fazaan panicked as he realised he was glued down. Huss and I tried to help him, but when it was obvious that the glue was stuck to his pants, PJ had to carry him out with the stool still attached to his butt.

PJ plopped the casual teacher onto the oval, where Mr Archie and the rest of the school were assembled.

‘Sir, they glued him to the stool so we had no choice but to bring him like this,’ I explained.

‘You alright, Derek?’ Mr Archie asked, trying not to laugh.

Mr Fazaan took a few deep breaths. ‘I was in the army for twenty years and never have I dealt with such animals!’

Mr Archie helped him hobble to sick bay, leaving us to Mr Ahmed.

‘Tariq, you’re the BBL. Tell me, who did this?’ Mr Ahmed asked.

‘Sir, you know we’re not snitches.’ Mr Ahmed wasn’t impressed with that answer, so we were called into the principal’s office. Honestly, they should have just put a bed in there for me and be done with it.

Mr Archie shook his head and leaned back in his chair. 'You sure it wasn't any of you? Because you know if I find out it was, you're all off the footy team.'

'I swear to God, sir,' Ibby said. 'Tariq even tried to stop them by locking the door.'

Mr Archie sighed. 'You tried, I guess. That's more than I could have hoped for.' He pinched the bridge of his nose as Mr Ahmed told us that our school had been tagged in a 'concerned citizens' Facebook page with more mobile footage of some of the school fights.

Where were these videos coming from? Not only were we dealing with outsiders trying to shut us down, it was now clear that someone on the inside wanted us finished, too.

Ibby stood up and started to pace, trying to calm himself. 'Wallah, when I find out who's leaking these videos, I'm going to smash them.'

'Alright, you're free to leave. Except for you, PJ,' Mr Archie said. 'Hang back a minute.'

We sat outside and waited for PJ. He finally walked out, hunched over with bloodshot, teary eyes and Mr Ahmed's arm around him.

'Lads, take PJ to the library and stay there for the rest of the afternoon,' Mr Archie said. 'It's under construction, but you can sit near the computer rooms.'

The library had blue tarp on the floor and new furniture wrapped in plastic. Stacks of boxes with new books lined the room.

PJ knuckled his eyes. 'You don't have to waste your lunchtime,' he muttered. 'You can go.'

'You're Wolf Pack,' Ibby said. 'We're not going anywhere.'

'Is it your mum again?' Huss asked.

He sniffed a few times. 'Yeah. A couple of weeks from release, and they found drugs on her.'

Ibby looked at me and shook his head as Mr Archie walked in. It felt better having him there because I didn't know how to deal with PJ like this.

PJ started pacing angrily. 'I hate her, man. I hate her so much.' He tried to fight back the tears.

'She's your mum, bro,' I said. 'She's always going to be your mum.'

He looked at us. 'Does your mum do that shit? Does your mum leave you so she can get high?'

Mr Archie sat on the table and didn't say a word.

I passed PJ some tissues. 'Bro, I know you're angry but try to calm do—'

'Calm down?' he abruptly interrupted. 'Calm *down*?' Tears streaked down his face.

I shook my head. 'No. That was stupid. Don't calm down. Scream at us, throw a punch if you need to.'

'All I've *ever* done was take care of her,' he bellowed. 'Clean up after her. Gone and sat in the car while she did what she did to get money.' His voice cracked. 'I've never had a mum. Do you know what that *feels* like? What it *does* to you? Instead of doing normal things like every other kid, I had to work so we can survive. And you'd think she'd look at me just *once* and say *thanks* or *I love you*.'

It was so hard to see PJ like this. He was the tough guy or the funny guy. He was never the broken guy.

I knew nothing we could say or do was going to solve his problems. But I realised, in this moment, it wasn't about solving or fixing anything, it was about letting him know that we were there for him, even if his mum never was.

The Wolf Pack were there for their brother.

Ibby grabbed PJ in a bear hug and I gripped his shoulder tightly.

And just like that he broke down and cried like a baby. I stood there and watched one of the toughest guys I know fall apart.

## Chapter 21

I could hear Uncle Charlie calling me from the shed as I shoved my gear into my bag for Game 2. His honey jars were the least of my worries – I needed to take Amira to school and hopefully see Jamila before I had to head over to Punchbowl Park.

As soon as we got inside the gates of her school, Amira pulled me towards the monkey bars and I saw Jamila standing beside them, waiting at the bottom of the slide for Jihad. My heart almost burst out of my chest.

‘I’m getting better,’ Amira said. ‘Watch me now, Tariq.’

I had just taken a deep breath to apologise to Jamila, when her brother came flying down the slide, clipped my knees and knocked me to the ground. I face-planted into wet bark, and Jihad landed right on top of me. For a little kid, he really packed a punch. I’d heard jokes my whole life about watching out for a Lebanese girl’s brothers, but I’d never imagined an eight-year-old could have been such a threat. I caught my breath and stood up, just in time to see Jamila heading off in the direction of the girls’ high school.

There was no time to go after her and still make it to the Park in time for kick-off. Jamila was on my mind throughout the game against the D Team. I was back to square one with her, with no idea how to convince her that I was just an idiot who ran his mouth.

I scored our first try in the comp, but we still lost 14–6 against the boys from Greenacre and Parramatta, who completed their sets and played the ball much faster than us.

‘Do what you did in the game at training next week, and you’ll be co-captain again with Aaron,’ Mr Archie said. Aaron’s face fell a little but he didn’t object. ‘You both being captain means you need to spend some time together outside of the comp, though. Have you done that yet?’

Aaron and I shook our heads.

‘Tomorrow, then,’ he said. ‘I don’t care what you do, but spend Saturday getting to know each other and figuring out some strategies for this team.’

‘Tomorrow?’ we both repeated in unison. Mr Archie smiled to himself and walked away. We stood in silence, not looking at each other.

‘You can come over to mine,’ Aaron said finally. ‘Mum has a thing on, so we’ll have the house to ourselves.’

He didn’t seem that happy to be hosting me and I wasn’t really happy being his guest, but I’d just gotten a chance to be captain again. If it meant I had to be in Aaron’s territory, then so be it.

Hunter and his team played on the other side of the Park, but there was only one toilet block, which meant we were bound to run into each other. Sure enough, when Riley headed into the building, a few boys from Team A followed him inside.

‘Did you see that?’ PJ asked.

‘It’s not our problem,’ Huss said, scrolling on his phone. ‘They’re not going to do anything to him here with everyone around.’ He then turned to Matt and Lee. ‘Go check on your mate in the toilets.’

‘We should go,’ Ibby said. ‘I’m going whether you boys are in or not.’

Leaving anyone alone in the bathroom with a bunch of bullies wasn’t right. I went with Matt, Lee, Ibby and PJ to the toilet block, to see Riley surrounded by three of the A Team boys.

‘You guys need to stop whatever you’re doing and apologise,’ Matt said. The boys laughed and gave us the finger.

*Oh my God, white people and their apologies...*

It didn’t work like that in our neighbourhood. If you did something stupid, either you got punched in the face or you got punched in the face, and these kharas were in *our* neighbourhood.

Ibby grabbed one of them by the collar. ‘I’m not white and I don’t apologise. I smash people’s heads in. Next time you touch Riley, you’re going to regret you came to Punchbowl.’

Ibby and PJ ran off the bullies while I turned to check if Riley was okay. He was squatting against the wall, shaking. I helped him up just as Hunter showed up with a few more of his mates and blocked us from leaving.

‘If it’s not the worst team in the world,’ Hunter announced. ‘We’ve got Noodle Boy here with the white-headed freak and a bunch of mozzies.’

PJ turned to Ibby and snapped his fingers like he’d had an amazing realisation. ‘*That’s* who the ranga reminds me of!’

‘Who?’ Ibbby asked, playing along. ‘Wait, wait. Don’t tell me. Let me guess. The short, ugly one in *Mulan*?’

‘You’re close,’ PJ said. I swear these guys had an encyclopaedic knowledge of kids’ movies thanks to Bob. This could take a while.

‘I wanna play,’ Lee said with a grin. ‘Is it Lord Farquard from *Shrek*? No wait, he’s too tall.’

‘It’s the hunchback guy, Quasimodo!’ PJ pointed at Hunter. ‘Spit image, ay?’ We all exclaimed in agreement.

‘But Quasi’s got a good heart,’ Lee added. ‘This guy is just rotten on the inside and out.’

Hunter blinked a few times, his face now as bright as his hair. ‘You pussies watch princess movies!’ he cried.

‘Each and every one of those princesses could kick your arse, ranga,’ I shot back.

He focused on Riley as the weakest target. ‘At least I don’t look like you. You freaking look diseased.’

‘Just piss off,’ I said as Aaron made his way into the toilet block.

‘Or what, mozzie?’ Hunter said. ‘Why don’t you do us all a favour and go back to your shithole country and take that freak with you?’

Before Ibbby, PJ and I could put his head through the wall, Aaron grabbed him by the shirt. We held off the other guys and I waited to see if Aaron was really serious about cutting himself off from Hunter.

‘You’re being a prick and you need to stop,’ Aaron said, holding Hunter to the wall.

Hunter’s face twisted in a sneer. ‘Your dad would be so disgusted to see you side with *them*.’

Aaron went nuclear. It took all of Ibbby and PJ’s strength to hold him back as Riley tried to get him to calm down. Hunter and his boys took advantage of the commotion to creep out the door, but not before Hunter threatened us with his *connections* to people who could do dangerous things.

‘Does he know you boys are from Punchbowl?’ Lee asked, scratching his head. ‘His *connections* are probably your cousins.’

‘Your dad would be really proud that you stood up to Hunter,’ Riley assured him. ‘They’re just trying to get under your skin.’

Aaron was washing his face. ‘Did they do anything to you?’



‘Nah, the boys walked in just in time.’

Lee cleaned his glasses on his shirt. ‘Look, mate, they’re probably jealous of the benefits of your hair. You can push in line and get disabled parking.’

Riley finally cracked a smile. ‘And don’t forget the pension.’

‘Ayyy!’ PJ hollered, picking him up off of the ground in a massive hug. ‘Did Ghostbusters just crack a joke about his hair?’

‘I knew you would come around,’ Matt said to me quietly as the boys laughed. ‘Thanks for helping out my mate.’

‘I know I made your life hell before,’ Aaron was saying to Riley. ‘I’m really sorry. I was picking on someone I didn’t expect to fight back because —’

‘Because you were a dipshit,’ Ibby interrupted.

‘Yeah, I was,’ Aaron agreed.

Riley laughed a little.

‘What?’ Ibby asked, looking surprised. ‘He was. You were. But you’re cool now because you stuck up for him.’

‘Bullies like Hunter think they’re all tough and strong around their mates,’ I told Riley. ‘But if we found him on his own, I guarantee you he’d shit his pants and run the other way. He only comes after people when he’s got them outnumbered.’

‘And you won’t be outnumbered again,’ PJ put in. ‘You’re part of the F Team.’

‘Okay, okay,’ Lee said, ushering us out of the toilets. ‘This is all really emotional and stuff, but this place stinks and I’m about to pass out.’

All of us coming together for Riley felt good. And really, considering how this whole experience had started, it felt strangely appropriate that we should truly come together as a team not on the footy field, but in the stinking toilet block in Punchbowl Park.

## Chapter 22

Sharing a room with all my brothers and sisters was turning out to be a major hassle. If Feda was sleeping, she'd go into Terminator mode if we woke her up. She had a major exam coming up at the end of her residency and spent any minute she wasn't at work or asleep studying like a maniac.

'Don't bother your sister,' Dad said to me. 'Don't give her nervousness or stress or I be very upset.'

Things were still tense between Feda and me. She only spoke to me when she had to, and usually left the room whenever I walked in. I knew I'd messed up really bad, but I couldn't find a way to make it up to her. With her exam coming up, none of us were allowed to linger in the room. Only Mum and Dad really saw much of her, when they made her special herbal tea or took her plates of sliced fruit.

'She be good doctor,' Mum said proudly to Auntie Salma. 'Then Insh Allah she get married.'

Saturday after our second game, breakfast was served as usual under our vine-leaf-wrapped pergola. Uncle Charlie sat next to me and I knew he was going to ask me about the honey jars.

'You forget, didn't you?' he said. 'It's okay. I leave some jars for next week.'

Mum and Auntie Salma had made some fresh manoush on the saj oven. The crispy warm dough with the perfect amount of lightly salted cheese melted in your mouth, and was always ten times better than anything you could get in the shops. Abdul and Saff fought over the last piece and Amira snuck some Nutella into hers before rolling it up, trying to hide the evidence.

'It's all over your mouth, I whispered.

'Don't think I can't see, Amoorah,' Mum called out as she rolled the fluffy dough. 'No more after this.' She then tried to tempt Feda away from her books with a plate of freshly buttered, extra sugary pastries that were Mum's specialty. It was a mix of sugar and butter with a dash of diabetes

that my brothers and I drooled over. Dad slapped Abdul's hand away from the plate.

'This for Feda!' he warned. 'She studying, she need energy.' Feda came out of the house, picked up the plate and flipped Abdul the finger before heading back to her room.

'Can I *please* have one, Mum?' I begged.

'When you become doctor like Feda, I make you some.'

Ibby and PJ must have smelled the manoush cooking from their homes, because they both rolled in the back gate a few minutes later. It was good to see PJ looking more like his old self after his breakdown in the library. I knew things were far from resolved with his mum, but Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed were working with Grandma Ceci to find the best long-term solution, and I think sharing the burden with the rest of us had eased his mind a bit.

Ibby and PJ squashed themselves in on either side of Abdul, who now couldn't move his arms.

'I told Mum she made a mistake feeding you piglets years ago,' Abdul said, trying to free his hands. 'I can't even reach my food.'

'You don't need to.' Ibby took a piece of his manoush. 'It's mine now.'

'Where Hussein?' Mum asked me, turning over the bread. 'Tell him to come.'

Tariq: Yo. Come over. Mum's making manoush.

Huss: Can't. Got to take Big Haji to the medical centre.

Tariq: Is she alright?

Huss: Yeah. Just a couple of check-ups.

Aunty Salma sat beside me and nibbled at my food. I don't generally believe in murder, but people eating my food makes me homicidal. But I had to stay calm, since Feda wasn't talking to me, I needed Aunty Salma's help.

'I need to lose a few kilos before I leave,' she said in Arabic from behind her huge sunglasses. She always wore them when she had no makeup and looked like a D-list celebrity. 'Very important to keep the husband happy.'

Ibby sat beside Mum and she taught him how to roll out the dough and stretch it into the air to get it just the right size to fit onto the dome saj. My brothers and PJ were in the yard, kicking the ball around while Dad watered the cucumbers and tomatoes. Uncle Charlie and Amira were messing around with their bees.

It was about as much privacy as I was likely to get. I turned to Auntie Salma. 'I have a friend who said some bad things to hurt a girl. What should he do to fix it?'

She took off her glasses, her eyes wide open. 'Is my nephew going to get married?'

'What? I said my *friend*.'

She laughed. 'Okay. Does your *friend* really like her or is he just playing?'

'Nah, he really likes her. More than any other girl he's liked before.'

I explained what this 'friend' had done.

'He's lucky he didn't get a slap. My advice would be to say sorry first, but more than that, he has to *prove* he's sorry.'

'But how?'

She tapped her long nails on the table. 'His actions. If he wants her forgiveness, he has to be patient and work hard.' She then told me about a guy she really loved back in the day, but because she was poor, his family never accepted her. 'Turns out he wasn't that good either, and got married two weeks after he said he was in love with me. I know you think I'm all fake with plastic surgery but your aunty did make the boys in the village work for her.' She smiled, but with sadness in her eyes. 'How life changes, right?'

'I don't think you're fake,' I protested. 'You're actually alright. Better than alright. I said some crap stuff that I shouldn't have.'

She nudged me with her elbow. 'And are you nice to me now only because I helped your *friend* out?'

I felt terrible that she saw right through me. She'd been here for weeks, and it was only when I needed something that I took the time to get to know her. 'I'm sorry, Auntie. I've been a bit of an ass, I know.'

'It's okay,' she said. 'I still love you. But you know, you've said a lot of stuff you shouldn't have. Not just to me, or to this girl you – sorry, your

*friend* – likes. Maybe you should be more careful before you say things. One day, “sorry” may not be enough.’

I knew she was talking about Feda. ‘I’m trying to do better.’

She nodded. ‘Yes, I see that. And trying is good, it’s very good. Try harder, and Insh Allah things will get better.’ She winked at me, then went to sit under the mulberry tree, trying to catch some sun.

I carried some plates to the outdoor kitchen, when Feda reappeared with her empty plate. As usual, her eyes slid right past me.

‘How’s the studying going?’ I asked.

‘Fine. Need to get back to it.’ She stood impatiently, waiting for me to get out of the way.

I looked down at my plates, then over at hers. *Try harder*, Auntie Salma had said. Actions, not just words. I reached over to take her plate from her, and watched her frown in confusion out of the corner of my eye as I washed it. She opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again.

‘Yallah, Tariq,’ Dad called from the garden. ‘I drop you at your friends.’

The moment passed, but for the first time, I felt a little hopeful that I could mend my fences with my big sister.

Mr Archie had already called Dad to let him know that Aaron and I would be spending more time together outside of the comp. Since it was the weekend, it was abaya-and-green-and-gold-kangaroo-thongs day for Dad. We drove around Aaron’s Shire neighbourhood, windows down and Dad’s thick white beard flapping in the cold breeze.

We stuck out like a sore thumb, and I could sense the stares from the people around us. When we finally turned into Aaron’s street, it was lined with tall trees, shiny new cars and mansions by the water. The air smelt like Matt’s hair, the salty, fresh tang of the ocean.

‘I go down and make sure everything is okay,’ Dad said, parking the car.

‘No, Baba. I can walk myself.’

He ignored me and went over to the passenger door of the van. It gave a loud screech, and a couple walking their dog stopped in their tracks.

‘We okay. We okay,’ Dad said with a smile and a wave. ‘Just very old car.’

We stood in front of a large black iron gate set into a high sandstone wall that wrapped around the property. This place looked more over-the-top than

the Prime Minister's house. When the gate opened, we made our way down the long, pebbled driveway. White rosebushes ran along either side, interspersed evenly with perfectly cut oval topiary bushes. I could smell the freshly mown grass as I stared up at the windows, reflecting the sun and the sea. Although Cronulla was really close to Bankstown – a fact that I loved to tell people who boasted about being from the Shire – it might as well have been a different planet.

'This house very nice,' Dad said. 'Imagine all the vegetables you grow here. You can feed lots of people.'

A short Indian woman opened the door. 'Hello. May I help you?'

'Uh, yeah, I'm here to see Aaron?' I couldn't help but turn the statement into a question as I wondered whether this woman was Aaron's butler. I mean, come on! Who has a *butler*?

She left, then returned with a woman that I recognised as Aaron's mum. She was reading a letter, with a few more tucked under her arm. She wore a different sharply tailored pantsuit from when I last saw her, but the red lips, the cropped blonde hair and the cold expression hadn't changed.

'Hello. You must be Tariq,' she said, before holding her hand out to Dad.

He put his hand on his chest. 'Salaam. Sorry, sister, but I don't shake woman hand.'

She smiled briefly. 'No need to apologise. We all have our own customs.'

I signalled to Dad that all was good now and he could leave.

'I need to speak to his mum first,' he said in Arabic. 'I want to get to know the family too, so I know when you come and go that you're safe here.'

'Is there a problem?' Aaron's mum asked.

'No, no, sister. I just explain to my son that I like to speak together with you, and then I go. I don't let my son go any place before I talk to parents.'

Aaron's mum smiled again, and the expression still did nothing to warm her distant eyes. 'As much as I would've loved to have tea with you, Mr Nader, I'm afraid I have a busy schedule. We work very hard around here,' she said dryly. 'And today is no exception. Maybe another time?'

'And we sit around all day?' I grunted. I was embarrassed as hell by Dad sticking around, but I wasn't going to stand around and let her insult him. 'It's the best part of being on Centrelink.'

Mrs Furner pursed her lips, her face tight as Dad told me off.

‘You speak that disrespectfully to anyone and I will slap the words right back into your mouth,’ he growled.

Obviously Aaron was too chicken to tell me that he didn’t want to hang out and so he sent his mum to blow us off.

‘So sorry, sister,’ Dad said to her with his hand back on his chest. ‘Tariq, he smart but dumb. He talk dumb a lot.’ She looked a little shocked that he would talk smack about me in front of other people. ‘I thought your son told my son to come.’

‘I did.’ Aaron came around the side of the house. ‘Hello. I’m Aaron,’ he said, shaking Dad’s hands. ‘Sorry, I was in the yard.’

His mum nodded at Dad, then turned to go. ‘I’ll leave you to it, then.’ She disappeared back into the house. Aaron shook his head and invited my dad to come in.

‘No thank you, I have to go,’ Dad said. I knew he was embarrassed by my rudeness and Mrs Furner’s brush-off. He kissed my head and walked back to the gate.

‘Shut up,’ I said, seeing Aaron trying not to laugh. ‘It’s what dads do.’ As the words left my mouth, I remembered that dads were a sensitive topic. ‘I didn’t mean that,’ I added quickly.

‘All good, bro.’

Aaron’s house was like something out of the movies: the black-and-white chequered tiles, two grey marble staircases that connected under a gigantic crystal chandelier. Paintings hung on the walls, and huge floor-to-ceiling windows took in the ocean view. Aaron led the way to where a white-and-gold motorcycle gleamed between the staircases.

‘You have a motorcycle in your house?’ I asked, too scared to touch anything.

‘It’s my dad’s,’ he said. ‘I mean, it *was* my dad’s.’

‘I wasn’t rubbing it in, you know, before with my dad.’

He nodded. ‘I’ll show you around so we can get to what we need to do so Archie doesn’t kill us.’

Mrs Furner reappeared and reminded Aaron that some places were off limits.

‘Don’t worry, we Arabs don’t steal *everything* we see,’ I joked, trying to make up for my rudeness earlier. She didn’t really find that funny, just

glanced coldly at me once again and walked away.

‘Don’t bother,’ Aaron whispered as we moved through the open living room. From here, I could see the pool overlooking the water. Everything sparkled and shone and looked like they had price tags way beyond anything we could afford. It was the first time I had been in a house without family pictures or hanging flower pots.

He opened the fridge and threw me a can of Coke. ‘Don’t let my mum get to you. She’s like that with everyone. Not just –’

‘Not just Muslims?’ I asked.

He snorted. ‘Yeah, she pretty much hates everyone. She’s an equal-opportunity hater.’

‘Sure,’ I replied sceptically.

He grabbed a basketball from a cupboard hung with coats.

