

SERENA PATEL



GAME OVER!

Illustrated by Louise Forshaw

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Louise Forshaw

*For Jayden – keep being your amazing,
one-of-a-kind self*

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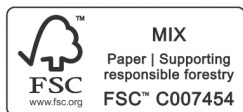
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CHAPTER 1

Trying Not to Be a Loser

It's the start of another week at the worst school in the world. When I say this to my mum at breakfast on Monday morning, she laughs and says, "It can't be *that* bad, Jay."

But she doesn't know what it's like. She doesn't have to go to my school.

I think there should be a rule that for one week a year, grown-ups have to go back to school and kids get to chill out and "work from home". When grown-ups work from home, all they seem to do is scroll on their phones

and forget to take themselves off mute on video calls. That's how my mum works from home. If the grown-ups went back to school for a week, maybe they'd remember how awful school can be.

"It is *that* bad, Mum," I reply with my mouth full of cereal, which sprays all over the table when I talk. "The teachers are mean; the lessons are boring. Why do we even have to go to school?"



“To learn things,” Mum replies, and has a sip from her mug of tea.

“Learn what? When am I ever going to use fractions and fronted adverbials in real life? I bet you don’t.”

Mum frowns. “Well, no, but it’s all useful, and learning is a life skill.”

“But it’s boring!” I argue.

“You don’t mean that, Jay,” Mum says to me. She smiles. “What about that great History project you did last term. You enjoyed that, didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t,” I moan. “I didn’t enjoy it at all! Who cares about stuff that happened like a million years ago anyway?”

“History can teach us a lot, sweetheart. I loved History when I was at school,” Mum says.

I sigh. "I'm not you, Mum; I'm Jay! Plus, my school's not like yours was."

"All right, well, what do you like?" Mum asks. "Maybe there's something else you enjoy? What about PE?"

I shrug. "I don't see the point of PE. I'm not good at it."

"Team games can be fun, right? Football with your friends, bench ball, cricket?" Mum asks.

"No, I'm rubbish at them all. I always run too soon or too late, I'm never in the right place and I'm not good at catching or throwing," I say sadly. "The only good thing about school right now is that I get to hang out with my friends."

Mum reaches out and holds my hand. "That's OK, beta. You just haven't found your thing yet."

I pull my hand back. It's embarrassing Mum using the Gujarati word for son. It sounds so babyish. I get up. "Thanks, Mum. I'd better go. Don't want to be late for the worst school ever!"

"Don't call it that!" Mum yells. "Go safe, tie your shoelaces, look both ways when you cross, don't talk to strangers and don't forget to take your lunch!" She shouts the same instructions at me every morning.

"Yes, Mum," I shout back as I grab my backpack, run out of the front door and let it slam shut behind me.

*

First lesson is Computing. It's actually the one lesson I don't dread. It would be more fun if they'd let us use the internet and our teacher, Mr Chan, wasn't watching us all the time. But I like learning about how stuff works, and coding is pretty cool.

My friends just mess about in the lesson. They'd rather be doing PE, but I'm happy. Computing is all right as far as lessons go.

Today, Mr Chan is a bit jumpy and looks excited. He starts talking before we've even sat down. "Right, Year Seven, we have the most fantastic opportunity coming up, and I hope you'll all take part!"

"Are we getting a trip to Boogle?" someone shouts out.

Mr Chan groans. "Yes, Simeon, we're all flying to America to visit the offices of the top search engine in the world," he says.

"Really, sir?" someone else asks.

Mr Chan snaps, "No, not really. Don't be ridiculous! Think how much that would cost! The actual opportunity we have is more, umm, local and it's being sponsored by some computing businesses here in our town."

My best friend Noah whispers, “Get on with it already!”

Luckily, Mr Chan doesn’t hear him and keeps on talking.

“Who here has a PC at home?” he asks us.

Some people raise their hands.

Oscar Robinson shouts out, “Most of us use games consoles, sir. You know, like PlayStations and Nintendos. PCs are for nerds and people who work in boring offices.” He laughs at his own joke but then stops as Mr Chan glares at him.

“We can talk about that in detention if you shout out in my class again,” he warns, and Oscar shuts up.

Mr Chan straightens his tie and carries on talking. “So, as I was saying, we have a fantastic opportunity to give some of you the



chance to design and build your own computer game! Some great people at a local computing firm have even said they'll come in and help, and at the end of next month we'll show off our work at the Computer Science Exhibition at the Indoor Arena! How exciting is that?"

I look around. It does sound kind of interesting to me, but after Oscar's comment, I wait to see how everyone else reacts. I've got these things wrong before; it's best to do the same as my friends.

Noah looks bored, and so do most of the class except Mae. Mae doesn't care what anyone thinks and pretty much does her own thing. She shoots her hand in the air and starts asking Mr Chan a million questions about the project. *Thanks, Mae*, I think because she asks all the things I'd want to know.

It turns out that if you want to be involved, you have to do the work after school. The Computing Club will be on Mondays,

Wednesdays and Thursdays after the last bell goes.

There are a few groans then. No one likes staying after school. It feels like a punishment to have to stay in the building even a few minutes after three o'clock. Noah nudges me and whispers, "Why would anyone choose to stay here longer than they have to?"

I carry on listening because the more I hear about the game-design project, the more I'm interested. But I try not to show it, obviously.

Once Mr Chan has answered Mae's questions, he asks if anyone thinks they might be keen to take part. Only Mae and one other kid put their hands up. I want to put mine up, but I don't. Noah's not looking because Muhammed is pulling faces at him. Our other friends Krish and Rex are across from us, and they look bored – totally not interested. I think that I'd better not put my hand up – I don't want to stand out and look like a loser.

So Mr Chan makes a list and then tells us we have to work quietly on our computers for the rest of the lesson. I'm happy with that. It gives me time to think, and I find the basic programming task he gives us really easy. It sort of calms me down.

After a while, Mr Chan comes round to see how we're doing, and when he looks over my shoulder, he gives a low whistle.

"Nice work, Jay. You're showing some talent there. You should definitely think about joining Computing Club and taking part in the game-design project."

Mae is sitting at the computer across from me and smiles. "You totally should, Jay. It sounds really fun, right?"

My face goes a bit hot, and I nod but then see that Noah's staring at me. He leans over when Mr Chan has walked away and snorts,

“Yeah, OK, who wants to be a computer nerd, right?”

I laugh back, and Mae goes back to what she’s doing. I hate that I laughed back, but what else can I do?

Part of me feels proud that Mr Chan thinks I have talent. And the game-design project doesn’t sound nerdy to me, but all my friends will laugh at me if I take part. I wish I could be like Mae and not care what anyone thinks.

I look over at Krish and Rex, and they’re messing about again, not doing their work. Muhammed is doodling on his hand. None of my friends like Computing. Give them a controller and that football game we all play, and they’d love it. But actual Computing – learning about how things work, putting the pieces together and making something clever – they’re not interested in that.

But I am. It's a bit scary, but I really want to find a way to be part of the project but not look like a total loser.