

CHAPTER 1

Hopping off the bus early, I head down the street with an artificial spring in my step, armed with a determined smile. I run through a mental checklist hoping to nix the odds of a back-to-school-fail; brand new backpack, peng hijab, multicoloured flashcards, and a contractual obligation for zero PDFs (Public Displays of Foolishness).

Man, did September roll around fast. One minute, I'm enjoying the summer holidays – working morning shifts at the local cafe, spending evenings watching K-dramas curled up on the sofa with Mum – the next I'm faking enthusiasm for the first day of term at a brand-new school. Like who goes to a new school for the *final year of their GCSEs*? Even if it is the 'better' school on the 'better' side of town . . .

My phone buzzes and another message pops up from my best mate, Liam.

Where are you?

I begin to text back, not noticing the massive traffic cone right in front of me. 'Argh!' I cry, lunging to prevent myself from hitting the pavement. A couple of primary school kids laugh.

PDF Count: 1.

'Dua?'

Glancing round, I find lovely Liam beaming at me, mouse-brown curls fluttering in the September breeze, dressed in the royal blue and gold colours of Bodley High and proudly sporting

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the faint green paint stain on his sleeve from last year's art project. I sigh. It's finally happened: the growth spurt Liam's been talking about for years has turned him into a six-foot bean pole. I grin as we bump fists.

'You are so ready for the new year at *Minerva College*,' I say, hyping him up.

'And I've got these!' He jabs his thumbs at his hearing aids like cartoon arrows. 'State-of-the-art Bluetooth.'

'Nice! You're practically a cyborg,' I say with a wink.

'All thanks to Auntie Aisha. If she hadn't kept on with all them emails, they probably would've fobbed me off with an ear trumpet.'

'Mum's always doing the most,' I say with a slight eye-roll. I spot some friends across the street and give them a wave. The Year Eleven Bodley High exodus is real and, good or bad, there's no turning back. 'Once she's found a cause, she has to see it through.'

'Reminds me of someone else I know . . .' Liam says, nudging me.

I laugh. 'Dunno what you're chatting about, mate. Year Eleven Dua has zero plans to be up in other people's business.'

I don't mention the ban on PDFs, since that's already a lost cause.

'And be less bossy?'

'Did I say you could speak?' We both crack up.

Liam's eyes travel across the street. 'Look at them, watching us like we're savages.' Four Minerva students in pristine maroon blazers train their eyes on us briefly. 'What you looking at?' Liam barks.

I smack Liam in the chest. 'Leave off. They have every right to check us out. We are *invading* their school.'

'Not by choice,' he says, bitterly. 'Swear down, if they say anything—'

‘They will. You just better not say anything back.’ I signal a thank you to a bus driver who’s letting us cross. ‘So beyond all the snapchats you sent me, how was Blackpool?’

Liam’s face lights up. ‘It was the best! Nan showed us around her home town and we played Bridge, which is actually kind of cool when you get the hang of it.’

‘OK, Boomer.’ I laugh.

‘Honestly, it’s kind of fun! I took her for a walk down Blackpool pier to remember the good old days when Grandad was still around and everything. But every now and then, she’d get confused.’ He lapses into a glum silence. ‘There was this one moment when she looked at me funny . . . like she didn’t even recognize me.’

‘Man, I’m sorry.’ This has been worrying him all summer. His mum already struggles with caring for his nan’s dementia, so she might have to move her into a care home to cope. I’m praying it doesn’t happen any time soon or my guy is going to feel lost.

‘So, what did you get up to while I was away?’ he asks, changing the subject. ‘Let me guess: loads of basketball in your new Jordans?’

‘Super rare Kobes, actually. And no. Drills can get boring when you’ve got no one to play with.’

‘Hope you’re not trying to guilt-trip me into playing, cos I’m tired of having my skinny white arse handed to me.’

A smirk lifts my lips. ‘OK – so you know that online magazine: *This Uni Life*? Well, they ran a competition for an amateur writer to get an article published. And I entered . . .’ I purse my lips, feeling my cheeks tingle. ‘I submitted “A Newbie’s Guide to Surviving Your First Week at Uni”.’