‘I hide them around the house so she doesn’t throw them out.’ He dribbled the ball a few times and walked out through another glass door. ‘It’s homework, homework and more homework for my mum. That’s all that matters.’

If I thought the inside of his house was extravagant, the outside was a whole other level. Soft green grass, tall palm trees, a basketball half-court, covered jacuzzi and the ocean.

‘Bro, I wouldn’t leave my house if I had all of this,’ I said taking aim for the hoop. ‘You really do have it all.’

He picked up the ball and took a shot himself. ‘The only part I care about in this medical centre is my dad’s car collection.’

I looked around to see if his mum could hear us.

‘Relax. She’s probably left already. She said she had some meeting.’ As he walked towards the garage, he ducked out of view of the cameras mounted high on the wall.

‘I thought you said she’s out,’ I said, following him.

He stopped. ‘Just to be on the safe side.’

He opened the garage door and switched on the lights. Each light shone on a new car. There were four lights in total. My heart skipped a beat.

‘Bro, is that an Audi R8 V10 Spyder?’ I asked in a hushed, reverent tone. I had only ever seen them in weddings, doing burnouts.

‘Yeah, my dad was a collector,’ he said. ‘He went around the country buying and selling cars. And if he wasn’t doing that, he was watching me



play footy on the weekends or going to the Bulldogs match.'

He walked to the back wall and uncovered a framed and signed Bulldogs jersey from the 2004 Grand Final. He pointed to a signature just under the collar. 'That's Hazem's there.'

'If I showed this to Ibby or PJ, they'd probably lose their minds. They'd knock you unconscious and take the jersey.' I took a few pictures on my phone. 'Just need some evidence to make them freak out.'

One wall was filled with pictures of Aaron and his dad, either with racing legends or doing father-son things like fishing and more fishing.

'Bro, how big is that Jewfish?' I exclaimed. 'You're a Jew fishing for a Jew.'

'I never thought about it that way,' he said, laughing. 'Anyway, my dad was Catholic.'

'What? Is that even allowed?' I asked.

'I mean, my grandparents weren't *thrilled* about it, but Mum was a bit of a rebel,' he said. 'It's hard to believe she broke any rules when now I can't even leave my shoes in my room in case she has a heart attack.'

'Man, my mum lets us do anything as long as we don't touch her plants.'

'Wanna swap mums?'

I shook my head. 'Relax, yeah? We're just getting to know each other.'

Aaron walked over to the only car under a cover. 'Dad would watch me play footy on the weekend and then we'd go for a drive in this.' He unveiled a blood-red 1963 Ferrari 250 GTO. I nearly swallowed my tongue. 'Nought to sixty in three seconds,' he noted, opening the car door for me to sit.

I took a few pictures inside the car. 'Bro, if Huss saw this, he'd lose his shit.'

Aaron's face changed. 'I don't want to fight with him, but when he stuffs around on the field, man, it pisses me off.'

'You have to admit that you do stuff to piss us off, too.' I got out of the car.

'Like what?'

'You're heaps cocky. Like when I lost captaincy, it was like you won the lottery.'

He grinned. 'Hey, man, if the roles were reversed, you'd be cocky, too.'

I helped him cover the Ferrari while we sniped about who started what.

‘There’s no point in arguing anymore,’ I told him. ‘I’m here cos Archie expects a lot from us. My school is in deep shit and it’s not helping that we keep fighting.’ I filled him in about the men in suits.

‘But Huss still argues with Ahmed and Archie? He even –’

‘Huss and I have been brothers since before I can remember.’ I needed to be clear about where I stood with Huss. ‘Yeah, he pushes people’s buttons but he’s loyal and he’s always had my back.’

Aaron rolled his eyes. ‘If he’s still shitting off Archie and Ahmed, it doesn’t sound like he’s got your back when it comes to keeping the school open.’

‘Let’s just talk about how we’re going to win games and work on some set plays, especially with Hunter and his team.’ It felt wrong talking about Huss behind his back. ‘If there was one thing we can agree upon, it’s that Hunter needs to be taught a lesson and we’re the ones to do it.’

Aaron agreed just as Abi the Indian butler walked into the garage. ‘Hunter is at the front door. He says he wants to talk to you.’

‘Speak of the devil,’ Aaron said. ‘Tell him I’m busy.’

‘Should I ask him to come back later?’ Abi asked hesitantly.

‘Please tell him that where he’s concerned, I’m always going to be too busy.’ He waited until she left before turning to me. ‘I don’t want to be around him ever again, I’m done.’

‘To be honest, I didn’t believe you until you put it on him in the toilets. I know we have our beef, but that was alright, man.’

‘Riley and I have been hanging out these last few weeks. He’s actually really funny, man. It makes me wish we hung out from the very beginning, not just when we were playing footy at school.’

‘Straight out, I don’t know how he’s so nice to you and treats you like nothing ever happened.’

‘I asked him. I asked him why he forgave me and you wanna know what he said? He said it was because he’d never want to let hate seep in his heart like it did to me and Hunter.’

‘That’s deep, man.’

I heard the sound of high heels clacking on the ground just as Aaron’s mum walked into the garage.

‘Hunter has been waiting for you outside.’ She folded her arms. ‘And didn’t I say this place was off-limits?’ she asked coldly.

‘Hunter can get fucked,’ Aaron said, equally coldly. I stood there awkwardly and wondered what would happen to my face if I ever spoke to my mum like that.

‘Watch your language,’ she snapped. ‘I don’t think I know you anymore. First the firecrackers at camp, and now this. You’ve always been friends with him. What’s going on? Hunter’s inviting you to his place and wants to put things behind him. I wish you’d be mature enough to do the same.’ By the sounds of it, Aaron hadn’t mentioned the bullying and Hunter had made himself out to be the innocent party.

‘I said I don’t want to talk to him!’ Aaron yelled. He stormed off and left me in the garage with his mum. I wanted to leave, but she stood in the doorway, her arms still folded, glaring my way.

‘I thought this football competition would help him to deal with his anger and his grief,’ she said. ‘Clearly, I was wrong. He still storms out and won’t listen to a word I say.’

I wanted to suggest that maybe that was because she didn’t listen to him, but I was an Arab boy in a white woman’s garage, so I kept my mouth shut. She breathed deeply through her nose a few times, then finally left.

I found Aaron’s room with Abi’s help. He sat on a couch beneath the window, spinning a basketball on his finger. The shadows under his eyes looked deeper than ever.

‘Six months today,’ he said, not meeting my eyes.

I stood in the doorway. ‘Your dad?’

‘Yeah. I know she’s upset and angry, but she can’t keep taking it out on me. She’s a psycho sometimes.’

I couldn’t tell Aaron that he was a psycho sometimes too. I’d been in his house for about an hour and I could see why he called the place a medical centre. Even though my mum would lose it when we went near her plants, we were basically free to do whatever we wanted. Abdul and Saff spray-painted the back of our garage and my parents didn’t say anything. Amira used Dad’s tools and built whatever she wanted in the shed. Uncle Charlie had a swarm of bees in his section of the garden, and Feda took up most of Dad’s closet space with her textbooks.

‘Maybe she’s dealing with your dad’s death in her own way,’ I tried to console him. ‘She lost a husband, too.’ We stared at each other and I realised that it was the first time we’d had a conversation – a real

conversation – without calling each other out. The moment stretched out into an awkward silence, so I moved to a safer topic. ‘Alright let’s talk strategy and come up with some stuff so Archie doesn’t kill us.’

We agreed on most set plays and the things we needed to change for our next game. Huss’s laid-back attitude was one of them but I warned Aaron to stay out of it and promised that I’d talk to him. I knew Huss would listen to me if I told him that I needed him to step it up and start taking things more seriously.

Three hours passed before I called Dad to come and pick me up. As I waited by the door for him, I could hear Mrs Furner on the phone yell at some guy named Mr Paten.

‘If you can’t get your act together, consider our deal finished.’ She didn’t raise her voice, but the threat was crystal clear.

God help Mr Paten.

*[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)*

## Chapter 23

The next week began with more trucks unloading new stuff for our school. We had a few classrooms now with aircons, which meant we could actually concentrate. Not that many of the boys did, of course, which was a problem because the men in suits now roamed through the halls and sat in on our classes. They reminded me of ghosts, haunting us with the words they wrote down in their notebooks. We had our own code to know when the men were around. If there was a school tie wrapped around a doorknob, it meant they were inside so we needed to be on our best behaviour.

‘They don’t even say hello,’ Ibby said. ‘I tried to give them some chicken and rice but they said no.’

Mr Archie started the week with another whole-school assembly, this time without any special guests. He told us that while we’d made some improvements with our behaviour and there were a few new enrolments, we needed to work extra hard coming into the second half of the term.

‘The teachers and I are doing our part to make this school a place you lads feel proud of,’ he said. ‘But I need you to play your parts, too. It’s now or never, lads.’

As was becoming his habit now, Mr Archie had a one-on-one with me in his office after assembly. ‘A little birdie told me that you and Aaron hung out on the weekend.’

‘I don’t think anyone’s ever called my dad a little birdie before.’

He laughed. ‘Your dad’s a great fella and wants the same things as I do for this school. I enjoy our chats.’

I still wasn’t sure how I felt about my principal and my dad being best mates.

‘How did it go?’

I shrugged. ‘Yeah, fine. Didn’t know he lived in a palace, so that took some getting used to.’

He shook his head. ‘Did you actually work on some plays, or did you just obsess about his house the whole time?’

‘Nah, we did some work. There are things we want to try at training tomorrow. There was some weirdness with his mum.’ I don’t know why I brought it up, but it just blurted out of my mouth.

Mr Archie frowned. ‘How so?’

I explained what had happened in the garage, and my conversation with Aaron later. ‘I dunno, but it feels like there’s a lot of shit going down between them, sir.’

He nodded almost absentmindedly. ‘You handled yourself well, though. Good to see the BBL work with Mr Ahmed and Miss K is being useful.’

He changed the topic and then, after a few minutes, dismissed me. It was the most uneventful chat I’d had with him since we first met.

Tuesday training ran a little smoother as Aaron and I managed to get some set plays right with the boys, but we still couldn’t complete most of our sets.

‘Yo, Aaron?’ Ibbby called across the field. ‘Is it true you have a 250 GTO Ferrari?’

‘And an Audi,’ Matt said.

‘Don’t forget the motorbike,’ Riley added.

Aaron picked up the footy. ‘Did Tariq show you the photos?’

‘You were at his place?’ Huss asked me sharply.

Everyone quietly melted away and left us alone.

‘Mr Archie said I could be captain again if I worked with Aaron, so we hung out on the weekend to figure out a couple of set plays,’ I explained, sensing his anger. ‘I wanted to talk to you about –’

‘About what?’ he interrupted belligerently; his arms crossed.

I had to find the right words. ‘I need you to play properly, like how we play in our school team. I’ve told Aaron to watch himself too and that –’

‘Are you serious? He tried to hit me, and now you’re telling me to take orders from him?’ he said a little louder. ‘Wallah, I’d die first. You went to his house once and now you’re best friends.’

The boys kept training with Mr Ahmed and Mr Archie, but I could tell everyone was eavesdropping as I tried to get him to relax.

‘Huss? I’m not asking you to kiss his arse. Just to be normal. I’m your captain too, and I’m asking you to take this comp a little more seriously,’

I said. 'Think about it as something for us, and nothing to do with this Aaron guy.'

His breathing eased. 'Just tell him not to get in my face.'

We had an audience at training today. Groups of women worked out on the new gym equipment installed by the council and old men sat on the benches and laughed every time Mr Archie or Mr Ahmed threw the balls at our heads.

'We need to be more consistent, lads,' Mr Archie shouted. 'Talk to each other, and please, for the love of God, stop dropping the ball.'

Mr Ahmed looked at his phone. 'Mr Archie, I have something that's going to help.' He left in a rush. We had a rare opportunity to have a break until Mr Ahmed came back, so we sat on the cold grass trying to catch our breath.

Lee fiddled with his phone and seemed frustrated. His YouTube channel had lost some followers over the weekend and racist comments had been posted. We knew it was Hunter and his friends because of all the times 'Noodle Boy' had been used.

'He's gonna pay, bro,' PJ said, punching his fist into his other hand. 'Next time we see him, let's just smash his face behind the toilets.'

'And ruin any chance for your school,' Aaron said, sitting up quickly. 'We have to figure out another way.'

'Don't act like you care about our school,' Huss sneered.

Aaron looked at me like I should say something.

'We'll talk about it later.' I saw Mr Ahmed walking back our way. 'Hey, who's that with him?'

I blinked a few times to make sure my eyes were seeing right.

It was Hazem El Masri.

Each team had been given an NRL mentor, and lucky us, we had a home-grown talent. Without warning, Ibby rushed up and hugged Hazem tightly. 'Wallah, I luv ya.'

'Don't fight it,' Mr Archie advised Hazem. 'He'll just hold on tighter.'

'Morning, boys,' Hazem said, Ibby still wrapped around him. 'Hey, buddy, I need my body to show you boys some things.'

Ibby finally let go. 'He's a good hugger, man.'

Hazem took out a newspaper from his back pocket and showed us the front page of *The Torch*.

‘Is that you, Ibby?’ PJ asked as we all huddled around.

‘Am I famous?’ he asked, holding the paper close to his face.

It was a picture of Ibby hugging Hazem when he had come to our school earlier. The headline read, ‘School Embraces a New Beginning.’

It was the first good story that had been printed about us in a long time. We were so used to people pointing out our flaws that we had forgotten what it was like to have something nice said about us.

Hazem handed the paper to Mr Ahmed and got straight into it. ‘Alright, boys. First things first. Hands up if you have each other’s mobile numbers.’

We looked at each other, confused.

‘Mobile numbers?’ PJ asked. ‘I only have theirs.’ He pointed to Huss, Ibby and me.

‘Communication is key,’ Hazem said, and waited until we had all exchanged numbers. He then pointed at me. ‘Make a chat group with all of you in it. From now on, you need to communicate via the group. This is more than just a team. When you play week in and week out, your teammates start to become your family.’ He went on to tell us of the difficulties he faced when he first played for the Bulldogs and how getting to know his team made them play so much better. ‘We knew each others’ strengths and weaknesses, and in 2004 we proved what brotherhood could do.’

Aaron raised his hand. ‘My dad has a jersey signed by all of you in our garage.’

Ibby grabbed him by his shirt. ‘First you don’t invite us to your house, and now you’re telling me you have a jersey from the last time the Bulldogs won a grand final?’

‘Relax, bro,’ he said, freeing himself. ‘You can see it when you come over.’

Hazem nodded, impressed. ‘Nice. Even I don’t have a signed jersey.’ He looked at all of us. ‘Look, guys, it’s all about sportsmanship and respect. You need to be able to rely on your team. I knew my team had my back, especially after September 11 and all the bad media coverage about Muslims. When I’d take a kick, I’d sometimes hear racist comments, but knowing my team had my back, I didn’t care.’

‘Team,’ Mr Archie said. ‘You lads need to be a team off the field before you play on the field.’



We split up and went back to completing some drills. Hazem coached Huss one-on-one, teaching him a few tricks for his kicking. With Huss and Aaron away from each other, I could concentrate on running the ball with the boys.

Miss K watched me like an eagle during the poetry workshop with Jamila. My stomach bubbled with nerves as I took my seat.

‘I’m sorry.’

She tapped away on her laptop.

‘I’m sorry for what I said. I didn’t mean it. It just came out.’ I could feel the sweat break out on my face.

She looked up like she was waiting for more.

‘I don’t think you’re uptight. I don’t know why I said that. I got nervous and said a dumb thing.’

It felt like a million years of her staring at me. She then reached for her bag and pulled out a small red gift bag. She slid it across the table, then went back to typing.

My heart beat a little faster when I pulled out a pair of gloves with rubber grips on the palms.

‘Maybe they’ll help Bob with the monkey bars,’ she finally said.

‘Thanks.’ I smiled a little. ‘So, I’m forgiven?’

‘I’m not one to hold on to grudges. But the next time you speak to me like that, I’ll ask Mrs Pepper to change groups and I’ll work with anyone but you.’

‘Fair enough.’ I put the gift bag away and pulled out a bunch of notes about our poetry slam presentation that I had scribbled the previous night with Aunty Salma. I didn’t just want to say sorry, I wanted to show her. ‘I wrote these notes and thought maybe you could have a look at them and see if they’re any good?’

She grinned. ‘You worked on this at home?’

I shrugged, trying to play it cool. ‘You said it was important. And I do think you’re Miss Perfect. But in a good way.’

She passed me her laptop with her notes, and for the first time the silence between us brought us closer. She read so much faster than me, and sat there drawing on her forearm as I caught up.

‘Your parents are divorced?’ I asked, reading some lines about rebuilding a broken home.

‘Yeah. Mum’s remarried in Dubai,’ she said, inking more flowers onto her arm. ‘It’s one of those “I promise I’ll always be there for you, except if a rich man from Dubai comes along and offers me more than what your dad could” type of divorce stories.’ She shook her head and continued to draw. ‘What about you? How’s the school stuff going?’

‘We met Hazem this week,’ I said. ‘We also had our first good news story and I’m sort of captain again.’

‘Nice,’ she said, smiling.

I looked down at her arms. ‘Why do you draw on yourself?’

‘It’s like brain therapy,’ she said. ‘I find it calming, especially drawing roses and tulips.’

‘Brain therapy?’

‘Yeah,’ she laughed. ‘It’s hard to explain. It just helps.’

‘Why don’t you buy real flowers?’ I asked.

‘I do. Every couple of Fridays. It brightens up the house.’

We worked and talked a little more, then Mariam came and sat on our table. I tensed up immediately.

‘What are you guys up to?’ she asked casually. ‘Anwar and I are going to do it like a rap. He needs work, but I think after a few Cardi B songs, he’ll be alright.’ She then busted out a few rhymes.

‘You’re really good!’ I said.

She grinned. ‘Don’t look so surprised. I killed it.’ She then looked at Jamila. ‘We’ll talk after, yeah?’

Jamila nodded, and Mariam headed off to show her rap skills to the other groups. I gazed after her.

‘Never thought I’d have a civilised conversation with Mariam again,’ I mused.

‘You’d be surprised how much women have to say if you’d actually listen,’ Jamila said tartly, but she was smiling, and there wasn’t the characteristic bite to her words.

I didn’t want to jinx anything, but it felt easy talking to her now. It wasn’t that she didn’t make me nervous or that I still didn’t think about every word I said, but I finally accepted that she was always going to pull me into line when I acted out.



## Chapter 24

The weather for Game 3 was crisp and cool, with only a couple of clouds in the sky. The buses had arrived and all the teams were sitting under their team banners. The fields were marked out in white, and some photographers were scattered around the park. Dad told me that *The Torch* article with Ibbby and Hazem was displayed in some of the shop windows in Punchbowl.

‘They tell customer about football comp,’ he said. ‘They come to some games and watch you boys.’ It felt so great having the community come out to support us on this cold Friday morning.

Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed gave us our final pep talk, both wearing Bulldogs jerseys.

‘Change of plans, lads,’ Mr Archie announced. ‘Your VIP tickets for tomorrow’s game at Belmore depend on how you play today.’

‘But, sir!’ PJ protested. ‘That’s not fair.’

Aaron raised his hand. ‘Weren’t they a gift from Hazem?’

‘Too bad,’ Mr Ahmed said. ‘You only get these tickets if you work as a team.’

‘Do we have to win?’ Lee asked dubiously. ‘The outlook isn’t good.’

‘Win or lose. We want to see proper sportsmanship and team playing from all of you. The tickets are for the F Team, so if you lads show us that you’re a team, Cinderella will go to the ball,’ Mr Archie said.

‘We have an incentive now,’ Riley said, strapping on his headgear. ‘We have something to play for.’

‘Um, and we have our school?’ PJ added doubtfully.

‘Stuff our school!’ Ibbby shouted. ‘Wallah, if any of you stuff this up for me, I’m going to kill all of you.’ He focused on Matt. ‘Especially you, Goldilocks.’

Matt looked around. ‘Goldilocks? I thought Mr Archie just said I was Cinderella.’

‘Goldilocks, Cinderella, Humpty Dumpty, whatever. I’ll kill you.’

My heart picked up its pace as the referee called for our game to begin in five minutes. Aaron and I discussed a couple of game plans when we noticed Lee with streaks of black paint marked across his face.

‘Hunter’s going to know I’m here for war,’ he said, slapping his face. ‘You wanna mess with my YouTube channel? I’ll show you what Noodle Boy can do.’

PJ stared at him. ‘It’s official then. Nintendo’s lost the plot.’

‘We need that intensity if we’re going to beat Team C,’ Aaron said. ‘Just keep an ear and eye out for Tariq and me on the field.’

We stood across from Team C while the referee went over the rules. Ibby and PJ growled a few times and shadowboxed, trying to intimidate the boys from Campbelltown and Macquarie Fields.

I set up the ball on the tee, ready for kick off, and raised my hand to signal play. ‘Here we go, boys.’

They caught the ball, and in a matter of seconds PJ and Ibby were on the other side, ready to make the tackle. I’d never seen them run that fast – they almost gave Lee a run for his money. Team C reached the last tackle in their set, just before the halfway line, when one of their players accidentally played the ball the wrong way.

‘Play on,’ the referee called out.

Riley hurried over to pick up the ball and made a break. He ran down the line, but just before he could pass to Aaron, he was tackled twenty metres out. Mr Archie shouted from the sidelines as I rushed up as dummy-half. I heard Matt behind me in support.

‘I’m unmarked,’ he shouted.

I passed the ball, and before we knew it, our first points were on the board. Ibby squeezed Matt so tight that I thought his eyeballs were going to pop out.

‘Hey, you said you’d kill me if we lost the game, not if I scored a try,’ Matt laughed. We watched on as Huss set up the ball but missed the kick.

‘It’s okay, Huss,’ Mr Archie called out. ‘Keep your head up, son.’

PJ ran beside him. ‘How did you miss that shot?’

‘It’s just one kick,’ Huss snapped back. ‘It’s no big deal.’

Even though I’d seen Huss make that shot a million times before, I gave him the benefit of the doubt. We’d talked before the game, and he assured me that he had our backs just as long as Aaron stayed away from him.

We made a few tackles and defended our line well, but they got a couple of repeat sets.

‘Stay on your line,’ Aaron called out. ‘Stay on your man.’

Team C played the ball and dived through to score their first try under the posts. It was Huss’s man but he still managed to get through.

‘You said he was going to play properly,’ Aaron said to me. ‘What the hell was that crap tackle he made?’

‘I got this,’ I said. ‘Just keep away from him.’

‘If he stuffs up one more time, I’m going to say something.’

I went over to Huss while we waited for Team C to take the kick. ‘I know it’s just one tackle, but it’s cost us a try. Hold on to the tackle next time.’

‘Relax, man,’ he said shaking his head. ‘You guys are taking it too seriously.’

They converted the try with a few minutes left on the board.

At half-time, the score sat 6–4 in their favour.

Mr Ahmed passed around the water while Mr Archie went through a few plays.

‘It’s okay, lads. You’re only down by two. Let’s just focus on completing those sets and gaining possession.’ He then looked at Aaron and me. ‘You two lads are working much better today. Run the ball a little more on the outside. We’ve got a rocket in Lee, and Riley is great out of the ruck. Use them to your advantage.’

We did just that and Aaron and I set up a beautiful set piece for Riley to score on the outside. Lee made most of the metres when Riley ran in support. I had used this play so many times in our school games and it always worked like a charm.

‘Good play, man,’ Aaron said as we watched Huss set the ball up on a tee. ‘He should get this, right? It’s not that far out.’

I held my breath, because if Huss didn’t make this kick, then I would know something was up. He took a few steps back and looked up to the posts.

*Ya illahi, please make it.*

The ball missed the posts, too far to the right.

Ibby and PJ shook their heads in disbelief. Aaron bared his teeth at me. ‘He’s not taking the next kick. You are. That’s my call as captain.’

8–6.

For the first time in all my years of playing footy, I prayed that we didn't score any more tries. I was angry that Huss was messing up simple things, but I knew that if Aaron stripped him of goal kicking, it would start an all-out war. Before we knew it, Ibby bulldozed through their line and scored.

My heart sank.

Huss ran to the ball just as Aaron picked it up. 'You're not taking the kick.'

Huss laughed and tried to take the ball from him.

Aaron turned away. 'We need these points to at least secure a win.'

'You can't do that,' Huss said through clenched teeth. 'Tariq's captain, too. Tell him to give me the ball, bro.'

I felt like time had stopped around me. Huss was my mate. But we needed this win to have any chance of making it into the finals.

'Just listen to him, Huss.' The words finally left my mouth.

His eyes turned flat and cold, and he took a few steps back. 'Really.'

Aaron shoved the ball into my chest. 'We need this, Tariq.'

There was a deafening silence on the field as I placed the ball on the tee to take the kick. It flew high in between the posts. Huss spent the rest of the game jogging up and down the field, not bothering to engage with any of the plays. When Aaron scored one more try, he wandered to the other end of the field.

20–6, full-time.

'Congratulations, F Team,' the referee said as we shook hands with Team C. I sat on the bench and watched the boys celebrate. They laughed and cheered, but as hard as I tried to join in, I couldn't get Huss's face out of my head. He had left as soon as the game was over, catching a lift back to school with some of the men who were heading off to Friday Jummah.

'Am I supposed to feel this bad?' I asked Mr Archie, who sat beside me watching the boys.

He smiled gently. 'Depends what you're feeling bad about, lad.'

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. 'I don't even know if I did the right thing.'

'If you had the chance to go back and change your decision, would you?'

I so badly wanted to say yes, but I knew that as hard as it was for me to side with Aaron against Huss, it had been the right call.

Aaron walked over and joined us.

‘I’ll leave you two captains to talk,’ Mr Archie said.

Aaron watched him go. ‘I know that was hard for you, but we had to win,’ he finally said. ‘We gave him so many chances.’

‘You don’t understand. It’s not that I didn’t let him convert. It’s the fact I sided with you. That’s the problem.’

‘Mr Archie put us in charge because we can make those tough decisions. That’s why we’re captains.’

I took a deep breath and looked up at the sky. ‘You have no idea what I’m talking about.’

He couldn’t understand. No one could.

No one was going to be hurt in this situation but Huss’s and my relationship. He held so tightly onto his anger and did stupid things when he was upset.

I could only hope he’d be over it for tomorrow’s Bulldogs game.

He wasn’t.

I tried to call Huss, but he didn’t answer. I left messages on our Wolf Pack chat but there was no response.

*Huss has left this chat.*

Ibby: Bro. He’s never left. Even when him and I fought about my mum.

PJ: This is serious. Add him back on.

Tariq: I’ve been trying to call, but he’s not answering.

I scrolled through my settings and added him back to the group.

*Huss has left this chat.*

I had no idea what to do, how to fix this. There was only one person I thought might be able to help, but I’d managed to burn my bridges with her, too. This was turning out to be a hell of a year.

Feda was barricaded behind the bedroom door, either sleeping or studying. I’d heard her coming home just after Fajr, so my guess was she was sleeping off her latest run of night shifts. I tapped gently on the door. ‘Feda?’



No answer. I tapped a little louder. Amira bounded out of the bathroom.

‘She’s never going to hear you,’ she exclaimed, then barged into the room without ceremony. I knew if I’d tried the same, I would have been dead before my feet hit the ground, but if anyone could wake up Feda without getting their head bitten off, it was Amira.

‘Oh my God, what?!’ I heard my elder sister groan.

‘Tariq wants you,’ Amira said cheerily, then rocketed off, probably to cause chaos somewhere else in the house.

I hovered in the doorway. ‘Um. Can we talk?’

She breathed out loudly. ‘Well, I’m awake now. What’s the matter?’

Hardly the most welcoming start, but the situation with Huss was pretty desperate, so I crept into the darkened room and sat on my couch-cushion mattress. ‘It’s Huss.’ I outlined what had been going on with the comp, and Aaron and Huss, as quickly as I could. Feda stayed quiet through all of it, then suddenly sat up.

‘Did anyone tell you that Big Haji is in hospital?’ she asked.

‘What? No! Big Haji? He never told any of us. I even asked him how she was, but he said she’s just getting some check-ups.’

She sighed and shook her head. ‘You guys, honestly. You spend so much time together but you never actually *talk* to one another.’ I crossed my arms defensively, but for once, I didn’t snap at her. ‘Big Haji’s really sick. She’s been admitted to the cardiac ward, and she’s just had a bypass. They’re talking about all the medication and pills she needs to take.’

‘What’s wrong with her?’

‘Well her diet hasn’t been the best, and she’s not as active as she probably should be. But most of all, she’s just old, Tariq. She’s worn down, and her heart is in pretty bad shape.’ She showed me some messages on her phone.

Huss: Don’t tell Tariq about my tayta.

Feda: Why? He should know.

Huss: He’s got a lot of stuff on at school.

There’s no point in making it worse for him.

Insh Allah she’ll get better. It’s nothing big anyway.

Feda: Have you told him about your dad at least?

Huss: Nah. I don't want him to see me weak.

If I'd felt like crap before, I wished now the ground would swallow me whole. These past few weeks I thought Huss didn't trust me enough to tell me about his dad, and if I was really honest with myself, I knew I hadn't tried as hard as I could to spend time with him. As it turned out, it wasn't that he didn't trust me; he didn't want me to judge him. And now the whole goal-kicking situation with Aaron had just made a bad situation worse.

'Why didn't *you* tell me?' I asked Feda now, upset. 'I know you're mad at me, but keeping this secret from me –'

'It's not my place to tell,' she interrupted. 'It's *your* job to know about your friends.'

I had to admit she was right. I could see from the texts that she'd urged Huss to communicate with me, even after I'd mouthed off at her. 'Sorry. You did what was right. It's just...how can I make this better? What should I do?'

She stared at me for a while, not saying anything.

'What?' I demanded.

'It occurs to me, Tariq, that you've had a pretty easy life so far.'

'Huh?' Was she insane? 'Oh yeah, it's pretty easy going to a school that's about to get closed down, and being called a terrorist every second day. It's so easy to have everyone constantly putting their expectations on me to be better, to be a good captain and BBL and be responsible for everyone.'

She gave a weird sort of half-laugh. 'All the things you just mentioned have happened recently, in the last year. What's your life been like before then?' She began counting on her fingers. 'You've got a family who support and love you. You've grown up your whole life in the one place, and had the chance to really put down roots. You've got friends who worship the ground you walk on. You've had a string of girls obsess over you even after you got bored with them and treated them like shit. You've never wanted anything that you couldn't have. Even the pressures you've mentioned are a product of the amount of faith other people have in you. I get that it feels like a burden, but there are people who would kill to have teachers and mentors believe in them so much that they keep giving you chance after chance.'

I had never thought of it that way. I stared at her, gobsmacked.

‘Here’s a wild idea, little brother. Instead of complaining about how hard you have things, try a little bit of empathy for people who have it a lot worse.’ With that, Feda burrowed back under her doona. ‘Close the door behind you.’

I couldn’t think of anything to say, my mind racing over the bombshells she’d just dropped on me. I went to the living room and tried calling Huss again.

No answer.

Ibby: Huss just messaged and he said he’s not going to the game.

I didn’t feel like going any more either, but I couldn’t stay at home. Our house was buzzing with guests coming over to see Auntie Salma in her last week in Australia. They really came to see if she could fit packages in her luggage for their relatives overseas.

That night, PJ pretty much dragged me to the station where the rest of the boys from school were meeting to see the Bulldogs take on our rivals, the Cronulla Sharks. A sea of blue and white supporters poured out of the station and into the stadium. The place was electric, and despite my confusion and gloom about Huss, I felt caught up in the wave of excitement. People danced and cheered to the beat of the trumbakis while Arabic music blasted through the speakers. Cars beeped and honked and flags flew proudly above the crowds. We all saluted the massive ‘Dogs of War’ banner that hung from the rooftop stadium. Old, young, Arab, non-Arab, it didn’t matter when you were a Doggies supporter. It was one gigantic party.

The last twenty-four hours had been rough and I just wanted to be at peace. Forget the footy comp. Forget my school possibly closing. Forget about Huss and Aaron. Forget Mr Archie’s expectations.

Aaron and Riley waited by the barbecued-corn stall outside the stadium with Mr Archie. Ibby was going to come separately because he didn’t want to skip his family’s usual Saturday lunch of kroosh, boiled sheep intestines with rice, which he made with his mum.

‘You boys missed out,’ Aaron said with a bounce in his voice. ‘The Cronulla players hopped off the bus and we gave it to them.’

Riley nodded. 'People really get into it around here.'

Matt arrived, sweating and out of breath, together with Lee, who was wearing a Sharks jersey.

'Really, Lee?' Aaron protested.

'Dude, I told him a million times,' Matt said. 'I'm just happy we made it through the crowd alive.'

Lee tucked his jersey into his high-waisted shorts. 'I don't really care what anyone thinks. I'm from Cronulla and so I should support them.'

Mr Archie looked at his watch. 'Where's Ibrahim? We should've been inside by now.'

I looked around and spotted Ibby across the crowded forecourt. He wore Bulldogs gear from head to toe, with his face painted with blue and white stripes. He left his taqiyah on his head as he waved a gigantic Bulldogs flag in the air. He was standing next to a total stranger.

Mr Archie waved his arms for attention and Ibby finally caught sight of us. We watched him do a double-take at Lee and the guy he was standing next to. He made his way over and stared at Lee. 'You Chinese all look the same, man.'

Lee rolled his eyes. 'For the millionth time, I'm Vietnamese, you shithead.'

'How long were you standing there with that guy?' Mr Ahmed asked, trying not to laugh.

'Like, twenty minutes,' Ibby replied. 'I wondered why he gave me a dirty when I called him Nintendo.'

We followed Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed to our seats, where Hazem was waiting. He gave us our VIP lanyards to meet the players after the game.

Mr Archie's phone rang and he passed it to me. 'Your dad wants to speak to you.'

'I already tell Mr Archie that everyone come over later cos we make a barby. Okay?' Dad said.

'Baba, we'll just eat out –' He hung up. I shook my head as I handed the phone back to Mr Archie. 'So it's my place after this,' I said to the others. 'Dinner's on me.'

Our names were taped to the seats, and of course I was seated next to Aaron. Huss's chair stood empty.

‘Should I hire security?’ Aaron said as we sat down. ‘Is he off somewhere plotting to murder me?’

‘He just needs some time. Maybe avoid him in training to be on the safe side,’ I said taking his name off the seat. Riley jumped a row down and sat in his spot.

‘You see Aaron’s face?’ he said. ‘He had a run-in with Hunter in the parking lot at Miranda.’

I turned to Aaron, who hid a faded bruise mark under his eye. ‘What? A punch-up?’

‘Nah, just a little scuffle. It was nothing.’

‘I swear I can’t wait until our school stuff is sorted so I can deal with him face to face,’ I said. ‘Is he doing anything else to you?’ I asked Riley.

He shook his head. ‘He’s backed off since Aaron and I started hanging out a little more.’

The game was about to begin when Aaron took out a Bulldogs beanie from his backpack and gave it to Riley. ‘I almost forgot this. You’ve gotta get into the game, bro.’

Riley’s usually pale face blushed as he replaced his red beanie with Aaron’s gift.

‘Get a room,’ Ibby and PJ called out from behind us.

‘Shut up,’ Aaron said.

*‘Ladies and gentlemen, please put your hands together for the Cronulla Sharks.’*

We all stood up and booed as they ran onto the field. A huge bikie-looking guy behind us swore so many times that I thought he was going to have a heart attack. Mr Archie had already warned us that if any of us got like that, we would be sent home immediately.

‘Keep it PG, lads.’

*‘And now it’s time for the boys of Belmore. Everyone up on your feet for the Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs!’*

The ground shook and the crowd roared as the Bulldogs ran out of the kennel and onto the field.

*Bulldogs! Bulldogs! Bulldogs!*

We all chanted and cheered as the drums banged loudly and the flags flew across the stadium. Chills rushed up and down my body and now the nerves kicked in. There was something about having another team in the

hood that fired up my blood. The referee blew the whistle and the Bulldogs kicked off.

Bulldogs made the first tackle and drove the Sharks back ten metres. A roar lifted the stadium. Aaron and I jumped up, not realising we were clutching each other's arms.

'I don't think I can last eighty minutes. I think I'm going to have a stroke,' he said.

It felt like that for the whole game. We held our hearts in our mouths until finally we came home with a victory.

Lee sat on the aisle steps beside us and rinsed the spilt alcohol from his shirt. 'I think I'm going to pass out.'

'Where's Ibbby?' Mr Archie asked, giving Lee some water.

A loud cheer erupted on the opposite side of the stadium, on the hill. PJ pointed to the massive LED screen, and there was Ibbby, belly-dancing to the drums and surrounded by supporters from both teams.

'I'll go get him,' Mr Ahmed said, shaking his head.

We not only met the players, but we also got to sing the Bulldogs victory song with them and we each got signed jerseys. It was a little awkward with Lee in his Sharks jersey, but everyone took it in their stride. We shook hands with the Sharks players, too, and they were cool enough to give us a few tips.

'You guys should be like a unit,' one player said. 'Stick together, and trust me, you'll bulldoze any team in your way.' Now that the game was done, there were no hard feelings and they even signed a few balls for us before mixing with the Bulldogs players in the dressing rooms after the game. I was stunned to realise that these guys from rival teams were all friends.

Aaron didn't stop talking the whole way back to my place. 'I can't remember the last time I had this much fun,' he babbled.

'It was my first game,' Riley said. 'And I can now say that I'm one hundred per cent a Bulldogs supporter.' PJ and Ibbby almost suffocated him with excitement.

'Ghostbusters! Ghostbusters!' they both chanted.

Lee tied his Doggies jersey around his waist. 'I think I'm bipartisan now, boys.'

'Bi-what?' Ibbby asked.

Matt put up heaps of videos on our group WhatsApp.

*Huss has left this chat.*

‘Oh shit,’ Matt said to me. ‘I completely forgot, dude, I’m sorry. I can delete the videos.’

I grimaced. ‘He’s already seen them. No point deleting anything now.’ At least half of Matt’s videos showed me and Aaron with our arms around each other, chanting and cheering. That was going to go down like a ton of bricks with Huss.

I messaged him to come by for dinner anyway, and hoped he’d make it.

You could smell the chicken cooking on the barbecue from the end of the street. My family had already set up the table for us, with tabouli and fattoush, garlic sauce and hummus, meat skewers and fresh bread.

Ibby and PJ wasted no time settling in, but the Shire boys dithered, unsure of what to do.

‘Welcome, welcome,’ Dad said with open arms. He was in full Arab-hospitality-mode, hugging everyone including Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed, who made themselves comfy at the table. He nodded at Aaron. ‘How are you, son? How is your mum?’

‘Yeah, she’s good,’ Aaron replied. ‘Thanks for this, sir. You didn’t have to.’

Dad pulled out a few chairs for the Shire boys to sit. ‘No problem, son. You my guests. This your home now.’

Mum flipped the chicken on the grill and Dad ran around the table making sure everyone’s plate was full. If there was anything missing, he’d restock faster than you could blink. Mr and Mrs Wallace from next door came in through the back gate and filled their plates.

‘This is some of the best chicken I’ve ever had,’ Mr Archie said. ‘You are too kind, Mr and Mrs Nader. Thank you very much.’

‘You look after my son,’ Dad said, adding more tabouli no matter how many times Mr Archie tried to explain he was full. ‘Tell me, is Tariq being good? Or is he still do stupid things?’

‘Here we go,’ PJ called out. ‘Moment of truth.’

Everyone stomped with their feet and drummed on the table until Mr Archie answered. ‘He’s improving. I believe he’s still got a lot more to give.’

‘Do me next, sir, do me,’ Ibby yelled. ‘Seriously, sir, aren’t I your favourite?’

We ate and ate and laughed and laughed. Mum brought out some of the sweet sugar pastries, her signature dish. Ibby and PJ rubbed their hands on their bellies, trying to make room for dessert.

Uncle Charlie brought out some of his honey jars and sat next to Aaron. He knew he was from the Shire, which meant dollar signs for my uncle. ‘Best honey in world,’ he said. ‘I give you cheap price because you friends with Tariq.’ I probably should have warned Aaron about Uncle Charlie.

I walked over to the kitchen and collected some extra plastic plates for dessert.

‘You talked to Huss?’ Feda asked from where she stood, shredding one of the pastries on her plate.

‘I tried, but he’s not answering any of my calls or messages. I don’t know what else to do.’

She gave me The Look. ‘And you’re going to leave it at that? Go to his place. You could see Big Haji, too. She should be released on Monday.’ She walked off to sit next to Aunty Salma.

Amira showed Riley and Matt her tools and her DIY work, while Lee played video games with Abdul and Saff in the living room. I watched as Mr Archie toured the garden with Mum. She spent most mornings talking to her plants and referred to them as her children.

‘I’d love for you to come to the school and help with some of our gardens that have completely died. You could run it with the P&C,’ I heard him say.

Mum’s mouth was wide with excitement. ‘This my dream!’ she exclaimed, before rushing to tell Dad the good news.

‘I wish I had all this,’ Aaron said leaning back in his chair and watching the madness.

‘This?’ I asked, confused. ‘You have everything at your place. Why would you want this?’

‘What’s the point of having the biggest house in the world if you’re on your own? You have family. You have noise. It’s dead quiet at my house.’

‘If it’s quiet here, then it means either Feda is studying or someone is dead.’ I thought for a minute. ‘No, scratch that second one. If someone was dead, everyone else would be wailing and screaming.’



He laughed. 'Your dad is cool, man. He was nice to me even though my mum was rude to him.'

I sat up, shocked. 'You heard that? I thought you were in the backyard?'

'Nah, I heard it. She was being a bitch, as usual.'

I chewed my lip. Feda's words about my easy life whispered back into my head. 'She's your mum, man. You shouldn't talk about her like that.'

'Why not? She does whatever *she* wants. Like selling Dad's cars.' 'Wait, what?'

'There's this guy, Paten. Oily dude – what did you guys call me at camp? Mayonnaise. He's supposed to be coming up with some buyers for Dad's collection.' Aaron's jaw clenched.

'Tell me the Ferrari is staying?' I said. 'C'mon, she can't give that up.'

He gazed up at the sky. 'Dad would be losing it if he knew.' He then looked over at me. 'Your family are really cool for doing this. Thanks, bro.'

I wanted to talk to him more about his parents and his dad's cars, but I figured this wasn't the right time or place. I decided to lighten the mood instead.

'Bro? One step at a time.'

He laughed quietly. 'Who would've thought, ay?'

## Chapter 25

Amira held on for dear life. She only had a few bars left. It was the furthest she'd gone and it was all thanks to the gloves Jamila had given her.

'You're almost there,' Jamila called out from the other side, and clapped. Jehad also cheered when Amira finally swung onto the second-last bar.

'Bob, if you do this, I'm taking you to Bunnings to buy whatever you want,' I said, standing close just in case she fell.

She blew some strands of hair from her face. 'And makeup.' I heard Jamila laugh. 'Whatever you like. Just one more bar.'

C'mon Bob. Just this one and you're done.'

'Swing your body,' Jamila called out.

Amira swung forwards and backwards until she got enough momentum to reach for the last bar and was finally finished. She landed on the ground in a heap.

Jamila and Jehad cheered when I helped her get to her feet. I wiped her sweaty face with the ends of my shirt. 'You killed it, Bob. And you did it all by yourself.'

Amira's smile reached ear to ear when she ran over and hugged Jamila. 'Thank you for the gloves.'

'You're welcome, beautiful,' Jamila hugged her back. 'It wasn't the gloves though. It was all you. The gloves just helped you a bit.'

Amira then rushed back and gave me a few kisses before going off with Jehad to tell the other kids that she had finally made it.

'That was awesome,' Jamila said. 'I thought she was going to fall, but I think having you there helped her.'

'Me? You're the one who bought her the gloves and cheered for her louder than anyone here.'

'It's nice that you take care of your sister like that,' she said, holding onto her backpack.

I watched Amira stop every child walking up the stairs to tell them what had just happened. 'I'd do anything for her. She's my Bob.'

Jamila smiled. I smiled.

Silence settled between us.

'So, I wanted to ask you a question,' I began, not looking directly at her. 'I know you said that you liked the Bankstown Poetry Slam and I thought, maybe, if you had time tonight, that you'd wanna go?'

In the time it took her to reply, I think I aged a hundred years.

'You bought tickets to BPS?' she said at last, stepping back.

'Yeah, I thought it would help with our own slam presentation,' I lied. 'Isn't it the place you said that you liked? Oh wait, was it another place? Man, I really thought you said it was Bankstown.' I was babbling, and I couldn't stop.

She wiggled her nose, trying not to laugh. 'Sure. For our *school* thing.'

I was going to pass out if she kept me hanging any longer.

'It is the place I talked about,' she said. 'And yes, I'd love to go.'

I wanted to jump out of my body and do cartwheels but I needed to remain cool and calm. 'Seriously? You'd wanna go with me?' Okay, so maybe I missed cool by just a little.

She rolled her eyes then looped her arm through mine and dragged me to the school gate. 'Well, it's for our school thing, right?'

I couldn't seem to let go of her arm and ended up walking her to school, even though it meant I was late to first period. We talked all the way about stuff like our favourite music and movies, and Jihad's dyslexia.