He nearly chokes on his chewing gum. ‘But you’re fifteen! You literally know nothing about uni.’

‘As a proud member of Gen Z, I know how to harness the

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power of Google.’ I poke my temple. ‘I call it “intellectual appropriation”. Anyway – it worked! I won.’

‘Oh, my days, Dua! Congrats for beating legit uni students to the prize.’ He gives me a high five and then wiggles his brows. ‘What did you win?’

‘Annual cinema pass, fifty per cent off pizza voucher and . . . um . . . some useless crap,’ I mumble, waving a hand dismissively.

He looks at me expectantly. ‘Don’t hold out on me, fam.’

I blush, looking around to make sure no one is walking directly behind us. ‘You tell anyone about this, I’mma hunt you down. Understand?’

He nods solemnly and we slow down.

‘Three condoms’ – he gasps sarcastically – ‘which I *obviously* binned. Can you imagine if Mum found them? She’d think my PG-13 life is a lie.’ He barks out a laugh.

I take a deep breath. Minerva College is on the east side of town, built on top of a beautiful hill, which gives it a super dramatic look, but it’s a pretty intense trek. Next time we’re bussing it. With perfect timing, the large electronic gates swing open to let us in. Like the Minerva school blazer, they’re a regal shade of maroon.

The campus beyond is spacious and perfectly colour-coordinated, making Bodley’s clashing vibrancy seem like a messed-up Rubik’s cube. There are lush green spots everywhere and even a crystal-clear lake edged by a grassy verge. Large modern-art sculptures are dotted around, making the place feel more like a fancy park than a school.

‘Forget this!’ Liam panics, pulling a sharp one-eighty.

‘You’re a cyborg, remember?’ I insist, wheeling him over to our lot. ‘If anyone can survive this, you can.’

‘Swear down, if them posh teachers start talking shit, I’mma turn my hearing aids off!’

‘Morning, Miss Rowntree,’ I say brightly to my Bodley High chemistry teacher, as she loops her shoulder-length hair behind her protruding ears and ushers us into the hall. A crap teacher by anyone’s standards, she’s the type to take it personally if you ask questions. Without Mum, I’d be failing chem.

‘Hello, Huda,’ she answers robotically, pale eyes darting wildly. I hadn’t even considered it before, but I realize Bodley staff must also be nervous about coming onto Minerva turf.

‘Miss, her name’s *Dua*,’ Liam says, vexed. ‘That’s Huda.’ He points to a pretty Pakistani girl in a glamorous hijab with a glittering rose pin just ahead of us, who, at the sound of her name, turns towards us and blinks her false eyelashes with disdain.

‘That’s what I said, isn’t it?’ Miss Rowntree says sharply, flashing her eyes.

Bless Liam for taking offence on my behalf. Some people see the hijab before they see the person: it is what it is. I wonder if the Minerva teachers will be any more aware. Doubt it.

Minerva’s interior is just as impressive as the outside. Every wall is painted pale grey without a smudge or swear word in sight, and the trophy cabinet is fit to burst.

‘That shoulda been ours,’ Josiah says, pointing to the football cup. Our school team captain is back from the summer sporting a great twist fade and, like Liam, has grown about a foot.

‘Don’t touch!’ Miss Rowntree snipes. ‘They won’t appreciate your greasy fingerprints.’

Josiah narrows his eyes.

‘Allow it,’ I whisper. ‘She’s a cow, but don’t give her a reason.’ He considers this then smiles. ‘Thanks, man.’

The large medieval-looking doors of the hall creak open and we file in. The walls are decorated with stunning paintings in gilt frames, each with a little panel displaying the name of the artist. I gawp, realizing this is *student* work. They wouldn’t

look out of place at the Tate Modern.

We are directed to fill up the pews on the left. The almost hallowed silence combined with the stained-glass windows depicting religious scenes makes even the rowdiest kids behave. The Minerva students, who we Bodley kids have taken to calling the 'Blue Bloods', are already occupying the pews on the right. Some watch us, smiling with polite curiosity, while others avert their gaze. Just like the affluent east side of town, the majority of them are white. Are their home lives as perfect as their school appears?