'I help him read every night,' she said. 'It's so important that he doesn't feel like he's different or not as smart as the others.'

'Let Bob help him out,' I suggested. 'Trust me, she's good. She helps my Uncle Charlie read stuff he doesn't understand.'

'Honey uncle, right?'

'Yeah. How'd you know?'

'Jihad said something about Bob and a company and that he wanted to sell honey with them.'

I remembered the honey jars still sitting on the kitchen counter. I still hadn't sold any. I needed to hide them and make it look like I was at least trying.

I waited by the gates until Jamila waved goodbye, then headed over to school. Luckily, first period was English with Miss K, and she let my lateness slide.

While one thing had worked out alright today, the tension between Huss and me still lingered in the back of my mind. He ignored me when we passed each other in the hallway, and sat with another group of boys at recess, no matter how much Ibby and PJ tried to get him to change his mind.

Mr Archie told me to give him some space, but to find a time to at least talk about the situation. It didn't help that Aaron and I were together more than ever, working to find some rhythm in our team. Aaron and Huss still avoided each other at all costs during training, with Mr Ahmed watching them closely. I felt torn between Aaron, who was actually turning out to be alright to hang out with, and Huss, who was my best mate and who felt I had betrayed him. I resolved to visit his place and say hi to Big Haji as soon as the opportunity arose. But between training and planning sessions with Aaron, the poetry slam and helping Aunty Salma get ready for her trip home, I didn't know where to squeeze in a visit to Huss's place.

Our school was looking cleaner, with many classrooms fitted with new desks and newly painted walls. We wondered where Mr Archie was getting all the money from for these improvements. A few of the seniors checked our GoFundMe page, which had gone from \$1025 to \$2570, nowhere near enough to pay for any of the stuff. The donation names on the page were mostly shop owners in Punchbowl and a few of our cousins. We chipped in what we could, but most of the boys helped out their families financially.

But perhaps the biggest surprise of all waited for Ibby. Mr Archie called for a few of us to meet in the renovated Home Ec room. Mr Ahmed walked Ibby in with a blindfold, before unveiling a new decked-out kitchen with two ovens and shiny cooking equipment.

I had never seen Ibby lost for words until now. He took a few breaths. It didn't take long for the waterworks to start. 'No one's ever cared like this for me before,' he said hugging Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed. 'Wallah, I luv ya, sir.'

Mr Ahmed clapped him on the back. 'So as long as you have teacher supervision, you can start your journey here to opening your own restaurant one day.'

‘What about the music room, sir?’ PJ asked.

Mr Archie smiled. ‘All in good time, lad. Don’t worry. We haven’t forgotten.’

The rest of the day was a blur, and all I could think about was the poetry slam with Jamila that night.

Aunty Salma helped me choose a bouquet of tulips and roses at the florist. I caught the train and met Jamila outside Bankstown Arts Centre, where there was a long line of people waiting to go in. My face burned holding the flowers with everyone staring at me. Someone wolf-whistled.

I handed Jamila the flowers and she blushed. ‘You’re doing good,’ she smiled. My pulse was jumping wildly in my neck. She introduced me to a few people, before stopping in front of a young girl in a hijab. ‘Meet the mastermind behind BPS, Sara Mansour.’

‘Salaam, welcome to the show.’ Sara shook my hand. ‘So, you going to have a go tonight at open mic?’

‘Oh, no,’ I said, feeling my palms sweat. ‘I hate speaking in front of people.’

We sat a few rows from the front and watched poet after poet read their pieces, almost like it was a rap battle. People clicked every so often, which Jamila explained meant that the audience thought those lines were particularly powerful. If it hadn’t been for Jamila, I’d never have thought to come to one of these events, but the poems were actually good and the place was packed. I listened to a couple of senior boys from our school who read their poems. I had no idea they were into poetry at all, let alone slam poetry.

And if I thought the night couldn’t be filled with more surprises, Mariam walked onto the stage and rapped a few bars. She was the only performer who didn’t look at a script, and had the whole audience cheering.

‘She’s good, right?’ Jamila asked, leaning in close to be heard over all the cheering.

I nodded. ‘She really is.’

‘This is where we met, actually. She comes to a lot of the open mics here, but she doesn’t want to go pro.’

There was a short break before the second half of the show. Mariam came over to sit with us, a look of interest on her face. ‘So, how long have

you guys been hanging out?’

‘What do you mean?’ Jamila asked.

Mariam waved her fingers between the two of us. ‘You know...’

I rolled my eyes. ‘Don’t be a *gossip girl* now.’

Mariam laughed and headed off as the second half got started. ‘Nice flowers,’ she called, and winked. Jamila blushed again as she was called to the stage to read her piece.

‘Wish me luck,’ she whispered.

Onstage, she adjusted the mic stand and cleared her throat. ‘Okay, slamily. This piece is called “I’m no damsel in distress”.’ The audience cheered and clapped as she began.

*They call me a damsel in distress, if I leave behind a mess.*

*Trying to suppress all that was me in a box you see,  
she left without even checking up on me.*

*They call me a damsel in distress if I open up my chest and pour whatever’s  
left*

*only to be called depressed if I confess that she broke every part of me.*

It was like she was the only one in the room. Her body swayed to the rhythm of the words, and by the time she was finished, the audience was up on their feet cheering for her.

She took a bow, then came back to sit beside me. I didn’t even think twice, just held her hand. I could think of no other way to show her that I thought she was incredible.

She squeezed my hand a little tighter as we spent the night afloat in a sea of words.

## Chapter 26

Mr Archie looked like he hadn't slept. He rubbed his tired face a couple of times before shuffling some papers on his desk. He handed me a letter:

*Dear Mr Archibald,*

*RE: Proposed closure of Punchbowl Boys High School – NEW UPDATE*  
*With recent reports in the media and disturbing videos still being circulated via social media, we have determined that an independent body will complete the necessary requirements for further investigation of the school. A foreclosure will be taken into consideration if we are unable to establish major improvements in student behaviour and enrolment numbers. We understand that this is a difficult time for both staff and the community; however, the safety of students is of utmost importance. We hope that you appreciate the severity of the situation, and we will be in contact soon.*

*Kind Regards,*  
*Shelly McField*  
*NSW Department of Education*

I was stunned. We were in Week 7 of Term 2, with the end of term fast approaching, and we were still receiving letters like this.

‘What do they want from us?’ I asked. ‘Do they want us to dress up in ties, brush our hair and salute them? We’re trying the best we can.’

Mr Archie looked at his wall of photos with different sporting legends. ‘They apparently need to see you lads take some ownership of the changes without the guidance of teachers. Take some initiative.’

‘Like what?’ I asked, confused. ‘What can we do to help?’

He slid his phone across the table to show a video of a fight that had been shared on social media overnight. Last week, a couple of boys had gotten into a scuffle on the playground and now it was all over the internet. It looked so much worse than it had actually been.

‘I was there, sir, and those boys were friends again within a few minutes.’ I ran through the witnesses to the fight in my head. ‘There were only some seniors, a few juniors and me and the boys.’

‘Regardless, the media aren’t particularly concerned with the truth of the matter. It’s all about optics.’

‘Optics?’

‘The look of a thing. This fight, however harmless,’ he waved his phone, ‘is bad optics. We need to find something with good optics to counter it. Something with good enough optics to counter the *months* of negative press we’re working against.’ He looked at the box holding our contracts. We had signed those contracts, and over the course of the term, the real troublemakers had been weeded out. But it was clear now that someone on the inside wanted our school closed. If it was the last thing I did, I was going to figure out who was willing to destroy all of our futures, and why.

‘I’ve spoken to head teachers and have asked them to investigate their grades,’ he said. ‘But what I really wanted to speak to you about is Huss.’

‘Huss?’

‘Have you spoken?’

‘He won’t answer any of my calls or messages.’

He leaned forward. ‘You do know where he lives, right?’

‘Yeah, but you’ve seen me, sir. I’ve had no time.’

‘You’ve had time to spend with Jamila and Aaron.’

I could feel my face heating up. ‘First, me hanging out with Aaron was *your* idea, for the sake of the comp. And second, Jamila... Jamila.’ I couldn’t find the words.

He sighed. ‘Lad, I get it. I don’t want to encroach on your relationships. But your relationship with Huss is of longer standing than with either Aaron or Jamila. All I’m suggesting is maybe have a chat with him when you get back from the poetry workshop today. It’s the right thing to do as the BBL, it’ll help our game this Friday, but most of all, Tariq, it’s what you owe your best friend.’

During the poetry workshop, I sat opposite Jamila with my notes open for the slam, but Mr Archie’s letter was stuck in my mind. I was starting to feel like there was no way forward, no escape for our school. No matter what we tried, they kept moving the goalposts, and it was clear that they



only had one aim in mind. Maybe Huss was right. Maybe all this was too little, too late.

‘Hello?’ Jamila waved her hand in front of my face. ‘You okay?’

I shook my head a few times, trying to get back to our presentation. ‘Yeah, I’m alright. Just school stuff.’

‘Anything I can help with?’

‘Can you go back to whenever boys started being stupid and fighting a lot and convince them to read a book and write poetry instead?’

She laughed. ‘I’m good, but I’m not that good.’ She frowned at me for a second, thinking. ‘Maybe I can help a little bit in a different way, though. Close your eyes.’

‘Huh? Why?’

‘We’re going to try a mini-therapy session.’

‘What, right here? In front of everyone?’

‘Can you stop being a baby, please, and close your eyes?’

I wasn’t about to torch the progress I’d made with her since the Bankstown Poetry Slam, so I closed my eyes. I hoped she wasn’t going to make me talk about my feelings. I remembered how exhausting that had been during camp, and I was going to need all my energy if I was going to tackle Huss later.

After a minute, she rolled up my sleeves and began to draw on my arms. ‘Just pretend no one’s here.’

‘I can’t,’ I said, cracking open an eye.

‘Just trust me.’ I breathed out noisily. ‘Now, tell me what the problem is at this very moment. Not everything that’s been going on, just what’s bothering you *right now*.’

I took a few breaths and slowly felt my muscles ease. ‘It’s our school. We got another letter threatening to shut us down. I think it’s because someone from the inside keeps releasing videos of fights around the school.’

‘Fights?’ she asked, her pen stopping for a second.

I shrugged. ‘Just dumb guy stuff. Nothing serious, just playground stuff. Archie’s trying to figure out who’s doing it, but he pretty much told me today that he was lost, which makes me nervous. If he can’t figure it out, then we have no hope.’

I tried to open my eyes, but she tugged my arm. 'I'll tell you when you can open. Keep going.'

'I don't know how our school situation is going to work out if all anyone sees are videos of us fighting. I feel like our image is too broken to fix. I want everything to go back to normal, like how it was.'

'How was it before?'

I shrugged, and she clicked her tongue when my arm moved. 'I dunno. We just did our thing. No one was on our case 24/7 about everything.'

'Was that better than it is now?'

'People left us alone.'

'Was that the best thing to do for you guys? Leaving you alone?'

I was quiet for a second, focusing on the feeling of her pen against my skin. I remembered the state the school was in even one term ago, the run-down classrooms, the stressed teachers. The way we had to watch out for one another. The fights.

'Open' she said.

I blinked a few times to see my forearms covered in flowers. 'Really? The boys are going to kill me when I get back to school.'

'You can pull it off,' she with a smile. 'Listen, Tariq. I'm not saying things are easy for you guys right now. It sounds like there's a lot of shit going on, and it's stressful and upsetting, and you still have no idea about what's going to happen to your future.'

'But?'

'But do you *really* think going back to the way things were would be better? Going back to being ignored, written off as worthless, just playing out the same cycles over and over again?'

I sighed. 'No.'

'Then maybe it's worth throwing that idea away and focusing on what you can do to improve the situation?' She rummaged through her bag. 'I want to show you something.'

She played me a video of her reading her piece at Bankstown Poetry Slam. I couldn't believe it had already gotten almost eight thousand likes on the BPS Facebook page.

'If your principal is saying that you boys are only known for being rough, then why not flip that image on its head and surprise everyone?' she said, tapping my forehead. 'Do a slam with the boys. Stop letting other

people tell your stories and use your own voice to tell them yourself. BPS could be the perfect place, not just because it's in Bankstown, in this community, but also because BPS gets heaps of attention.'

'No way,' I said, shaking my head. 'Like, it was cool with you the other night, but trying to convince the boys to do something like this would be impossible.'

She looked sideways at me. 'What would you have said were your chances to get me to go on a date with you when we first met?'

I knew what she was implying, but I couldn't help but grin cockily at her. 'Pretty solid, I'd say. I'm irresistible.'

She rolled her eyes, but I could see the smile tugging at her lips. She scrolled through all the videos on the BPS page and showed me the thousands of likes and comments on each clip. 'If someone inside your school is sending videos trying to ruin your school, then wouldn't it make sense to counter the narrative with something like this and leave people speechless?'

'Even if I wanted to, I wouldn't know what to say,' I argued. 'Plus, why do you care? It's not your school.'

She opened her notebook and unfolded the list of things I had written about my school. 'I care because it's my community too. I don't want Jihad to be limited by other people's prejudices about your school, or be written off as a waste of space.'

If I had thought nothing she could say would make me like her more, I was dead wrong.

'I'll help you,' she persisted. 'Just tell a few of the boys you're close with and we can work on something. The next BPS slam is in a couple of weeks. We can film your performance and post it online.'

I got where Jamila was coming from, but I had to come up with a way to convince Ibbby and PJ to take part.

Fourth period. Science. I had explained Jamila's idea to Mr Ahmed, who agreed to let me have a chat to the Wolf Pack in the empty classroom across from the lab. Huss had no choice but to participate since we were all in the same class. It was the first time we had been face to face since the mess at the game last Friday, and I knew I'd have to work extra hard to convince him to join in on the slam.

To my surprise, Ibby and PJ agreed without any hesitation.

‘Yeah, bro, anything to help the school,’ PJ said, before adding slyly, ‘And if it means we finally get to meet your girl.’

‘Is she pretty?’ Ibby asked. ‘Is she the one that drew on your arm?’

‘I’m serious,’ I said, pulling my shirtsleeves down. ‘Jamila made some good points. I think this would really help to show another side of us, especially when that snitch keeps releasing shitty videos.’

PJ nodded thoughtfully. ‘You know, we could post ourselves on Lee’s YouTube channel, too. I know it’s only gaming stuff, but who cares. He’s got heaps of followers.’

Ibby’s eyes widened. ‘Oh my God. You know what we can also do. I can post my cooking videos, too. Would that help change our image?’

‘That’s actually really good, Ibby,’ I said, impressed. ‘PJ, you can post some of your music stuff, too. We could make this into a whole thing to overhaul our image, get all the boys to post all the cool stuff they do in and around school, all the creative stuff, the sports, all of it.’

I waited for Huss to say something. He stayed slumped over in the corner, scrolling through his phone.

‘So, you in, Huss?’ I asked. ‘Or do you still wanna chuck a sook about Aaron and the game?’

Ibby sucked a breath through his teeth. ‘Yallah, easy.’

Huss looked up, his eyes sharp. ‘Why don’t you post videos with your best friend Aaron, stabbing me in the back?’

Ibby and PJ moved away to give us space.

‘What are you talking about?’ I asked. ‘You were playing shit and so as co-captain I did what was best for the team. I would’ve done it to anyone.’

‘Whatever, man,’ he said, walking to the door.

I blocked him. ‘I’ve tried calling you and messaging you, but you’re just choosing to stay being a sook.’ I had wanted to go in with a positive attitude and try to figure things out with Huss, but seeing him so blasé about our whole situation made me angry. It was like he really didn’t care. ‘I’m trying to talk to you about how we can help, and all you can do is talk about how you got put on by Aaron. Stop thinking about yourself for a second, and pull your head out of your arse.’

‘Tozz feek and move out of my way, Tariq.’

‘I’m not moving until you admit that you threw the game on purpose.’

‘Khalas, boys,’ Ibby said, trying to calm the situation. ‘You’ve been brothers for a long time. Don’t let this ruin it.’

‘We’re the Wolf Pack,’ PJ added.

‘You’re believing the Yahooda over me?’ Huss hissed, walking closer to me.

‘Well, then, what’s the truth?’ I raised my voice. ‘I believed you, and you fucked up a simple kick, I don’t believe you and you stop talking to me altogether. I don’t know what to do with you anymore.’

‘How about coming to check up on your so-called *brother* and see if he’s alright?’ he said, his voice shaking. ‘You knew about Big Haji and how much she means to me and you still didn’t care to come over.’

I reeled in shock.

‘What? You think Feda didn’t tell me that you knew? You made time for everyone but me!’ The anger drained from his face, leaving a terrible sadness.

‘But I called you,’ I protested. ‘You didn’t answer.’

‘So? Come over,’ he said. ‘You had no trouble going to Aaron’s place or going to something in Bankstown with that Jamila girl.’

*How did he know about BPS?*

‘I know you’re upset with me. I get it. But the situation with Aaron is your fault. You took it too far.’

He gave me the coldest look I’d ever seen, and left.

‘Probably not the best time to mention Aaron’s name,’ Ibby said.

I banged on the bedroom door until Feda opened it, her eyes bloodshot, papers and books strewn all over the ground.

‘Why’d you tell him?’ I demanded. ‘Why’d you tell Huss that I knew about Big Haji?’

‘Not now, Tariq,’ she said, trying to close the door. I pushed it back open.

‘No. Now,’ I snapped. ‘Are you so angry with me that you wanna ruin my life because you’re miserable and lonely?’

She stared at me for a few seconds. ‘You really are trying your hardest to be the worst person I know.’

‘*Why did you tell him?*’ I shouted.

She closed her eyes like she had a headache. ‘Why didn’t *you* tell him you knew?’ She slammed the door. I stood there, fuming, when I heard Uncle Charlie calling my name from the yard. Everyone else must’ve been at work or out with Aunty Salma.

I ignored him and walked into the kitchen, looking for something to eat and trying to breathe through my rage.

‘Tariq,’ he called again, walking in the back door, holding a few honey jars. ‘There is some –’

‘Don’t you start,’ I lashed out. ‘I’m not going to sell your dumb honey jars and embarrass myself, so *stop asking me.*’

His eyes fell as I slammed the fridge door. ‘Tariq.’

‘*Why won’t you leave me alone?*’

He lowered his head and walked to the oven and grabbed a plate of food covered in foil. ‘I stay back to make you food because no one here.’ He then went out with his honey jars, back into his shed. Even when my parents came home and called him for dinner, his door remained closed.

## Chapter 27

The grass was definitely greener on the other side. The sports field at Aaron's school was as big as our whole school, with a running track that surrounded the oval. His school was huge, with lots of new buildings, and buzzed with the noise of students hanging around in pockets before the morning bell.

Mr Archie had told us in the car that morning that it was time for us to step outside our little bubble and see what life was like on the other side. 'It's part of life, lads,' he said. 'Got to go and meet people who are different. It's good for the soul to be around others.'

'Why? We have everything in Punchbowl,' I said, watching the trees zoom past from the passenger seat. I wasn't in the mood to do anything, let alone be in a car with Huss and going to see Aaron. I had slept on the living room couch the night before, slowly draining off my anger until all that was left was the bitter taste of regret on my tongue for the horrible things I had said to Uncle Charlie and Feda.

Aunty Salma found me tossing and turning around midnight. 'What's wrong, habibi?' she asked. She looked at me sadly when I gave her a brief version of the last twelve hours. 'You were trying to make things up with your sister. What happened?'

I had nothing to say.

'Did you not wonder why she was crying?'

'No.'

She clicked her tongue. 'One of her patients died today. A baby.'

I froze in shock.

'Her job, it's really tough, Tariq. She cares for so many people, works all hours, doing her best to save people. And you keep referring to her being unwed like that is something for you to hold over her head. You're a little boy trying to make a strong woman – your sister, who has been like a second mum to you – feel as though she's not worth anyone's love.'

If she had slapped me hard across the face, she couldn't have hurt me more. I had never thought about it that way, that I had been saying my sister didn't deserve to be cared for.

'And your khorloo? You know he once had a life outside of being your uncle,' she continued. 'And I know we fight sometimes, but there isn't any place on Earth he wouldn't go to make you and your siblings happy.'

'What happened to him that we're never allowed to talk about?' I asked.

'It's not my place to say,' she said. 'But while you sit here and complain about how hard your life is, you can be sure that nothing you have experienced will ever be as difficult as what your uncle has gone through.'

'Feda was right,' I said. 'I am the worst person in the world. I feel like I'm underwater, and every time I come up for air, something or someone pushes me back down again.'

'The only thing pushing you down is the choices you make, nephew. You are about to be a man. The time for these childish excuses is over. We have talked and talked and talked about you trying to do better. When will you actually *start* being better?'

I stared at my aunty and thought about the assumptions I had made about her over these past few weeks. That she was vain, shallow, judgemental. Even if some of these things were true about her, she was much more than I had been so quick to judge her as. She had helped me with Jamila, and now she was continuing to help me see how I might be a better person.

She laughed to herself, accurately guessing what I was thinking. 'Your botox aunty is more than her injections, right?'

Now, in the morning, I felt the bags under my eyes as I waited in Aaron's school office with the other boys. Huss and I hadn't said anything to each other and the only interaction we had had was a morning handshake that was too ingrained a habit to break even now. Dad taught us long ago that the handshake and the greeting of Salaam was for God, and that under no circumstances was it acceptable to refuse to greet your brother.

'There's girls here?' Ibbby asked, staring out the office window. 'And they play footy?'

'It's probably OzTag,' PJ said.

'There are no tags,' Mr Archie explained. 'Girls play tackle too.'

We didn't believe him at first, but then on the sound of the whistle, we watched, gobsmacked, as the girls picked each other up and drove each



other into the ground.

‘They’ve won back-to-back finals,’ we heard a man say proudly from behind us. ‘Mr Bennett,’ he said, shaking our hands. He joined us at the window. ‘They’d give any male team a run for their money.’

Mr Bennett was Mr Archie’s contact at the school, and organised what was needed for the Shire boys. ‘The boys will be here in just a minute, and then we can get started. We’ve organised a tour for you, followed by some lunch.’

The tour took us past a pool, an indoor gym with a basketball court, a two-storey library, footy fields and Ibbey’s dream kitchen. It was hard not to look like village cousins from Lebanon as we went through room after air-conditioned room.

‘So I’ve got a few ideas for tomorrow’s game,’ Aaron said as we made our way to the hall where lunch was being served. ‘I was watching a few games that my dad taped of me, and there are some sick plays.’

I could see Huss watch us from the corner of his eye, but he turned away when he caught me looking at him.

‘He’s still angry, hey,’ Aaron said, noticing the exchange.

‘Wanna know the weirdest part? I defended you and that just set him off,’ I said. I wanted to avoid Aaron as much as possible, but the more I thought about it, the more I knew that the problem was between Huss and me. Aaron was just the catalyst.

We sat and ate and Ibbey mentioned his cooking video idea to Lee.

‘Put them on your channel, Nintendo,’ he pleaded. ‘I know it’s about gaming and that other stuff you Asians do, but we got another bad letter for our school and we need help.’

Aaron looked at me for confirmation.

‘It’s true,’ I said. ‘We’re also trying to do this poetry slam thing because there’s a snitch leaking videos and it’s only adding –’

‘– to your bad image,’ he finished, nodding. ‘It’s smart. If they show a bad video, then you can combat that with a good one.’

Riley moved from the end of the table where he had been talking to Huss and came and sat with me. ‘I think I can help you out with those leaked videos. A friend of mine who’s way into computers and stuff can pretty much trace anything. I can ask her to take a stab at it.’

‘Tell Tariq what you told me,’ Aaron said to Riley. ‘About Hunter.’

Riley moved closer. 'A neighbour of ours said they may have a video about the graffiti.'

'Seriously? Have you seen it?'

'They didn't get any faces because it was too dark,' Aaron said. 'But they did get a number plate.'

'So, what are you guys waiting for?' I asked. 'Take it to the cops.'

Riley cleared his throat. 'I was thinking that we hold onto it until we've talked about what we could do with it.'

I looked at Aaron, confused.

'Just hear Riley out,' he said.

'Blackmail?' I asked.

Riley shook his head. 'No, not exactly. I don't want to get the police involved. Hunter can say that he wasn't in the car and then he'll just come at me harder.'

'Then what?' I asked. 'What do you wanna do?'

Riley looked towards Huss. 'He's a mastermind at this sort of stuff. I wanted to ask him if he had any ideas.'

'We can talk about it at my house on Saturday,' Aaron said. 'We need to get Hunter without creating too much noise and bringing attention on us. Especially with your school situation.'

He then stood up to address the whole team. 'Since I promised Ibby a look at Dad's collection, I was wondering if you all wanted to hang at mine on Saturday. We can talk footy and strategy.'

I did want to teach Hunter a lesson with as little evidence leading back to us as possible. And they were right, nobody was better at revenge strategies than Huss.

Mr Bennett walked into the hall followed by the two girls' footy teams we had watched earlier. They challenged us to a game of footy.

PJ and Ibby laughed as if they'd made a great joke.

'Dude, they literally have never lost a game,' Matt said. 'We train with them at lunch sometimes.'

Aaron nodded. 'He's right. They're really good.'

'Really good' was probably the understatement of the year. They ran through us like no one was on the field, and when we asked them how they still remained undefeated, they said it was simple.

‘We play for each other, not ourselves,’ Cheryne their captain said. ‘A machine can only run smoothly if all the parts are in sync and are working together.’

I looked at Huss, who looked at me. Our machine was broken and would never run smoothly if we stayed like this.

*[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)*

## Chapter 28

‘I think I know what we could do with the slam in a few weeks’ time,’ Jamila told me as we sat between the shelves at the back of the library, away from the other pairs. ‘But the audience will only buy it if you guys dig deep and show how you really feel. The outside world needs to connect with you on a human level and see past the stereotypes of the Angry Arab or the gang affiliations in Punchbowl.’

Watching her speak so passionately about our school and what we could do to keep it open gave me hope. We swapped numbers, and she said that if I had any ideas, I could message her.

‘Don’t get too excited, it’s for the slam,’ she said.

I smiled. ‘Of course, the slam.’

I saved her contact under ‘No damsel in distress’.

Things with Jamila were moving forward so well, but when it came to everyone else, it felt like I was mired in the mud. I stayed awake for hours every night playing out in my mind the different ways I could try to fix things.

We had a close game against Team B on Friday. Huss and I shook hands before the game and even made some small talk, which felt like a huge step forward.

‘I’ll come over tonight and see Big Haji,’ I said as we strapped on our boots.

‘She’s doing better. Been in and out seeing the doctors,’ he said. ‘She keeps asking about you.’

He left as soon as he saw Aaron walking our way.

PJ had some slips during the game and lost the ball a few times. I had to keep him calm and reassure him that his mistakes were simple to fix and that he needed to keep his cool. If PJ was angry, it only made him play worse, so I needed him to get back on track and work with Ibby to push us forward. That didn’t go down well with Huss who pointed out that I was a lot softer on PJ than I was on him.

‘Why didn’t you tell *him* off, ay?’ Huss asked, shaking his head. ‘Did Aaron tell you not to?’

I wanted to reinstate him as the goal kicker, but he still strolled lazily across to make tackles on his line, which put us in a dangerous position and jeopardised the game. We needed all three wins for our school and nothing was going to get in the way of that, not even Huss.

We finished the game against Team B with a close victory when Lee made a break in the last minute and flew down the line to score. While the rest of the team cheered and celebrated, Huss packed up his gear and left. It had become his pattern after every match, and I was getting sick of it.

I hadn’t forgotten my promise to go and see Big Haji after school. But it was the last Friday before Aunty Salma was to go back to Lebanon, and when Amira asked me to join them for some bonding time, I couldn’t say no. Amira painted Aunty Salma’s face with makeup as we chatted about what she would do when she got home. I finally bit the bullet and said what had been on my mind all week.

‘Aunty, I need to make it up to Uncle Charlie after what I said to him.’

‘Yes,’ she agreed, as Amira smeared glittery shadow over one eye.

‘He’s been avoiding me, though. Can you help me, please?’

‘He’s awake right now, and he’s in the shed,’ she said. ‘And don’t worry, I gave him a heads up.’

I stared at her. ‘But I only mentioned it to you just now.’

She winked, the eyeshadow sparkling and shimmering. ‘You think I’ve spent all this time with your family and I don’t know you, Tariq? Go, before he runs away again. Make things right.’

I peeked through the shed window and saw Uncle Charlie sitting, blank-faced, with a cup of tea. The lines on his face deepened around his eyes like he was lost in thought. It hit me that since most of us had grown up, we rarely spent time with him in his shed. It must have been so lonely being on his own.

‘Can I come in, Khorloo?’ I said.

He opened the door before walking around his kitchenette, trying to find something to feed me. ‘I have halloumi. I have eggs. I cook for you now. Give me moment.’

‘It’s okay, Uncle,’ I said. ‘I just wanna talk.’

He sat back down and poured me some tea. 'It's okay. Don't worry about it.'

'No, it's not okay, Uncle. You should've punched me in the face.' He smiled gently. 'You good boy, Tariq. I sorry if I make you embarrass. Very sorry.'

I didn't like that he was apologising when clearly I was in the wrong. 'You don't make me embarrassed. I make myself embarrassed. You do a lot for me and I don't deserve it.'

'It's okay, Tariq. Everyone make a mistake. We should forgive and try to learn.'

I'd never stayed long enough in the shed to notice the tapestry hanging above his head, of what looked like an old Arabian desert town. He saw me looking at it, and wordlessly stood up, took out a photo frame from his bedside drawer and placed it on the table. It was a black-and-white photo of a woman, one hand on her round stomach. By her side, much younger and with no moustache, stood Uncle Charlie.

I picked up the frame and studied it. 'Who was she, Khorloo?'

'She was my wife,' he said. He took a few deep breaths. 'I was at work then one day I come home and I find her.'

He stopped.

He drank the tea.

He stared at the photo in my hands and smiled. 'I not tell people cos is very hard for me to say.'

As much as I was trying to process that my uncle was actually married long ago, I didn't want to bring him any more pain by forcing him to share his story.

'It's okay,' I said, handing him back the photo. 'You don't have to tell me.'

Uncle Charlie held the photo close to his chest. 'They kill her and the baby in war when I away. I try to make her alive to help her breathe but it was too late. She die.'

I was stunned. I knew the civil war in Lebanon in the seventies had been brutal but I didn't know it had directly affected our family. 'Khorloo...I am so sorry.'

He stroked the photo once, twice. 'I never marry anyone cos I have only love for her.'

I couldn't believe that Uncle Charlie had been holding on to so much grief and never mentioned it. I hated talking about my own feelings, but I couldn't imagine what it must be like to keep that much bottled up inside and still go above and beyond every day for my family.

I had no words, and the truth was, words were the last thing he needed. I hugged him tightly and let him know that he was like a father to me.

'Will you tell me about her?'

He smiled. 'She very funny, Tariq. So funny. Always laughing and joking. You know, she love bees?'

'No way?!'

'Yes, she wanted to have her own bees, so she could have honey every day.'

And in Uncle Charlie's cramped shed, the tea long gone cold between us, he told me all about the woman who had been my aunt, who would have been an amazing mum, and whose memory still lived on in his heart.

## Chapter 29

Aaron: You busy?

Tariq: Nah. Why?

Aaron: Bored. Come and hang out before the boys come over.

Abi opened the door and welcomed me. ‘Mr Furner is waiting for you outside.’ I hurried through the house, not wanting to bump into Aaron’s mum. She opened the kitchen bi-fold doors to find me standing in her living room. She looked like she had just come back from a run.

She raised her eyebrows. ‘Back so soon?’

I cleared my throat. ‘Yeah, just footy team stuff we need to discuss.’

‘I hear your mother cooked a feast with *the tastiest chicken in the world*,’ she said, rearranging the cushions on the sofa. She then knelt down and lit a candle on the coffee table. ‘Aaron hasn’t stopped talking about it. How does your mum find time to cook and clean and work?’

‘Oh, she doesn’t work,’ I said trying to figure out why a candle needed to be lit in broad daylight. ‘I mean, not like a job. She does heaps in the community, though, as well as for our family.’

‘I see,’ she said before closing her eyes and taking a few deep breaths. Her bare face revealed the tired lines and her body arched over the table, as she whispered softly to herself, almost in prayer. I felt I was intruding on her space but before I could leave, she broke her silence. ‘The candle serves as a reminder of the departed. Aaron worshipped the ground his father walked on and so this candle lets him know that he’ll always be with us.’

Up until now, all I’ve gotten from her was cold stares or snarky comments so I wasn’t sure why she was opening up. She had a softer look about her and there was no sharpness in her face or her words.

‘Aaron talks about him all the time. He always says he was the best person he knew.’



She smiled then shook her head, as if snapping out of a daydream. ‘So your mother doesn’t work. She must live an easy life.’

I felt myself growing defensive again. ‘She feeds six kids and my uncle and sometimes our neighbours, Mr and Mrs Wallace. She runs around for the whole family and puts herself last. She’s always helping out Big Haji and other elderly people in the area. And on top of all that, she’s about to start a community garden project at my school. There’s nothing easy about staying at home, Mrs Furner.’

‘You don’t mind that your mother will be at school with you?’ she asked, surprised.

‘Heck, no. If I had my mum around me all the time, I’d be over the moon.’

Aaron walked in, bouncing a basketball. ‘Yo, what’s up, man?’ he cried, shaking my hand. ‘What took you so long?’

Mrs Furner snapped her fingers to get his attention. ‘How many times have I said no balls in the house?’

Aaron laughed. ‘No balls?’

‘Aaron!’ she snapped.

‘Can you calm down? It’s just a stupid ball. Why do you always make such a big deal out of everything?’

She cleared her throat, her eyes darting to me. I got the impression that she was embarrassed that I was witnessing this conversation. ‘Remember what we discussed about guests in our home. See to it that you follow the rules.’

He rolled his eyes. ‘Let’s go, Tariq. I can’t handle being around *her* for too long.’

I looked apologetically at Mrs Furner, who stood frozen in the doorway, looking as if she’d been slapped in the face, then followed Aaron out of the room.

‘Bro, I know your mum doesn’t like me and you’ve got beef with her at the moment. But c’mon man,’ I said. ‘You can’t speak to her like that. I’d get my teeth knocked out if I even looked at my mum the wrong way.’

‘Yeah, but your mum has a heart,’ he said. ‘She’s around all the time and doesn’t care about stupid balls in the house.’

‘Are you normal? If Mum saw me playing with a ball in the good living room, I’d have each part of my body buried around different parts of

Punchbowl.’ I shrugged. ‘She keeps all the good stuff in there, so it’s the only room where she has strict rules. If we lived in a place like *this*’ – I gestured at the grandeur around me – ‘she’d care a whole lot more about the rules, trust me.’

Aaron shrugged and motioned me outside. We played a quick one-on-one game on the basketball court when I noticed his garage door open. ‘Please tell me you still have the Ferrari.’

‘For now,’ he said. ‘Someone is picking up the Audi in a few weeks and two Mercs were sold yesterday. The guy’s wife couldn’t choose which one she liked more.’

‘Well, at least you have *that*,’ I said, pointing to his view of the water.

‘What? This craphole?’ He shook his head.

I looked around, trying to figure out which part of his place was crap. Was it the large games room near his dad’s car collection? Or was it the massive fish tank that looked like it had swallowed the Great Barrier Reef? I thought about how rich people could buy anything without even flinching at the price tag.

‘You know,’ I said carefully, trying not to piss Aaron off. ‘No matter how hard I work when I leave school, if I work every day for sixty years, I will still never be able to live the life of luxury you have.’

He rolled his eyes. ‘You go on about all this stuff way too much, Tariq. It’s just *stuff*.’

‘You’d only say that if you’d never *not* had “stuff” before,’ I retorted. I tried to change the topic before he joined the ranks of people who were mad at me. ‘Why is she selling the cars, anyway?’

‘Something about keeping up with payments,’ he replied, bouncing the ball. ‘I don’t ask too many questions. She doesn’t listen to me, anyway.’

‘Aaron!’ we heard his mum yell. ‘Riley’s here. And there are a bunch of other very loud boys waiting at the door with him.’

‘Yeah, up the lads!’ he called out to me with a giant smile on his face. ‘That’s the rest of my team, Mum. You know, in the comp you forced me to enter?’

And like a tornado he was away. I could hear the boys cheer and holler out the front as once again he left me on my own with his mother.

He really needed to stop doing that.

Ibby and PJ's eyes were wide and they walked through the house like kids in a lolly shop.

I looked over the group and noticed who was missing straight away.

Aaron gave the boys the tour and they didn't waste any time making themselves feel at home. They raided the kitchen and messed up the new flowers planted beside the pool before walking into the house in their dirty shoes.

Ibby thought it was a good idea to introduce himself to Aaron's mum by hugging her tightly. 'I'm Ibby. Nice to meet you.' I tried not to laugh as she stared down at Ibby in shock. She tilted her head back and tried to shuffle back but it was no use fighting Ibby's grip.

We gathered in Aaron's room to talk about Riley's possible evidence against Hunter.

'It's too risky to do anything now,' I said. 'I get not telling the cops, but let's just lay off until we've sorted our school stuff.'

I knew they wanted to get him good, but I wasn't going to be part of something that could blow up in our faces and set back our school's chances.

PJ agreed. 'We're on thin ice, man. Anything dumb now, and we're screwed.'

Lee slumped. 'Damn! I got excited for no reason. I thought we were going to dress up in balaclavas and hold him for ransom, you know?'

'No, I don't know, Nintendo,' Ibby said staring at him. 'That was never going to be the plan.'

'I'll just keep the footage until we make a decision.' Riley suggested. 'He shouldn't get away with the stuff he's done.'

'As long as we don't have any solid evidence, there is no use for that footage,' I told him. 'If you want, investigate a little more and then come back to us.'

Aaron brought up the Grand Final Bulldogs jersey for the boys to admire. It didn't go down well with his mum. We could hear them arguing outside.

'You're so disrespectful!' she exclaimed.

'I hate being in the house because of you. You don't let me breathe,' he yelled back. 'You're always in my space. You piss me off!'

He stormed back into the bedroom and slammed the door shut. It was bad timing, but I was busting for the toilet, and I left the room just as Ibby and PJ started telling him off about how he spoke to his mum. In my rush to leave, I didn't shut the door behind me.

'She's your mum at the end of the day. It's not right that you spoke to her like that!' I heard PJ say as I bolted for the loo.

When I came out of the bathroom, I spotted Aaron's mum hovering awkwardly at the top of the stairs. It took less than a second to work out what was happening. She was right. The boys really were loud.

'No matter what your mum says to you, you have to shut your mouth, bro,' Ibby's voice floated into the hallway.

'She gave birth to you and raised you,' came PJ's voice. 'So what if she's got rules? It's her house, she can have all the rules she wants.'

The ghost of a smile passed across Mrs Furner's face. I coughed loudly as I walked back to Aaron's room, giving her time to disappear back down the stairs and pretend she hadn't heard anything.

I entered Aaron's room in time to see Ibby's face fall in shock as he checked his phone.

'It's Huss.' He looked at me. 'Big Haji's had a heart attack.'

I sat and stared at Big Haji's tired body wrapped in wires and tubes. Huss held her hand and sobbed softly. Machines beeped and nurses walked in and out of the room. The boys waited outside, while Feda talked to the staff in the cardiac unit to make sure Huss's mum was taken care of. I could hear her crying to my mum in the hallway.

Silence stretched out between us, heavy with Huss's grief.

'So, you made time now when she's going to die?' he said to me at last, watching her face. 'Don't you have more important things to do?'

'She's not going to die,' I said. 'I should've come before but I didn't. You have every right to be angry with me.'

He wiped his cheeks. 'What happened? It's like you forgot our friendship completely and only cared about yourself.'

'I'm trying, Huss,' I said. 'Honestly, I am. But there's been a thousand things going on. I don't wanna start a fight with you right now but we've both done some dumb stuff.'

He laughed bitterly to himself and said nothing.

There was quiet again. I wanted to make him feel better. When I looked out the door, I could see the boys sitting with their heads bowed. We'd been here for hours.

'You know Aaron and the Shire boys are here, as well as Ibby and PJ?' I said. 'They wanted to make sure you were alright.'

Tears welled in his eyes before he wiped them away. 'Why would they come?'

'Because we're a team, Huss. Wallah, they're not the bad guys. Look!' I pointed out the door. 'They didn't need to be here but they came anyway, even Aaron.'

I stood up, wanting to give other people their turn to sit with Big Haji. 'I don't want to fight anymore. You're my brother, Huss, and Big Haji is my tayta.' I was walking to the door when he called out, 'You still doing that poetry thing?'

I smiled. 'Yeah, man.'

He looked down at his grandma, his fingers tightly wrapped around hers. 'I want her to be proud of me. I want to make things right.'

'Of course, bro,' I said, returning to his side. We hugged it out, and I felt a pressure in my chest finally ease.

'Tell Aaron I want my role back in the team.'

'Tell him yourself,' I said. 'Trust me, Huss, this Yahooda is actually alright.'

## Chapter 30

I watched Jamila sit by the pond and feed the ducks that swarmed around her. Her hair was tied up neatly in a high bun and her feet touched the water.

I had organised for the Wolf Pack to finally meet Jamila and start the slam stuff after school, since we only had a few weeks left until the end of term. Even though it was another job added to our list, we knew that stepping out of our comfort zone to do something we'd never tried would get the outside world to see us differently.

I watched Jamila a little longer, and was just starting to feel like a creep when she looked up and spotted me. She waved her hands at me to join her. I wanted to spend some alone time with her before the boys came.

I never knew how to greet her. Should I hug her, should I kiss her on the cheek – not sure if we're there yet – do I wave or shake her hand?

But as with everything, she made things easy and hugged me.

'Where are the boys?' she asked, looking around. 'Don't tell me they backed down?'

'No, no. I just thought we could hang out and talk about our own school slam before they came.'

She shook her head and smiled. 'Even though we already spoke about it earlier today at the workshop?'

I was stuck. 'Well, yeah, but I – '

'It's okay,' she said. 'I'm just joking.'

We threw some bread in the water and more ducks swam to our feet. I hadn't felt this calm in ages. For the first time, I felt like my head was actually staying above water.

Yesterday in training Huss had shown up like I'd never seen him before. He was pumped and ran harder than anyone else. Hazem taught him a few pointers, and kick after kick, he shot them over the black dot.

'For Big Haji,' he said every time he ran up for the ball.

‘He’s killing it, bro.’ Aaron was loud in his praise. ‘If he does this in our games, then we definitely have a chance to make it to the semi-finals.’

Truth was, I hadn’t been sure if he was even going to show up to training, but he had been the first one there. Big Haji was still recovering in the hospital, while Mum had cooked malfoof – cabbage rolls – Huss’s favourite, and made sure he and his mum had something to eat.

‘I know I was acting like a sook,’ Huss said to me before we got started. ‘But I had a lot of things going on and I took it out on the comp.’

‘Let’s just forget it and focus on winning these games,’ I said.

Jamila brought out her notebook from her bag, snapping me back into the present. ‘While we’re waiting, let’s think of a few ideas so we can get straight into it.’

‘What do you do to start a piece?’ I asked. ‘Like the one you read for BPS was really good, but it was –’

‘Personal?’

‘Like, were you comfortable sharing that stuff about your mum?’

‘It’s my truth,’ she said. ‘There’s no point in sharing my art if I’m not going to be honest.’

I only ever knew about her mum through her writing. ‘Do you still keep in touch with her?’

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘I love her and she’ll always be my mum.’

She leaned on my shoulder. ‘People are complicated. You can still love and be broken at the same time.’ She rubbed my arm absently. ‘You smell nice.’

We sat and talked a little more until I heard some wolf-whistling from the other side of the park.

‘Get a room!’ PJ yelled.

‘This is Jamila,’ I said with a laugh when they got near enough.

Ibby hugged her. ‘I’m a hugger,’ he said. ‘And he likes you a lot, ay. Don’t hurt my Tariq.’

I could feel my face superheat. ‘Why don’t you calm down, Ibby, yeah?’

‘What? You do like her,’ he protested, then turned to her. ‘He says you make him nervous in a good way.’

I stared at him until he closed his mouth. I was happy to see Huss, and he had even brought his own notebook.

‘He’s back!’ PJ said putting his arms around him. ‘The Wolf Pack is back!’

‘Do you boys want to do it as a group? Or do you want to do four separate pieces?’ Jamila asked.

‘Together,’ Huss said. ‘I don’t want to be on stage on my own.’

She stood in front of us under the pergola in the park. ‘We know your school is in trouble, but slams are more about making people connect on a deeper level. You need to let people in and show them what’s beneath the surface.’

Jamila gave us time to write some ideas. After a few minutes, PJ scrunched his page in frustration. ‘I can’t rhyme!’

Jamila picked up the piece of paper and sat next to him. ‘Slams don’t need to rhyme. Think about it more as a rap.’

‘Like Tupac,’ he said.

‘Exactly, like Tupac.’

‘Why do you care?’ Huss asked curiously. ‘You could be at home now instead of being here. Why are you helping us out?’

She looked at me and smiled. ‘I want to be here.’

Ibby winked at me. ‘I like her,’ he whispered.