'Crocodile smiles,' Liam whispers.

Soaring above the wooden stage at the front of the hall is a large plaque of the school's coat of arms with a shine that suggests a summer paint job. A tall, silver-haired man rises from his seat, maroon, black and gold academic robes fluttering as he strides over to the illuminated lectern with all the confidence of a monarch.

'Look at that fool!' Liam seethes. 'Thinks he's Dumbledore!'

I roll my eyes. 'Let's just hope he doesn't make us sing the Hogwarts school song cos my voice *will* shatter all that stained-glass.' A couple of Bodley kids chuckle and I smile, glad to have lightened the mood.

Our principal, Mr Aden, joins him at the lectern and I can't help feeling a little proud. He's a tall Somali guy with a neat little beard, dressed in an expensive-looking air force blue suit. Our dear Mr Aden: master of entertaining assemblies and psychedelic ties, and keeper of a mystical bottle of lollipops for when you're down in the dumps. In short: a legend.

'Good morning and welcome!' booms the beardless Dumbledore. 'I am Sir Reginald Unwin – proud headmaster of Minerva College. And this is Mr Aden, principal of Bodley High.' Mr Aden waves briefly as Sir Reg continues. 'As you are aware, Minerva has

formed a Learning Trust with Bodley, which we are very proud of, and we are delighted to welcome Bodley's Year Elevens to our site while building work is undertaken at their school. This arrangement will benefit both schools by enriching our shared experiences and hopefully raising attainment.'

I snort. Everyone knows it has nothing to do with results – it was rushed through to avoid austerity cuts.

Aden moves a little closer to the stand and speaks. 'In some cases, Bodley students will retain their existing teachers and class sets. In others, they will be mixed in with Minerva classes and share their teachers. And, wonderfully, our sports teams will now have the benefit of training on the same state-of-the-art grounds.'

A murmur of horror sweeps across the Bodley and Minerva students. 'They kept us out of the footie county championships with their dives. And now we'll be sharing a pitch? Disgusting,' Josiah mumbles to me.

'Bodley, you are going to show our partners how well-behaved and focused you can be,' Mr Aden instructs with firmness. 'Our hopes for glowing GCSE results rest on your capable shoulders.'

Sir Reg gives a short spiel about Minerva making us feel welcome and how good this will be for both schools. Just the look on Liam's face tells me he's not buying it. He sees Minerva as the enemy. It's easy to hate on entitled people who were born to win at life but as long as they don't treat us horribly, I'm going to keep an open mind. It's our last year, and I want to make the most of it. Mr Aden sits down at the back of the stage and Sir Reg moves onto Minerva news.

'At the end of last term, the Minerva rugby team participated in the Under Eighteens London Championship.' The Minerva kids lean just a fraction closer as the atmosphere shifts. 'And to tell you all about it, here is our captain: Hugo!'

Minerva goes *wild*.

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The blond boy who walks onto the stage is so tall that at first I think he's a teacher. Massive shoulders fill out his blazer but the fine cut of his tailoring hints at a slim waist. Glancing round, I see adoration on the Minerva kids' faces.

OK, we get it – he's peng.

Hugo describes his team's uphill battle to win the finals and it suddenly becomes clear why Minerva is so obsessed. Though his voice is deep and resonant, it crackles with energy, summoning the match before our eyes, taking us through every heart-racing tackle and try. I don't even know the guy but he has me reluctantly rooting for the win.

'So did we win?' he asks the entranced crowd. 'Does *this* answer your question?'

Suddenly the entire rugby team pour onto the stage, bringing the championship cup with them. Raucous applause, stamping feet and euphoric screams drag me along for the ride. Liam has to nudge me to bring me and my hands back to earth.

'Now,' Sir Reg says, his cheeks tinged with colour as he gestures for order while the rugby team leave the stage. 'You may be aware that our very own school newspaper, the *Minerva Chronicle*, won a prestigious award over the summer. Here to tell us more about it, and a very exciting opportunity, are Keira Walsingham and Renée Harris-Lords, editor and deputy.'