Huss sat next to Jamila and me. ‘I had time in the hospital with Big Haji so I came up with ideas for how to get people noticing us in a good way.’ He turned a few pages in his book. ‘We can do that signing thing.’

‘A petition?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, yeah.’

I watched him read idea after idea about posters in the streets, asking shop owners to leave the petition in their shops, and inviting as many people as we knew to the slam.

‘Feda helped me. She told me what you said, you know?’

‘What did Tariq say?’ Jamila asked.

If looks could kill, then Huss would be six feet under. ‘It was nothing.’

We spent the afternoon brainstorming our ideas. Jamila sat next to me and rubbed my arm, excited. ‘They’re doing really well,’ she said softly. ‘This is going to be so good.’



Aunty Salma caught me stuffing a letter into her suitcase. She wiped away a few tears and hugged me. 'I just finished my makeup so don't ruin it for me.'

'Don't read it until you get on the plane.'

Mum and Dad served date and pistachio biscuits and kids ran up and down our driveway, dodging the teas and coffees on the tables. My brothers sat with my older cousins inside the garage and watched a UFC fight, which only made the Arab women's orchestra scream at them for not sitting with the guests outside. Uncle Charlie and Amira tried to sell some honey to the guests, and Feda sat beside a few of my cousins with her blonde hair straightened.

*Why was she so dressed up?*

You'd think there was some sort of major occasion with the amount of people walking in and out of the house but it was how we farewelled people. Mr and Mrs Wallace peeked over the fence and passed over a few dessert pies and sandwich platters they had made to serve to guests.

Aunty Salma was back in her over-the-top makeup and glittery clothes. We sat and talked a little more until Feda came and asked her for perfume. My brothers then called me from the garage to come over as quick as possible. 'Don't make it obvious,' Abdul said, 'but see that man sitting across from Dad, with the blue shirt? He's here to see Feda.'

'What? Like for marriage?'

They nodded.

I watched Feda walk back to her seat. She didn't look right.

'But she's still doing her residency?' I said. 'She always said she wanted to finish first.'

'I guess she changed her mind,' Saff said with a shrug. 'Don't worry, I already called the cousins to ask about him.'

I had a sinking feeling in my stomach as I watched the man sit next to Feda. I had left it too long and I feared there was never going to be a right time to tell my sister that I was sorry.

Every moment was the right time. Even now, as I walked over and stood in front of them, not caring about who was watching.

'Feda. You don't have to do this. You don't need to get married to please everyone else.'

'Tariq?' she cried.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything I said to you before.’ I turned to the man. ‘My sister is smart and pretty and the best person I know. She’s taken care of us her whole life and spends all her time now taking care of other people. You’re lucky to even think about being with her.’

‘Tariq?’ she cried again, standing up now. ‘He owns the practice in Bankstown and was talking to me about a job!’

*Wait, what?*

I turned back to my brothers, who were laughing like hyenas.

Everyone watching joined in as well. I didn’t care that I had embarrassed myself but I didn’t want to embarrass Feda. I turned to explain, but she stopped me with a smile.

‘Breathe, Tariq. We’re good.’

‘We are?’

She gave me a hug. ‘We are.’

*[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)*

## Chapter 31

We won against Team E, 24–6. It had been our best performance so far, with not a single argument and Huss blitzing through their line like he was the only one on the field. Everywhere I looked he was there, either making a break or setting up a try from the back line.

‘Is he on drugs?’ Ibby asked at half-time.

‘It’s probably because his grandma is getting better,’ Riley said.

‘By the way, I’ve got some good and bad news about the number plate in the video. Good news is that the number plate belongs to Scott – you know that tall blond one on the team? Bad news is that we can’t prove that Hunter was in the car.’

The boys joined the conversation and I quickly briefed them. ‘We do nothing until after we’ve got the all-clear from the men in suits.’

‘No one will know,’ Huss said. ‘We can keep it on the down-low.’

Aaron agreed. ‘Hunter needs to pay for what he’s done.’

I shook my head in disbelief that Huss and Aaron were now teamed up against me. ‘Keep *what* on the down-low? Huss, we have no evidence and we’re just going to burn ourselves. Let’s be smart about this. Trust me, Hunter will get what’s coming to him.’

Everyone agreed to strike when the time was right.

‘No dumb stuff now, when we’re so close,’ I reminded them as we ran onto the field for the second half.

Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed were umpiring other games since two referees hadn’t shown up. ‘We have faith that you can be left alone for a game without getting yourselves into trouble,’ Mr Ahmed said, giving us The Look.

Of course, while they were away, we had an altercation with Hunter.

‘I can’t wait to see your faces when your school closes,’ he said to us after our game. ‘It’s about time we did something about the cockroaches in your area.’

PJ's hands clenched and Huss's eyes narrowed. I stared at them to stand down. The rest of the boys were lying on the grass, trying to catch a break before we headed back to school.

'Just piss off, Hunter,' Aaron said.

'Or what you're gonna go cry to Daddy? Oh wait. You can't, can you?'

They laughed and laughed like they'd made a great joke.

When Aaron swung his arm towards Hunter's face, I held it back and stood between them both until PJ grabbed hold of Aaron. He tried to break free, but was no match for PJ's strength. Huss stood on the lookout while I made sure Hunter knew that his words were going to come back to bite him.

'And even then, when you beg us to stop and grovel at our feet, we won't. Until you feel what you made us feel, especially Riley and Aaron, and that's when, maybe, just maybe, we'll let you breathe again.'

His face changed and he wasn't laughing anymore. Something about my cold tone made him take a few steps back, then leave.

'Why'd you do that for?' Aaron said, freeing himself from PJ. 'He joked about my dad and you –'

'And I what?' I interrupted. 'Archie and Ahmed have been telling us to control our anger for weeks now, but it's like they're talking to brick walls.'

'If he said that about your dad, you would've –'

'He's called us cockroaches. He's called us dirty terrorists,' I said, watching his chest heave. 'He's talked shit about everyone in the team, not just you. I'm not saying you can't be upset, but if you punched him, you'd lose being captain and your spot on the team. Who would that have hurt? Hunter?'

He shook his head and ground his teeth. 'I want to get him so bad.'

I pointed at Riley. 'He's gone through much more than you for years and he can control himself. Be like him. You can relax at my place,' I said to the team. 'Dad invited all of you back home for a late lunch.'

Aaron took a few deep breaths. 'Is your mum making the special chicken?'

I laughed. 'I told her the Yahooda doesn't eat home-cooked food even though he lives in a bloody castle.'

He tried to tackle me to the ground, but he forgot that he was messing with a member of the Wolf Pack. They all jumped on and rumbled him. Lee

tried to join in, but only ended up getting squashed between Ibbby and PJ.

Mr Archie called Mr Bennett and told him that the Cronulla boys were spending the rest of the day with us. We took them on a tour of our school, which lasted about forty-five seconds. Our library was still under renovation and most of the other classrooms were being fitted with new furniture or air conditioners. We knew they wouldn't be finished any time soon, but it was important to show the men in suits that change was happening and that we were taking things seriously.

Some of the seniors along with Mr Ahmed challenged us to an afternoon game of touch before the bell rang. Mr Archie made an announcement over the PA that any student who wished to watch the game at last period was welcome to do so. Naturally, it was like a herd of elephants trampling their way out of class and onto the field. Any excuse to leave the classroom. We had some of the men in suits in the crowd, still with their notebooks.

Mr Ahmed and his hand-picked team – mostly seniors – were no match for Mr Archie and us. The cheers were deafening when the crowd realised that we could actually play a decent game with the Cronulla boys. They begged Mr Archie to let them come and watch the last game of term, the must-win game to make it to the semi-finals.

Back at my place, Mum made an extra plate of food for Aaron to take home and share with his mum. 'Make sure you give her big kiss.'

I had told her briefly about how they fought a lot. 'Be kind, Tariq,' she advised me. 'Be thankful that we have each other.'

'You told her about Mum?' Aaron asked me, shaking his head.

'No, no, no,' Dad said, still in his work clothes. 'Son, you know heaven is under her ground?'

'Feet, Dad,' Feda corrected.

'Oh yes, I mean feet,' Dad said, going over to kiss Mum on the forehead. 'The whole house will be nothing without my love.'

I couldn't get the boys to leave even after Uncle Charlie took them for a ride around Punchbowl in his ice-cream truck.

'Say salaam to your family,' the shop owners said to Huss, Ibbby and me over and over again.

'What does that mean?' Matt asked.

I laughed, remembering the time he had accidentally converted to Islam. 'It means "peace". It's how we greet each other.'

‘You make sure you get that trophy home.’ Abu Habra slammed his butcher’s knife into the meat.

‘Tell Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed that whatever the school needs, we’ve got them covered,’ Ginger and Pete reassured us in the fish and chip shop.

The signs reading KEEP OUR KIDS IN SCHOOLS, NOT ON THE STREETS were displayed in shop windows all along Punchbowl Road, and the chatter about ways to help the school were getting louder and more urgent as the review date crept up closer.

‘It feels like you’re in another country,’ Aaron said looking around. ‘You guys have Indian food, Lebanese, seafood and charcoal chicken just up the street. It’s going to be hard getting me away from here.’

‘You should come by more often,’ I told him, walking back to the truck. ‘Just give me a heads up beforehand. I’ll need to let them know that the Yahooda is with me.’

My home was buzzing way into the night. The boys stayed over for cards. Amira had two jobs: she was keeping score and helping PJ and Ibby cheat against Aaron and Huss, who were clueless.

Abdul and Saff bought extra snacks from the servo and Matt helped Uncle Charlie in the shed. He was fascinated with the bees, too, and I think my uncle had found a new shareholder in Cronulla.

Eventually, Aaron’s phone rang. It was his mum, who wanted him to come home.

‘Catch the train,’ we heard her say.

Dad quickly finished his tea and refused to let Aaron go home on his own. ‘You like my son. How can I let you go home by yourself at night?’

‘It’s okay, Mr Nader. I can catch a taxi.’

‘Call me “uncle”,’ Dad insisted. ‘And I take you.’

## Chapter 32

There were only two weeks left until the end of term and they were probably the most important two weeks ever.

Not only did our school look different, it also started to feel different. The air felt easier to breathe and we had a sense of purpose now. We weren't just idling by and strolling in and out of school like zombies anymore. The seniors set up a school YouTube channel which featured daily highlights, Ibbby's weekly cooking videos as well as PJ covering songs that we voted on. Elias and Johnny walked around with a camera Mr Archie bought, capturing moments like Mum's first day running the community garden.

Mr Archie had said that if enough people showed up from the community on that first day, then she would be a permanent fixture, teaching gardening skills to parents and students once a week. There was no way I was going to let Mum put all that effort in only to have parents not show up. Ibbby and Huss's mums called their friends and PJ's Grandma Ceci told the women at her church, which meant eighteen parents showed up on that first day, the official record for any community project at our school. I watched Mum's face light up as she scooped up soil with her hands and showed parents how to lay it on the ground. 'Raising plants is like raising children,' she said. 'If seed is planted with lots of water and sun, then it grow to be healthy and strong.'

Another popular video on our channel was a special tribute to the two men who had started us on this path to recovery. Dad had clipped an article from the *Daily Telegraph* about Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed – The Tag-team Wonder Duo.

'They didn't even tell us,' I showed the boys on our way to school. 'I'm going to ask Miss K to make some copies and we'll stick it around the school and on their office doors.'

Huss waited behind Mrs Amin in the front office to film their reactions when they walked into their offices. Some of the seniors hid with party-

poppers and streamers, too.

Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed were talking and laughing with the men in suits. The seniors leaped out with confetti flying everywhere and cheers from the office ladies. It was important to show these two men that they meant so much to us and we appreciated all the hard work they had done so far, even when we didn't deserve it.

'How did you get this, lads?' Mr Archie asked, his face turning red as he peeled the photocopied article away from his door.

'Dad gave it to me,' I said.

PJ moved his phone closer to Mr Archie's face. 'This is the first time our principal gets embarrassed, ay.'

Ibby tackled Mr Ahmed with a hug. 'Wallah, you know I luv ya, sir.'

We also posted a video of the team at training with Hazem who shared it on his Instagram with the caption, 'Real Heroes'.

On Thursday night, before the game against Team G, I was over at Aaron's place, and he was oddly quiet. His mum had just told him that the sale of the Ferrari was almost a done deal. She actually referred to the sale as 'a clean slate'.

'Just *talk* to her,' I advised, sitting in his room.

'I did.'

'You mean you shouted and then chucked a tantrum?'

He fell back onto his bed. 'Your mum is so nice and she gets you. My mum doesn't even know where I am half the time.'

'Tell her where you are, then,' I said. 'I've told you this before, bro. She's in pain, too. She lights candles for your dad. Have you even asked her if she is okay since he died?'

Trust me, I was surprised with myself for defending Mrs Furner. I had initially thought that no one could be miserable in a place like Aaron's, but the more time I spent with him, the more I realised how empty and unhappy his house was. He was right. It did feel like a medical centre. But Mum always said, 'Houses become homes when people inside show love to each other.'

'Isn't she the adult?' he asked, sitting up. 'Why do *I* have to parent *her*?'

I was going to reply when Mrs Furner walked in to return the container in which Mum had sent chicken home with Aaron. My body didn't freeze



or tense up when she was around now. There was a little more warmth and colour in her face.

She cleared her throat. 'I wanted to thank your mum for the food she sent. She didn't have to.'

'You ate it?' Aaron asked sceptically. 'Or did you throw it away?' She barely glanced at him as she handed me the container filled with biscuits. 'They're made with poppy seed.'

I didn't know if she was being nice or if she wanted me to leave. In Arab homes, if you offer your guests something to eat too early, then that's a sign that they need to go.

'Thanks, Mrs Furner. My family will gobble these up.'

Aaron laughed unkindly. '*You* made them? Or did Abi do it?'

I kicked his foot in warning. His mum's face froze over, and she nodded at me awkwardly. 'Well. I'll see you later.'

'What the hell, dude?' I asked Aaron. 'She was just being nice.'

'She doesn't know how to be nice,' he retorted sullenly. I knew if I stuck around much longer, I would end up getting into a fight with him, so I decided to head home early.

Aaron was having the worst game so far the following day against Team G, the team we needed to beat to make it to the finals. The score stood at 12-6 at half-time.

He sat on the bench, his knees bouncing. No matter how much Mr Archie spoke to him, I could tell that he had completely shut down.

'You had a few opportunities to put some points up on the board,' Mr Archie said. He checked his watch. 'You have twenty-five minutes to prove that you can be a better captain than this.'

'What's wrong with him?' Huss asked me.

'His mum,' I said. 'She's going to sell the Ferrari, his dad's favourite car.'

Huss shook his head. 'Can't you talk to him?'

We watched Mr Archie and Aaron go back and forth until Aaron did what he always does when he can't handle a situation – he stormed off, but not before kicking his bag a few times.

'Go speak to him,' Mr Ahmed told me. 'If he doesn't respond, then he's no longer captain.'

Aaron was lurking by the toilets. He paced back and forth and told me he didn't want to hear anything I had to say.

'You won't be captain if you don't come back.'

'I don't care.' He continued to pace. 'I don't care about this shit anymore.'

'Yes, you do,' I said, standing in his way. 'I know you're angry because of your dad's cars but –'

'But what?' He raised his voice. 'It's the only thing I have left of him.' He took a few breaths and his eyes began to swell. He turned his back on me and looked up to the sky. 'I miss him.'

'Then do it for him,' I said, walking around to face him. 'It's just a car. It means nothing. The memories you had with him, the things he taught you, *that's* what's important. Things come and go, bro.'

He wiped his face a couple of times.

'You need to stop running away, Aaron, and deal with this.' 'Archie's going to kill me,' he shuddered as we walked back to the group.

Mr Archie didn't kill him, but he did strip him of being captain for the rest of the game.

Team G were good, but they lacked the energy to bring the game home even though they led at half-time. Riley carved them up out of dummy-half and Ibby and PJ pretty much carried our team on their backs. They were too strong to hold onto and both scored tries. Aaron had a better second half. Huss's goal-kicking was on target and I found my rhythm, moving on the field and creating as many opportunities as I could.

The referee blew his whistle and we all tackled each other onto the ground. We had won 24–12.

Our position in the semis would be confirmed once all the other teams had played their games, but one thing was certain: Hunter and his team had lost no games, and were definitely through to the semis. I prayed that we would meet them in the grand final and could finally crush them both on and off the field.

Week 10 was our Poetry Slam at BPS. Jamila and I had presented our own slam to the poetry workshop earlier in the week. Jamila had turned the idea of *Place* to something about a woman's womb and how that was the first *place* known to man. I want to say that I played a major role in us getting

the highest marks, but it was all her. I was the dummy and she was the ventriloquist. That was how I described it to Feda.

‘I’m not going to lie, it makes sense now, seeing those changes in you,’ she said. ‘Just make sure you don’t do anything stupid.’

‘Trust me, I try with all my soul when I’m around her.’

Since there was no game in the last week of term, we had time to focus on the Wolf Pack slam on Friday night. Riley had designed a few posters that Huss, Ibby, PJ and I stuck on telegraph poles around Punchbowl. We also left some in shops, knowing that the more community support we had, the better it would be for the school. We had to let people know that we needed the community to get behind us, especially since Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed had invited the men in suits to come and watch us at BPS.

We met with Jamila every afternoon that week at Wiley Park, trying to polish our slam. She and I always met earlier than the rest of the boys and hung out.

‘So, you nervous?’ she asked, sitting with her feet in the pond.

‘You going to be there?’

She smiled. ‘Of course.’

‘Then no.’

Her hair whipped about in the breeze. Some got caught in her mouth and I moved the strands of hair from her face as she talked about Jihad and his reading.

‘His letters *O* and *C* are getting better,’ she said. ‘He can tell them apart now.’

‘I don’t know how you do it. You’ve moved into a new home and a new school. You take care of your dad and brother. You helped Amira finish the bars and you helped me out when I didn’t deserve it.’

She tapped her finger on my nose. ‘We have one chance at this life. I want to do the most I can to help so I can rest later.’

I held her hand. ‘I know you can find a million guys who are better than me, but I want you to know that if you ever need anything, I’m always here.’

‘Anything?’

‘Of course.’

She looked at me from the corner of her eye and her dimple appeared. ‘I want to fly.’

I stood up and brushed the dirt off my pants. 'Alright, let's go.'

'What are you talking about?'

I pulled her up. 'Jump on my back.'

'Have you lost your mind?'

I tickled her until she agreed. She jumped up and wrapped her legs around my waist.

'Hold on.'

She yelled at the top of her lungs as I ran around the park then down the hill. I wanted her to feel for once that she didn't need to carry people and that I would be there to shoulder the load.

I stopped before we reached the park pergola, and she dropped off my back. She then buried her head in my chest and we hugged for a while.

It was quiet. We held each other until I noticed Ibby's head pop out from behind one of the pergola's columns. 'Is it safe to look?' he called out.

The lights shone brightly and my heart raced a million miles per hour. We were seconds from stepping onto the stage. We wore our school uniform with pride, knowing that our community was here to support us. Shop owners, our parents, our teachers, the Cronulla boys, and even the men in suits.

Elias and Johnny brought the tripod and video camera and had set it up, right in the centre of the aisle. Ibby was quietly freaking out backstage.

I walked out with the boys right behind me, and we each stood in front of a mic, ready to read our parts.

'Go, Tariq!' I heard Aaron call out, followed by a loud cheer from the rest of the audience.

*Just concentrate on something that calms you...*

I searched the audience's faces until I found her. Jamila blew me a kiss and I felt like I could take on the world.

I made one last prayer and began.

*So, these men in suits want to close down the place that is helping me become a man.*

*A man of respect.*

*A man of hard work.*

*A man of loyalty.*

*It's easy to judge from the outside, not knowing what's inside, shattering our pride and then to decide with files classified, that we are not good enough.*

*Not good enough to have a place of our own, a place to call home, a place to feel safe.*

Ibby took over.

*Safe from the streets, from people's constant tweets, that feeling of defeat that keeps us incomplete and broken.*

*Broken in a thousand pieces, seeing the police while the media increases, holding onto a long overdue phrase and cliché, that we Punchbowl boys are only sideways and will never change.*

*Change our so-called violent ways, these men in suits would say, forcing us to stay away from the place that made me who I am today.*

Next came PJ.

*The place that cared for me when my own mother turned away, busy getting high on some highway, forgetting that her only son was waiting for her by the doorway.*

*When I needed comfort and care, my teachers were always there, even as people stopped and stared, they never left me in despair.*

*You see, they see me. All of me. They see me for who I am, not who the world paints me to be and whether you agree or disagree, you can't deny what the school has done for me.*

Huss stepped forward.

*And what it has done for me.*

*See, it's hard not knowing what's going to happen, as the days darken and the place that made me feel worthy of being called a son, may soon become undone.*

*I don't know my dad. He left when I was a kid, not batting an eyelid and hid. When my birthdays came about, I'd count down until he came round*

*but turns out I was the clown for expecting a dad to be glad to see his son not be sad.*

*And when I'd be mad pleading to be banned, my teachers held my hand, even when I felt like I was in quicksand. My school is my dreamland and the place I found peace from the troubles that waited for me.*

I took over once again.

*Our school closing is not an option no matter how many times you put us up for adoption. My friends from childhood, in a special brotherhood that no place can create, except for my school, which we stand today and celebrate.*

We brought it home together.

*We may seem tough and strong, but the truth is, the only place where we belong is here in Punchbowl.*

*Our home.*

While everyone clapped and cheered, all up on their feet, we hugged each other, knowing that no matter what, from here on out, we were always going to be brothers.

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## Chapter 33

Aaron: Hanging at Tariq's today. Who's in?

PJ: Done.

Huss: Just doing a couple of things for Big Haji and I'll come.

Riley: I'll come past yours, Aaron, and we'll go together.

Matt: Wait for me.

Lee: And me.

It was only a couple days into the first week of the holidays and the boys already wanted to hang out. We had been told to spend time together whenever we had the chance and because my place guaranteed a free lunch and Aaron's home guaranteed a free resort holiday, they decided that our houses would be their headquarters.

Ibby: I'm already here.

Tariq: Don't lie, bro. You're not here.

Ibby: Look outside ur window.

Sure enough, Ibby's googly eyes were staring back at me through my bedroom window.

I checked the time on my phone. 9:07 a.m. 'Get lost, Ibby,' I called out, flopping back onto my bed. 'It's too early.'

I ignored him and tried to go back to sleep, until Ibby fell through the window and onto Abdul's face. He ripped open our curtain, and the wooden rod cracked Saff over the head. Abdul thrashed underneath Ibby's body, trying to get free, and Saff, I'm sure, was knocked out cold. Dad, gripping his thick, black leather belt like a weapon, rushed in and began to belt them both.

'Hajj!' Ibby screamed. 'It's me, Ibby! Stop!'

Ibby rolled off Abdul, who looked like he'd been steamrolled. Dad held up his pants, his white hair all messed up. Saff regained consciousness and blinked a few times. 'Where the hell am I?'

'In Jahannam,' Ibby said, rubbing his back. 'I need eggs. We're out at home.'

'And you couldn't just come to the front door, you jahash?' I groaned.

I watched Ibby raid the kitchen. Amira had woken up from all the commotion and now helped him prepare breakfast. They shared the Nutella jar, knowing that my mum was still asleep.

The eggs sizzled in the pan and the smell of crisp bread toasting under the grill made my stomach grumble. Ibby stood beside me and wiped the sweat off his head with our kitchen towel. 'Guess why today's special?'

'I don't know,' I said, rubbing my face. 'You found some extra eggs in our fridge.'

Amira jumped off the kitchen bench and punched me in the stomach. 'It's my birthday!'

Crap! I had forgotten.

'Of course, it is,' I said, smiling through my teeth. 'I even got you a... a...piñata.'

She punched me again, this time way too low, before running around the house in excitement. Amira had an obsession with piñatas because it was the only time she got rewarded for destroying something with a bat.

'You're lucky I already messaged PJ to get some stuff,' Ibby muttered to me. 'I knew you'd forget cos there's been so much going on lately.'

It was the first time I had ever forgotten Amira's birthday, so I was lucky that the boys had my back.

We had set up the table in our backyard when Uncle Charlie walked out of his shed in only his boxer shorts. He held a jar of honey and was followed by a cloud of bees.

Ibby ran inside, and closed the screen door. 'Bro, tell Winnie the Pooh to get rid of the bees. I swear if I get stung again, I'm gonna kill someone.'

I stood in front of Amira. 'Khorloo, at least put some pants on.'

'Okay, okay,' he said, rubbing his eyes. He must have forgotten to put mascara in his hair this morning, because the white hairs were sprouting out. He put the honey on the table and headed back to his man cave. His bees followed, almost in formation.



PJ waited at the back gate with a bunch of Bunnings balloons in one hand and a Batman piñata in the other. Aaron and the boys had also arrived, each with a different tool that Ibby and PJ had told them to get. It only made me feel worse.

‘Don’t worry,’ Huss said. ‘I got ya covered.’ He then showed me a mini toolbox set with laminated pictures of bees that Riley had helped him design.

The boys sat and ate breakfast like they were part of the furniture now. Uncle Charlie’s moustache curled closer to his mouth when Matt asked for a few honey jars to sell at the surf shop in Cronulla. ‘Some of the dudes there were asking about organic honey when I remembered you, Uncle Charlie.’

Amira slammed open the screen door, singing ‘Happy Birthday’ to herself at the top of her lungs.

‘Who’s ready to party?’ she shouted, posing in her denim overalls, unevenly-braided hair, favourite Batman shirt and the tutu Auntie Salma had bought her.

We set up Amira’s ‘surprise’ party, with her watching our every move from the kitchen window. Aaron and I tied the balloons to the four posts of our vine-leaf pergola, while Matt and Riley filled the piñata with lollies, keeping a good distance away from PJ and Ibby. Abdul and Saff set up the chairs and Mum and Feda arranged the cake and a few snacks.

‘I tried to talk to Mum, you know,’ Aaron said as we worked. ‘I tried to do what Archie and Ahmed have been telling us, but it’s so hard not to lose it when she just does whatever she wants.’

‘Did you storm out?’ I asked.

He took a deep breath. ‘I wasn’t going to, but then she mentioned something about being invited to Hunter’s house for some dinner thing and that’s when I left.’

‘Okay, I would leave too,’ I said. ‘But not with the yelling and shouting.’

He laughed. ‘Since when did you become my therapist?’

‘Since everything almost fell apart this term. I get what they say now, you don’t know what you have until it’s gone.’

Saff came rushing out of the house, holding our wooden curtain rod. ‘Let’s crack open this piñata!’

The birthday girl didn't even wait for a blindfold. She swung the rod back, unaware that Saff hadn't moved, and knocked him down. You'd think she would've stopped to check if he was okay, but she kept hitting the piñata until it cracked open, spilling lollies everywhere.

Over the holidays, talk of our team making the semi-final made its way around the Punchbowl shops and up to Greenacre, home of Team D, the team we'd be facing. We had lost against them in Round 2, so we needed to work at a faster pace to secure our spot in the grand final. Hunter's team were going to be playing against Team B.

As well as spending the holidays in Aaron's pool and soaking up the sun, I also spent time at his place trying to figure out some set plays and writing down things we remembered from when we last played against Team D. Lee had a whole booklet of notes and detailed information about their weaknesses and their strengths.

'He's Asian.' Ibby said. 'What do you expect?'

'That's like saying *Hey you're Arab? Of course you're in jail?*' Lee retorted, before explaining his numbers and statistics.

It was the first time Huss had been to Aaron's place and had the same reaction we all had, not only to the house, but the Ferrari too. It was still in the garage – the buyers apparently pulled out at the last second.

'Allah loves you,' Ibby had said to Aaron. 'Your prayers were answered.'

Aaron's mum wandered around the house like she was looking for something, but every so often our eyes locked before she looked away. I had told her that my family loved the cookies, to which she nodded and smiled.

'Your mum makes good chicken,' she said one time when Aaron was in the bathroom. 'Does she use a specific spice? Or is it a mix of spices?'

I had no idea. 'Not sure. Maybe a mix of things?'

She left the room when Aaron came back.

'Did she annoy you?' he asked, rolling his eyes.

'Nah. She just asked about what spices my mum used for the chicken.'

I heard Mrs Furner pause, then continue walking away.

## Chapter 34

First week back at school, and we picked up right where we had left off. It was business as usual with training, rain, hail or shine. Our game against Team D fired up the boys at school.

‘If the boys win this Friday,’ Mr Archie addressed the school at morning assembly, ‘every single one of you will be allowed to attend the grand final to cheer them on.’

‘You know they’re going to kill us if we don’t win the semi-final now?’ I said to him, walking up to class.

He laughed. ‘That’s kind of the point, lad. Now you have to do everything in your power to win that game. Speaking of, how are things going between you and Huss? All good in the hood?’

‘Don’t do that, sir,’ I said, shaking my head. ‘You have to be cool to do that.’

‘You’re the one spending all your time with your school principal,’ he grinned. ‘Are you absolutely certain *you’re* cool?’

I scowled at him, then answered his original question. ‘Huss and I are sweet. Nothing’s going to come between us again.’

‘Glad to hear it.’

Miss K and Mr Ahmed checked in with me and talked all things BBL.

‘Supportive and fair,’ Miss K said. ‘Those are the two qualities I want you to focus on this term.’

‘No matter how hard things get, you have to keep these two qualities in your mind,’ Mr Ahmed added.

The men in suits had gathered enough information to send to the review panel who would visit our school in person in a month’s time. Just because they weren’t here anymore, though, didn’t mean that we could sit with our feet up.

Hunter sent Aaron a message about putting Huss, Ibby and my faces on terrorist-themed ‘Wanted’ posters.

‘He’s trying to get us to lose focus for our game this Friday,’ I said to the boys at training.

‘But he’s a dog,’ Ibby said, looking closely at his poster. ‘Like, as if my head’s that big?’

I finally had time to see Jamila. I had missed her over the holidays – we’d both been too busy with family and school stuff to catch up. I didn’t just want to meet at Wiley Park as we’d been doing. I wanted to do something special, so more roses and tulips and a trip to Brighton Beach was the plan.

‘I couldn’t make you fly, but I thought if we sit here on the sand and watch the aeroplanes taking off it’d be close enough?’

‘You didn’t have to,’ she said. ‘But thank you.’ She gave me a hug.

‘I did, though. I would’ve still been old Tariq if you hadn’t shown up,’ I said, watching her draw in the sand.

‘Old Tariq? What was he like?’

‘Old Tariq didn’t pay any attention to the way he spoke to people and couldn’t care less if he hurt their feelings. Old Tariq was a dog to girls, and lost control of his anger easily and never really knew his potential.’

She rested on my chest and looked up through her thick lashes. ‘And new Tariq?’

I thought about it for a while. ‘New Tariq is still learning.’

It was perfect.

She was perfect.

Nothing could ruin this moment.

Aaron: Bro, you need to come over right away. It’s an emergency.

I stared at the phone until the light of the screen burned my eyes.

‘I didn’t want to tell you the day before the game but Riley wouldn’t let me hide it,’ Aaron said when I got to his place. ‘I’m sorry, man.’

Riley’s hacker friend had traced some of the leaked videos to an IP address back at Canterbury Hospital. The same hospital Big Haji had spent so much of last term at. The dates and times matched up.

‘This doesn’t prove anything,’ I said, pacing Aaron’s room. ‘I know he had taken her in for check-ups, but still, there are hundreds of people in there. That’s not good enough evidence for me to believe that Huss would send videos out. He’s not a snitch.’

You know those times you argue just so you can convince yourself rather than anyone else in the room? I couldn’t let myself believe it. Believing it meant that the Huss I grew up with, who had my back, who was the first guy in fights defending me, betrayed me and every one of the boys at our school. Believing it meant that Huss would no longer be part of the Wolf Pack or our footy team. Huss would no longer be a part of my *life*.

I felt like the walls were closing in. Pieces of the puzzle began to fall in place: he was always filming things, always on his phone. Still, I couldn’t understand why he would do it.

Nothing made sense.

Why would he ruin our school’s chance of staying open? If he really wanted it shut down, then why would he show up to training, play the best footy of his life and do everything Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed told him to?

I felt lost. I knew if the boys back at school found out, he’d be gone. I couldn’t believe that in this moment I was thinking about ways to protect him. I knew there were things that the boys could tolerate and forgive, but betrayal was something people paid a heavy price for around here.

## Chapter 35

The air in my lungs was cold and dense as I ran onto the field for our semi-final against Team D. Huss's betrayal weighed heavy on my heart, and with no sleep at all, I was on the brink of a breakdown. I watched the boys joke and laugh before the game. They didn't know the pain I felt, right down to my core, knowing he had turned his back on all of us.

'Maybe he had a reason,' Aaron said. 'Just talk to him.'

'I can't.' I watched Huss move in and out of our team like a snake moves through the bush. 'There's nothing he could say or do that would justify selling us out, especially with our school just barely holding on.'

'If he's really your mate and you've grown up with each other, don't you owe him the chance to explain himself?'

'Owe him?' I repeated, baring my teeth. 'After everything we've gone through, you think I owe him?'

'Yeah,' he said baldly. 'Everybody deserves the right to explain themselves and Huss is no different.'

'Says the guy who treats his mum like crap.' I took a few breaths because I could feel the old Tariq seep through my veins. 'Aaron, do me a favour and stop pretending you care. We both know you're probably happy deep down.'

He stared at me for a while and I knew my words had hurt. 'You know what, you're upset, so I'm going to let that go, but if you come at me again, we're going to have a problem.'

I washed my face in the toilets and stared in the mirror. I could see the anger begin to filter through my face and as much as I tried to calm the fire in me, I couldn't.

Hunter walked in alone, then took a few steps back when he saw me.

'Say something,' I said, turning around. If my fire was going to burn anything, then Hunter would be the perfect target. 'Say something. Go on. Do it.' I pushed him against the wall. 'You're not so tough and strong now without your mates, huh? I've let you get away with everything the last

couple of weeks, but you watch and see what's coming. You're going to wish you never met me.'

'Let me go!' he shouted.

I glared at him a little longer before finally letting go and rejoining my team.

'Where have you been?' Huss said, putting his arm around me. 'Yallah, the game is going to start now.'

I moved his arm away and continued to walk. 'Make sure you don't miss any kicks today.'

The referee blew the whistle.

Team D's plays and runs were timed perfectly. They rolled us on our backs when we got tackled, making it harder for us to get up, as well as catching us off guard with quick taps and kicks.

8-0.

Lee's speed was of no use because he was running into a wall no matter how many times Aaron and I tried to create some space. Their kicks across field and their solid defence tested my patience when PJ and Ibby lost metres.

'Keep moving forward,' I called out. 'It's not bloody hard!'

'We're trying,' Ibby said, resting on his knees. 'But you're not talking and calling the plays.'

Huss ran up every so often to ask if everything was okay, but I ignored him.

'Just stay in your position,' I said. The more I kept my mouth closed, the safer it was for everyone.

14-6, half-time.

'Why are we not communicating, lads?' Mr Archie asked as he wrapped Lee's knees with bandages. 'I don't know what's going on with you, Tariq, but the lads need to hear your voice.'

PJ turned to me. 'Why are you so quiet?'

I drank water and stared blankly as Mr Ahmed and Mr Archie talked and talked but I wasn't hearing a thing. I stared at Huss from the corner of my eye until Aaron took me to the edge of the field, away from everyone else.

'I don't care how pissed off you are, get your shit together,' he said. 'Deal with Huss after this and focus on the game for your school's sake.'

'I can't stop thinking about it,' I said, holding my head.

‘We have twenty-five minutes,’ he said. ‘We can’t win this game without you.’

Jamila’s voice crept into my mind. *‘Jehad deserves to go to a school in his own community that he’s proud of.’*

‘If we can keep them pointless in the second half, we can win this game,’ I said at last.

‘That’s what I’m talking about,’ Aaron said. He called the boys over for one last huddle before the second-half whistle blew.

‘Stay on your man, hold on to your tackles, stay on side and most importantly stay in support of one another,’ I ordered. ‘You never know when we will find a break and the play opens up for us.’

The referee blew the whistle and we were back. Tackle after tackle, PJ and Ibby followed their marked players around like two hungry hippos, not giving them any room to move. Riley was quick out of dummy-half, catching the markers off guard and awarding us a couple of penalties. We were finally on the board.

We kept up the pace though they were close to scoring. Hit after hit, it seemed like time was against us, when Lee made a break and found Huss on the inside, scoring under the posts.

16–12.

Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed couldn’t contain their energy, rushing up and down the sidelines, yelling instructions at us. Team D made their first mistake of the game with a forward pass inside their own half.

Five minutes left.

‘Grubber early on in the tackle count,’ Huss said. ‘It’ll catch them off guard since they only want to defend.’

‘It’s not your job to call the plays,’ I said, turning back to Aaron to discuss what we were going to do.

‘I agree with Huss,’ Aaron said. ‘We need to attack and we need to do it now or else the game is gone.’

‘We don’t have to if you don’t want to,’ Huss said to me. ‘Whatever you choose I – ’

‘Since you and Aaron have it under control, go for it.’ I threw the ball to him and walked off to the wing.

My switch-up must’ve confused Team D, because no halfback would be far out on the wing unless they were going to expect the ball. They moved



their best defensive players over in my direction. Huss grubbered the ball and Aaron cut through to dive and score.

18–16.

The referee blew the whistle. ‘Congratulations, F Team. You’re through to the grand final.’

*[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)*

## Chapter 36

Google search: What does it mean to be captain?

*A person who is at the head of or in authority over others; chief; leader. The position of **captain** is given to those athletes whom the rest of the team respect and trust to lead the team in the right direction.*

Right direction? What was the right direction? Do I ignore the situation and pretend like it never happened or do I call him out and drop him this far into the competition? Huss was our goal kicker and our fullback who had been on fire the last couple of games, but the more I thought about it, the more I knew that I didn't want to play alongside a traitor.

We were one week out from the Grand Final against Hunter and his rotten team. They were the only undefeated team in the comp, and with the additional week given to us, we needed to prepare and train harder than ever before.

I tossed and turned all weekend and ignored the WhatsApp messages from the boys, especially from Huss.

Huss: Is everything alright?

Huss: Why aren't you answering my calls?

Huss: Want me to drop some food off?

Huss: If you're not doing anything, come past. Big Haji wants to see you.

Aaron: He keeps asking me if I know something. Just bloody talk to him.

My family were out at San Souci beach and I told them that I had some extra homework from Mr Archie that I needed to do before the final. I was flicking through the channels on the TV, trying to find something to get my mind off the situation, when Feda came home. She walked straight over and switched off the television and stood with her arms crossed.

‘Call him,’ she said. ‘I don’t care what it is or what happened, just do it.’

‘Trust me, even you would axe him.’

She sat next to me. ‘Aaron called me and told me everything.’

*How did he even get her number?*

‘And you still want me to talk to him?’

She shook her head like I was missing the point. ‘He deserves a chance to at least explain himself.’

‘What is there to explain? He leaked videos like the snitch he is and now everyone’s on my back like I’m the bad guy.’

I stormed out of the house. I didn’t want to share my burden with Jamila but I needed to see her.

We met at our usual spot by the ducks at Wiley Park. ‘What’s wrong?’ she asked me after I’d spent ten minutes glaring at the ducks.

‘Nothing. Just tired.’

She traced her finger down my cheek. ‘Tell me. You’re going to have to face it at some point.’

I closed my eyes and lay my head in her lap. She ran her hands through my hair like she was gently pulling the words out of my brain. I told her in detail about how all along the traitor was right under my nose and I didn’t even realise it.

‘I know you won’t like what I’m going to say, but Aaron and Feda are right,’ she said. ‘If you’re this hurt and in this much pain over Huss, then you owe it to yourself and your friendship with him to at least give him a chance to explain.’ She leaned her face closer to mine. ‘I mean, they even give murderers a chance to plead their case.’ I moved some hair away from her face. ‘Go and speak to him.’

I rang the doorbell a couple of times at Huss’s flat until he buzzed me in.

‘Hey, Tariq,’ someone called. Mr Gabbar, Huss’s African neighbour, rolled anything that could be smoked and was the first to tell you everyone’s business in the street. ‘If you need any people to take care of those men in suits, you just give Uncle Gabbar a call.’

Huss had sent me a few more texts wanting to ‘get something off his chest’. I figured he had spoken to Feda or Aaron and had decided now it was time to confess and face the music. I was walking heavily up the stairs

when Mariam and I crossed paths. She had an empty saucepan in her hand and was just as surprised to see me.

‘I was just getting mum’s pot back,’ she said, her eyes a little nervous. ‘Anyway, I have to go. See ya.’

I greeted Big Haji in her bedroom and kissed her hand. She looked feeble, her body had shrunk and she had grey spots on her face. ‘Salaam, Tayta.’

She lifted her head like she was about to kiss me, then pulled my ear instead. ‘Why you not see me, huh? You think I won’t smack you cos I have heart attack?’

I sat with her a little while and could hear Huss in the kitchen opening and closing cupboards. He eventually walked in with a small tub of medications, and, one pill at a time, he gently placed them in her mouth and held the cup of water to her face.

We waited in silence until Big Haji fell asleep, then sat in the living room.

‘You want a V?’ It was the first thing he’d said to me since I’d arrived.

‘No, thanks. I can’t be long.’

A lie. I had all the time in the world but the more I thought about the damage those videos caused, the less of my time I wanted to give him.

‘I know you’re angry with me,’ he began, rubbing his sweaty palms, staring at the ground. ‘But I can explain.’

‘Then explain,’ I insisted.

‘I didn’t know it was going to be this serious. I didn’t know it was going to lead to this.’

I sat up. ‘You serious? Is betrayal that easy for you?’

‘Tariq, I didn’t mean to hurt you. I thought you were over her,’ he said, finally looking at me. ‘She kept coming around to see Big Haji and because you and I were fighting a lot, I just sort of started to like her accidentally.’

I shook my head. ‘What? Over who? What are you talking about?’

His eyes now widened, like it was so obvious. ‘Mariam? We’ve been seeing each other, but if it makes you this angry, wallah, I’ll axe her now.’

I stared at him.

‘Isn’t that why you’ve been ignoring me?’ he asked.

I sank back into the couch. 'I know it was you that sent the videos to the news.'

He rubbed his face a few times. In that moment, I believed that my best mate Huss had betrayed me.

'After everything we've been through, after seeing us work like dogs to keep the school open, after seeing all the seniors, your brothers, stressed out because of their HSC, do you even feel bad?' The more I heard the words out loud, the more I felt the volcano in me about to erupt. 'You're off the team. And not that I owe you any favours, but I won't tell Mr Archie or Mr Ahmed. You will.'

I got up to leave but he stood in the doorway. 'Please, Tariq. Let me explain.'

'Move out of my way, Huss. I don't want to hear your bullshit.'

'For the sake of Big Haji, please don't kick me off the team,' he pleaded once more.

I grabbed him by the shirt. I wanted to make him feel the pain I felt. I knew I couldn't do it as me now but old Tariq was still alive somewhere. 'No wonder your dad walked out on you. Who would want a snitch as their son?'

I wanted him to fight back. I wanted him to yell and scream so I could release more of my anger towards him, but he didn't.

Instead he stared at me, his eyes big and empty and his body weak in my hands. He slid down against the wall and looked up at me like a lifeless doll.

'Please, Tariq. Don't do this to me. It's all I have now.'

'You did it to yourself,' I shot back at him.

And Huss, who never cried when he could throw a punch instead, began to sob.

I heard his cries echo in the stairwell as I walked out of the building. I had thought that if I released my anger and made sure Huss felt like crap, somehow, I'd feel better.

But I didn't.

## Chapter 37

I sat in Mr Archie's office and watched him answer phone call after phone call until finally, the noise stopped. It had been five days since I confronted Huss about the videos. He didn't show up to training on Tuesday and had told Mr Archie that he needed to stay with Big Haji. He obviously wasn't going to tell our principal that he was the guy who could have cost us the school.

Mr Archie sat back in his chair and looked up at a photo of Muhammad Ali. 'Do you know why he was the greatest?' he asked.

'Float like a butterfly. Sting like a bee. He was the best boxer.'

'His boxing skills were great, lad, but it was what he did off the field that made him unforgettable,' he said. 'The choices he made, made him a man of honour and respect. A man who refused to go to war because he believed that love conquered hate and that forgiveness was true happiness. His choices outside the ring made him a legend.'

I stared at Mr Archie for a while, unsure what a history lesson about the greatest boxer ever had to do with anything. 'I know you haven't slept in the last couple of weeks, sir, but you sure you're –'

'Did you kick Huss off the team?' he asked abruptly. He sat forward and his eyes caught mine.

My heart began to quicken. 'Sir, you don't understand. H-he did –' 'I know what he did,' he retorted. 'The question is why you thought it was okay to make that decision without giving Huss a chance to tell you his reasons.'

'I'm the captain!' I was sick of how everyone thought that Huss had the right to explain himself. 'It's my job to make sure that there are no traitors in the team.'

He then pressed a button on his phone. 'They can come in now.'

Mr Ahmed and Miss K walked in and waited for me to calm down.

'Is this some sort of intervention? Shouldn't Huss be here instead of me? He's the one that needs it!'