As if struck by a taser, I'm sitting ramrod straight. Liam looks over at me, aware that kismet is at play here. This is *it*.

'Good morning!' says an enthusiastic and entirely flawless blonde girl into the microphone, making everyone feel included with a friendly sweep of her eyes. Behind her, a slideshow begins, flashing up pictures of her news team receiving the Omega Young Journalists of the Year award at the Savoy in London. Her tone of voice and body language is on point, keeping us engaged. I start making mental notes.

Up on stage, Keira is cracking back-to-school jokes. *Hilarious!* Her expression shifts as she talks about this year being scary but seriously important. *Relatable.* Then she hands over to Renée, a stunning mixed-race girl, who gives us a brief visual history of the *Chronicle* via quirky pictures of student reporters from way back when the world was sepia-toned. *Enduring.*

‘This is why the *Minerva Chronicle* is so dear to our hearts,’ Renée says, folding delicate hands over her chest. ‘Winning awards and being part of that legacy is a humbling honour.’

Keira starts clapping and, taking our cue, we all join in.

‘Thank you, Renée,’ Keira says. ‘The *Minerva Chronicle* has flourished where sadly other school papers have disappeared, because we never shied away from maintaining the highest standards.’ She looks out into the hall. ‘That’s where you come in! We are hoping to welcome two new recruits to our dedicated news team. This position is open to both *Minerva* and *Bodley* students. Needless to say, it will look impressive on sixth-form applications.’

‘So how do you apply?’ Renée asks rhetorically. With a delicate flick of her wrist, the slide behind her reveals application details. ‘All you have to do is go to the *Chronicle* website and upload an original article. Something that shows off your awareness of current affairs and your voice.’

‘The deadline is this Friday,’ Keira adds.

‘That’s not enough time!’ I protest in a voice like a foghorn. A flurry of laughs surround me, and there are shocked faces from the right side of the hall. Aden shoots up in his seat, eyes scouring for the *Bodley* culprit. I sink lower, using the lower part of my scarf like a niqab to hide my identity. PDF Count: 2.

‘True,’ Keira says, unperturbed. ‘But the mark of a good journalist is producing excellent copy on short notice. Nobody wants to read old news.’

The rest of the assembly is a blur. All I can think about is getting on the *Chronicle*. That kind of pedigree would not only make me a shoo-in to do my A levels at Minerva, but it couldn't hurt when seeking a big break in the actual world of adult journalism.

I. Am. *Stoked*.

People start filing out of the hall. 'Bodley students, please stay behind for some housekeeping,' Aden announces at the lectern.

I watch Keira and Renée exit through the door on the far right. Rowntree has just clocked Huda's make-up and is threatening to send her home and Aden is organizing six students to hand stuff out.

'Cover for me!' I tell Liam, ignoring his protests as I dart across the hall after my future employers (fingers crossed).

'Excuse me, ladies!' I call out, catching up to Minerva's answer to the D'Amelio sisters.

Renée's beautiful olive-green eyes appraise me, lingering on my hijab, while Keira smiles with what I think is warmth. 'Yes?'

Suddenly at a loss for words. I blush, desperate not to blow up the PDF Count any further. 'Hey, so I'm Dua.' I give a little wave. 'I was super-impressed with your presentation and I'd really like to submit an article. But you didn't say what the cut-off point on Friday was. Friday evening would best, obvi—'

'It was on the slide, wasn't it?' Keira asks Renée, her brow arching.

'Pretty sure it wasn't,' I chime.

'Nope, it definitely was,' Renée states matter-of-factly before wagging a finger at me. 'Gotta improve your observational skills if you want to join the team.'

I feel my eyes water and audibly swallow. 'So if you could remind me, I'll have it ready for your perusal stat.'

'Friday midday,' Keira says. 'Good luck!' She turns, her ponytail swishing glamorously.

Renée continues to stare at me with a mixture of amusement and curiosity. Then, spinning on her heels, she executes a perfect flick of her silky burgundy tresses before joining Keira in a synchronized strut.

You don't like me, I think. But that's only because you don't know what I can do.