Miss K sat next to me and put her hand on my knee until it stopped bouncing. 'We all make mistakes, but as human beings it's your job to show compassion to your brothers, especially in a time of need.'

'Your BBL qualities to focus on this term were to make sure you were supportive and fair,' said Mr Ahmed. 'You were neither of them.'

*No matter how hard things get, you have to keep these two qualities in your mind,* I remembered him saying in our last BBL meeting.

I stood up and kicked the chair back. 'You knew!' It was obvious to me now that those qualities were strategically picked because they knew about Huss. I felt the room spin and wanted to shout at the top of my lungs, not understanding why everyone kept defending him.

Mr Archie picked up the chair and waited for me to sit. 'Huss came to me two weeks ago, after Big Haji had her heart attack. He cried in the very chair you're sitting in. If you had let him talk, you would've known that the videos were exchanged for money from the vulture media companies, exploiting a young boy and his need to get lifesaving medication for his grandma, medication he couldn't afford on his own.'

'You know the type of man his dad is,' Mr Ahmed said. 'Huss's father came a few weeks before Big Haji got sick and took whatever money the family had saved and left.'

'He needed help,' Miss K said. 'But he didn't want to feel embarrassed and ask for money. So he thought he should be the man of the house and go and find ways to get money.'

'He never meant to hurt anyone,' Mr Archie finished. 'We let him down as a school for not picking up on the fact that one of our boys was hurting.'

Their faces blurred and my chest tightened. 'Why didn't he come and tell me? He knew I would've done anything for him.'

'He didn't want you to think he was weak or that he was some charity case,' Miss K explained.

All I could hear now was the sound of his sobs when I had left him broken in his apartment. When I cut him so deep that he pleaded for forgiveness, pleading that the team was all he had and I had taken it away from him. When I told him that he was to blame for his piece-of-shit dad leaving.

'I didn't know,' I said, trying to keep it together. 'I didn't know!' I leaned over abruptly and vomited into Mr Archie's trashcan.

‘Ya Allah,’ I said, wiping my mouth, ‘how can I look him in the eye?’

Mr Archie stood up and opened the door. ‘Let’s go for a walk.’

We walked and walked for what felt like an eternity until we saw the boys waiting at Punchbowl Park for training. They stood huddled, and when they broke apart, they revealed Huss standing in the centre.

‘Go on, lad,’ Mr Archie said. ‘Go and make your peace.’

My legs felt heavy and I couldn’t take any more steps. The rest of the team walked over and put their arms around each other, leaving Huss and me in the middle of the huddle to talk it out.

A few tears fell down my face. ‘I left you when you needed me and there’s no excuse for what I did.’

I could hear the boys sniffing and wiping away their tears. I stared at the ground. ‘I’m sorry, boys. I let you down as captain but I swear to God,’ I looked Huss in the eye, ‘I’m going to do everything in my power to be worthy to be in this team and to be worthy of being your brother again.’

‘I never meant to hurt anyone,’ Huss said. ‘Wallah, if I could go back in time, I’d –’

‘Stop,’ I interrupted. ‘If anyone needs to go back in time, it’s me. You had a reason for why you did what you did. I didn’t.’

I turned to the rest of the boys. ‘I know I don’t deserve it, but will you still have me as captain in the grand final?’

Huss smiled. ‘You better be, cos we still have some unfinished business with Hunter and his team.’

As we gathered together in a group hug, I made a promise then and there that I would never ever let the old Tariq get between my brothers and me.



## Chapter 38

‘You nervous?’ Jamila asked me on grand final morning as we walked around the park, holding hands. She had woven pink streamers through her hair. ‘Go F Team!’

While Hunter and his team had the luxury of focusing only on the grand final, we still had the review for our school in a few weeks. There was still a lot to be done and we needed all the help we could get.

The last of the old chairs and tables were emptied from the school and the bars from windows had finally been removed. Our seniors stayed back, scrubbing and cleaning the walls, ready for new paint. The juniors went around and scraped chewing gum off the benches while the inbetweeners hosed down the bathrooms.

The photoshoot we had with Maxine early last term was printed on different-sized murals around our school. She had personally delivered them, which was a good chance for us to apologise for the way we treated her.

‘We’re actually not bad people, I promise,’ Ibby said, dressed in his apron. ‘But we sometimes say dumb things and we’re sorry for being disrespectful.’ He then gave her a small tray of Lebanese desserts he had made in our school kitchen.

There was something in the air now that made us feel a little more worthy, especially since so many people from our families and the community came and helped in whichever way they could. My dad talked to the boys, trying to give them advice about jobs, while Abdul and Saff helped unload some new computers into the library. New carpet was installed and the shelves started to fill with books that Feda and others had covered in plastic. Mum had brought over the Arab Orchestra to help her and the P&C with the school gardens. Uncle Charlie parked his ice-cream truck outside of the grounds and sold heaps of honey jars, donating the proceeds back to our school.

I laced up a pair of brand-new footy boots that had been left on my bed by Feda with the note, 'Good luck, you brat!' I ran a few laps to try to clear my mind and relax before the boys arrived. Jamila sat back on the little hill and waved her 'F Team' flag when I passed her.

Huss, PJ and Ibby arrived and got straight into running laps, each with their music in their ears. Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed came with Aaron and the Cronulla boys, and a couple of boxes. We stretched and warmed up with our usual drills followed by a run-through of the game plan we had against Team A.

'The best type of revenge is success,' Mr Archie reminded us. 'Put all your energy and focus into this game and not the nonsense off the field.'

Hunter's team stepped out of their gleaming coach, headphones and sunnies on, all carrying the same red Nike training bags like they were some professional team.

Mr Ahmed threw the ball at PJ's head. 'Concentrate.'

'Sir! You always do that when I'm not looking.'

'We have a surprise for you lads,' Mr Archie announced. They opened the boxes to reveal our new pink-and-white jerseys, with our own F TEAM logo, and matching black shorts.

We put on the new jerseys, ready for the team photo, as the crowd began to arrive. I knew Uncle Charlie was here because I heard the ice-cream truck music from down the street. I also knew my family was here, because the smell of kefta on a barbecue filled the air.

The boys from our school arrived in style, with big drums and Arabic music pumping. Some Sharks and Bulldogs players had come and headed straight over to the food. Mr Bennett from Cronulla came not only with the girls' rugby teams, but busloads of students, too.

Aaron's mum had come and sat next to my mum, even though her white friends had saved her a seat on the other side. It was a small gesture, but the smile on Aaron's face told me that it meant the world.

I could feel knots in my stomach as Hunter and his team stood only metres away, taking their official team photo. You could cut the tension with a knife as we waited to take ours, except Riley was missing.

'Where is he?' I asked, looking through the crowd. 'He was just here a minute ago.'

'He went to the toilet,' Huss said. 'He should be back by now.'

And then Riley walked out to a loud cheer.

‘No way, bro!’ Ibby pointed.

Riley, for the first time, wore no headgear, confident enough now to show his white hair. PJ picked him up and held him on his back, hollering and spinning him a few times until Riley’s face was as white as his hair.

‘He’s gonna vomit, ya hayawan,’ Ibby said, trying to help Riley down. ‘His hair will turn whiter.’

Matt stared at him. ‘Really, dude? Whiter?’

‘That’s like saying one day you’ll stop eating,’ Lee said, fixing his glasses. ‘Both things are impossible.’

With three minutes to kick-off, I took one last look at Jamila, who waved and smiled. It was weird seeing her only a few metres away from my mum, who I’m sure if she found out about us, would turn this place into my wedding venue.

Our photo had been taken and now both teams stood face to face, ready to shake hands. As we walked down the line, not only did the A Team barely shake our hands, they mumbled threats under their breath, trying to get under our skin.

We formed one last huddle with Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed before kick-off.

‘This is it, lads,’ Mr Archie said with his arm around Aaron and me. ‘I couldn’t care less if you win or lose, just go out there and do your best.’

We stared at him in disgust.

‘Really, sir?’ Ibby said. ‘*You* don’t care if we win or lose?’

Mr Archie rolled his eyes. ‘Okay, I’d prefer you to win but I’m serious. I’m so proud of how far you’ve come and the unbreakable brotherhood you’ve formed. You’ve exceeded all our expectations and have set the bar so high.’

‘You go out and show everyone how good you really are,’ Mr Ahmed shouted, geeing us up. ‘No matter how hard they try to break us down, we’re going to rise up each and every single time. Why? Cos we’re the F Team!’

We cheered and hollered, ready to rock and roll.

Mr Archie held out his hand. ‘Alright, lads, hands in, after three. One, two –’

‘The F Team,’ Lee shouted again.

‘No, it’s after three,’ Mr Archie explained.

‘Oh, sorry.’

Mr Archie tried again. ‘Okay. One, two –’

‘The F Team!’ Lee shouted.

Ibby threw the ball on the ground. ‘Ya Allah! AFTER three!’

PJ shook his head in disbelief. ‘A genius, but can’t count to three.’

Aaron and I nodded to each other, ready for the game of our lives. The referee blew the whistle and the crowd cheered as PJ ran hard towards their line. The booming impact made PJ lose the ball in the first thirty seconds.

*Well that was an anticlimax.*

Hunter high-fived his team mates. ‘That’s just a little taste of what you’re in for.’

They had the ball twenty metres out, but their first set play saw Hunter kick the ball dead because of our solid defence. They had a few more set plays and for a while it felt like all we were doing was defending, until Riley found some space. He ran down through the middle with Lee in support and once he passed the ball, we knew no one was going to catch Lee. I could hear the drums get louder as he got closer to the line and scored.

6–0.

We had a few more opportunities to score in the first half, but that was it. They never lost focus and came at us stronger than ever. PJ tried his hardest to control his anger but another dropped ball had him being called things like *butter fingers* or *coconut* by the other team, which only made him play worse. Aaron and I tried to calm him down as the ref warned Hunter’s team to keep it civil.

They produced one of their set plays that saw a kick hit the post and bounce back into play. Hunter picked it up and scored under the posts. He slammed the ball into the ground like he was King Kong.

‘Isn’t he too short to do that?’ Ibby said, trying to catch his breath. ‘Boys, we need to stick to our game plan,’ I reminded them as we waited for the other side to convert. ‘It doesn’t matter if we make mistakes, we need to forget about them.’

PJ’s back was towards me and no matter how much Aaron or the boys spoke to him, he was at the point where we needed to let him be.

6–6.

Hunter's team dominated the rest of the half and held onto most of the possession. Aaron and I were their main targets, attacking and rushing in when we needed to kick, which only put more pressure on us. Their repeat sets and offloads killed us and their fifth tackle options always saw them get the ball back. Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed shook their heads in disbelief. The crowd was quiet now. It wasn't like they were playing the best footy, it was just that we couldn't get ourselves to complete the sets without dropping the ball. Huss and Riley tried a few strategies, but they fell short of the try line. To make things worse, Hunter's team was awarded a penalty right on the half-time whistle.

14-6.

We sat on the bench, trying to catch our breath. Mr Archie talked us through the set plays while Mr Ahmed finally managed to get PJ to calm down. 'Make your family proud and remember that our school needs this more than anything else.'

They were playing some quick footy and it was hard to gain any momentum because of our unforced errors.

'Lads, it's only 14-6,' Mr Archie said, handing out some water. 'Get back to basics and hold onto the ball.'

Mr Ahmed looked at Aaron and me. 'I need more from both of you. You need to take control and do what you were doing in training.'

'It's hard,' Aaron said, shaking his head. 'We're trying, but the ball keeps getting dropped.'

PJ stood up. 'Boys, I'm sorry. I'm back now.'

'You sure?' I asked.

'Just watch me.'

Second half.

I knew what I needed to do. The wind picked up, with some light rain falling onto the oval as I kicked the ball high into the air. It swayed from side to side until Scott caught it for the A Team.

'Keep them up high,' Huss said, running beside me. 'The winds are getting stronger. They won't be able to catch them for much longer.'

Hunter's team ran hard and strong, wanting to score first. They gained some metres, but a heavy tackle by PJ saw them make their first mistake. PJ and Ibbby jumped in the air in celebration before breaking out into a little dance.

We broke out of the scrum and Aaron made a run across field. Riley, being first receiver, passed it to Huss who then passed it on the inside to Ibby. Huss broke their defence and managed to get an arm free, offloading the ball to Matt, who ran through the middle to score beside the posts.

Huss converted. 14–12.

We went back and forth with our defence, each team giving everything they had. The referee warned Hunter's team, threatening that a penalty would come our way if they didn't stay onside. And it didn't take long before we got one. I wanted to give the boys a break, so I called for Huss to take the two points.

14–14.

We were now even and time was ticking. The rain fell a little heavier and the winds were a little stronger but that didn't stop the drums from beating or our parents yelling out from the sidelines. Hunter and his team had the ball thirty metres out and looked dangerous. I called out to the boys, reminding them to mark their man. They pushed through our defence with their short balls and constant offloads until they got over the line, near the corner post.

They missed the kick. 18–14.

Mr Archie signalled to me the time we had left. If we were going to do something, we needed to do it now. I could see the boys felt tired and broken, knowing how hard we defended to still be down one try. Hunter and his team boasted as though they had already won, unaware of what was about to come. I knew if we continued with our set plays, we'd eventually get over the line.

And we did.

Aaron caught a high ball that I put up and scored, just inside the corner post. We heard his mum yell so loud that we actually stopped to see what was going on. All the pressure was on Huss to make the kick. He took a couple of breaths, looked up at the posts and stepped back, only to have the wind push the ball so it just missed the target.

18–18.

Golden point.

We were given a five-minute break before we had to head back. Hunter and his team argued while we organised ourselves. Through all the cheering and noise, one thing calmed my nerves.

The sight of Jamila.

She smiled with her hands close to her heart, clenching her fists. I stared at her until my heart beat normally again and my thoughts became clearer.

Mr Archie called for us with only two minutes left. 'Lads, I believe you can do this. You owe it to each other. You owe it to your brothers.'

The referee blew the whistle and we wasted no time tackling hard. Even though our muscles were sore and we had no energy left, we didn't let them gain many metres. On their fifth tackle, they kicked it high in the air, making it difficult for Huss to catch the ball. We all held our hearts in our mouths as the ball landed safely in his arms.

The crowd cheered.

All we had to do was hold onto the ball and gain as many metres as possible to have a decent attempt at a field goal. I knew if we wanted metres that Lee was the guy to do it. Riley passed the ball to PJ who barged through, freeing his hand and offloading to Lee who was in support. He made a break but not enough to get us in a good position for an easy field goal attempt. I knew that all of Hunter's team was going to rush forward when I had the ball since it was our last tackle.

Riley passed the ball to me. I stared up at the shaky posts. It was too risky. If the posts were shaking about, then there was no way the ball was going to keep its line. I turned to Aaron, who read my mind. While everyone thought I was going to kick for the posts, I dummied and chipped the ball over Hunter's head. It bounced just enough for Aaron to sprint through, pick up the ball and dive between the posts.

The crowd jumped in joy and drums beat until the ground shook.

Aaron ran and tackled me to the ground, celebrating our win against the A Team. The boys jumped in, as well as Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed. We cheered and rejoiced until the referee blew his whistle and made it official that we, the F Team, had won the grand final.

We turned to see Hunter's team lying on the ground, shattered they had lost. We walked over and shook their hands, even offering to help them up. Some accepted, some didn't, but at that point, we didn't care because we were the champions.

Elias and Johnny ran onto the field with their camera and recorded the celebrations. The Bulldogs players congratulated us and presented us with the trophy. Aaron and I held it up to a roar from the crowd. Dad waddled up

and hugged me, shouting to a bunch of media that I couldn't possibly be a terrorist if I was this good at footy. And if that wasn't emotional enough, Huss's mum had brought Big Haji, who waited by the trees in her new wheelchair. Huss ran up and fell to his knees, kissing her hands. We all huddled around him until she knocked him on the head with her stick, telling him to stop crying and be a man.

I wanted to hug Jamila but not with my family still around. I knew I'd see her later without the stress of the comp on my shoulders.

I celebrated with the boys and hugged Huss one more time. 'If I ever turn my back on you, do me a favour and punch me.'

'And if I ever sell you boys out again, do me a favour and knock me out, too.'

Aaron and the boys joined us for one last group huddle. The atmosphere was electric. I couldn't believe that it was finally over.

We were now more than a team, we were brothers.



## Chapter 39

One week later, it still felt like a dream. Everyone in Punchbowl was talking about the game like we were celebrities. Ibby had won \$245 on the bet he made at the beginning of the comp that we'd be crowned champions.

'Who's laughing now, ay?' he said, waving his money. He spent the money on a new mixer for the school kitchen.

And if I thought the surprises were done and dusted, boy, was I wrong. Aaron's mum invited everyone back to her house for a post-grand-final celebration lunch. Our families were all there together, and Mum helped her cook the food. Ibby was also in the kitchen, making dessert.

We sat, we ate, we laughed and then Aaron's mum called me over to the living room. She handed me a small black box.

'On my signal, give this to Aaron.'

I weighed the box in my hand. 'Is this...?'

'I had the car detailed,' she said with a wink.

She called everyone over and made Aaron stand with a blindfold.

'I know it's been a rough year for the both of us,' she said. 'But I want you to know how proud I am of you.'

'Thanks, Mum,' he said still unsure of what was going on.

She gave me the signal and took off his blindfold. I gave him the box that had his dad's collectible 250 GTO Ferrari keys.

'No way!' he shouted when the garage door opened.

'I couldn't do it,' she said wiping her tears.

They held each other until my dad gave another one of his *heaven is beneath your mum's feet* lecture.

We were up bright and early on the day of the dreaded final evaluation for our school. The men in suits had collected all the evidence they needed and it was now time to face reality. Even though everyone was still riding high from the grand final, we knew that this could all be taken away from us.

The seniors met with each of us and went through the plan and what was expected of each grade. Tattoos were covered and any weird hairstyles were gone.

We waited in lines until we saw Mr Archie usher in four women, holding clipboards, dressed in suits. Their heels click-clacked on the concrete as they walked through our lines, writing stuff on their clipboards. Mr Ahmed gave us The Look to signal that under no circumstance should he find out that we were taking secret polls on who was the hottest.

*No. 2 didn't look too bad...*

Mr Archie had asked me to be their tour guide, knowing that if a student showed them around and talked about the school, it would be more meaningful. We started in the science lab and for the first time the boys sat on the stools without throwing them out the window or using their slingshots.

PJ played his guitar with a few other band members in the music room, then we headed off to the legal studies room where we had taped Mr Bottol's back to the chair, since he always fell asleep. Next came Ibbby in the kitchen, demonstrating to some juniors how to roll vine leaves with rice. The women tasted a few but didn't give much away.

Huss and Miss K helped Mum and the P&C committee in the gardens while the seniors took turns patrolling the hallways, making sure shirts were tucked in, ties were knotted and pants were buckled. With all the positive attention the competition had brought, we now had 224 new enrolments.

We walked into the library where you could hear a pin drop. The inbetweeners used the computers appropriately – no games or illegal transactions – while Mr Cameron, our librarian, walked some students around the newly furnished bookshelves.

Our tour was almost over when we walked towards the main hall, where most of the boys in the school now waited. Mr Archie and Mr Ahmed had no idea that we were planning one last surprise for these women in suits.

We were sick and tired of telling people that we deserved to have a school of our own, so we decided to show them. Elias and Johnny had compiled all the videos they took over the last few weeks and made a mash-up of our school's transformation. Not only did the video present our journey as a school and the friendships we had, it also showed that the heart

and pride of our school were our teachers who never gave up on us, especially Mr Archie, Mr Ahmed and Miss K.

The women in suits smiled for the first time.

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## Chapter 40

*To Mr Thomas Archibald, students and community members of Punchbowl,*

*This letter is in regards to the recent visit of my colleagues and the proposed closure of your school. We understand that this term has been difficult for not only staff and students, but for all community members involved, and wish to advise you of the decision we have made. We have received many letters from parents and community members pledging their support and outlining how the school has helped shape their children's lives.*

*We have been informed in great detail of the changes your school has undertaken to help build a safer learning environment for all. One of the steps that has caught the attention of the wider community was the sports initiative. This has not only made a positive impact on the school's image, but it is clear to see from the video that has generated much interest online that these boys have developed a real and strong friendship between their two schools. The students involved showed great courage and resilience and we look forward to receiving any news and updates in the next phase of their Canterbury-Bankstown Bulldogs scholarship.*

*After careful consideration and deliberation, it is with great pleasure that I am able to announce that the school will remain open, with additional funding provided to its physical education and health programs.*

*I want to congratulate not only the students for their efforts, but also the staff for their commitment and determination in providing meaningful and life-changing learning experiences.*

*Warm regards,  
Shelly McField  
NSW Department of Education*

And that was that.

Mr Archie read the letter to us in assembly, which made us jump on our chairs and cheer until we lost our voices. At one point I saw Elias and

Johnny crowdsurf until they almost ended up out the window.

In all the madness and chaos, I had a moment to myself and saw what it meant to so many boys, especially our seniors who now had the opportunity to graduate from this place. Some cried, some fell to their knees and some ran up and down the aisle like they were free.

We were all finally free.

Oh wait.

You're probably wondering if we ever ended up getting Hunter back?

Well, we sent Uncle Charlie and his bees in the pink ice-cream truck to stalk him, handing out flyers about converting to Islam.

*These mozzies, they just won't go away!*

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# Acknowledgements

Thirteen.

That's the number of times this book was rejected and funnily enough that's the same number of family members living in my street. Yep, side by side and at every dinner. I came close many times to giving up on this story but my family pushed me to do it. That and because they have this crazy idea that I'm somehow going to be a millionaire and be the Muslim version of J.K. Rowling.

*Someone really needs to tell them how much authors get paid...* Before I thank and acknowledge the incredible people who helped me on this journey, I want to start off by saying Al Hamdulillah, Praise Be to God, who blessed me with parents, Mohamad and Raife, that are the backbone to my success. There aren't enough pages in the world that would suffice in letting them know how much I love them and how proud I am to be their Golden Child.

I've heard many daunting stories of debut authors and their experiences with their publishing team but I couldn't have asked for a more supportive and brilliant team than the one at Giramondo. Thanks to everyone who helped me, in particular Ivor and Nick, who went above and beyond and brought my story to life. I am forever grateful.

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There is more to my hometown Punchbowl, a place that is close to my heart, than the endless negative stories. It is here where I learnt the skills to face my fears and it is here where I built up the courage to fight for my voice, to fight for my story. To the men and women of Punchbowl, you inspire me everyday and I hope this book is one that you approve of.

And finally, this is for everyone with a red line under their name in Microsoft Word. Here's to our names being permanently *Added to Dictionary*. May our colourful backgrounds and identities no longer be *Ignored*.

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