

Boy, Everywhere

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Chapter 1

It all started going wrong during English. It was the last lesson on Thursday before the weekend began, we'd just finished reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Miss Majida stood at the whiteboard going through some comprehension questions. I was scribbling them down, my head resting on my arm, when Leila tapped me on my shoulder from behind and handed me a note.

Are you coming ice-skating tomorrow?

I'd started writing back when the door flew open and Mr Abdo, our principal, burst into the room.

I shot up from my desk the second he entered and straightened my shoulders. Everyone's eyes were fixed on Mr Abdo, their faces blank.

'Pack your bags. You're all to go home,' he said, rubbing the creases on his tired, worn face. 'See you back here on Sunday morning.'

We didn't need telling twice. Everyone slapped their books shut and the room erupted into noisy chatter. My best friend Joseph turned to me and our eyes locked in confusion.

'Your parents and guardians have been called and are on their way to collect you,' Mr Abdo added, loosening the knot in his tie, his lips thin and tight, lines deepening across his brow.

'But why, Sir?' asked someone from the back of the class.

'There's been a bombing. This is not a drill, eighth grade. We need to get you all home. You know the protocol.'

A collective gasp rose from the room.

Through the sash windows, the sky was a clear blue. I couldn't see any smoke. Everything looked normal. The old orange tree stood firm in the sunlit courtyard, the gold crescent moon on top of the mosque's minaret gleamed in the distance. Behind it the red, white and black-striped flag on top of the church tower fluttered gently in the breeze, cars were hooting their horns and the newspaper seller was still shouting out to people passing by his stall.

Where had the bomb gone off? Panic prickled through me as I thought of home. I wished phones were allowed in school so I could just call to see if Mama, Baba and Sara were okay. I grabbed my bag to get my iPad, but remembered it wasn't in there. 'Joseph, get your tablet out,' I said. 'Just want to check what's happened – I left my iPad at home.'

'They won't have bombed anywhere near us, Sami. Don't worry,' said Joseph, pulling his tablet out of his bag and swiping to log in. 'What shall I type?' he asked, leaning in towards me.

'Google "bombing in Damascus".'

After a second, he pursed his lips and said, 'Nothing's coming up.' He showed me the error message – the internet was down for the second time that day.

My shoulders tensed. I quickly reminded myself that it was usually the outskirts of the city that were bombed. Most of Syria was torn apart because of the war, but no one had gotten close to Damascus.

'Your mama and baba are at work, right?' Joseph asked, his eyes focused on my forehead. I realised I was sweating and wiped the back of my arm across my face.

'Yeah, Baba's at the hospital but Mama worked from home today because Sara wasn't feeling well. They *should*

be at the mall now,' I said, glancing at my Swatch. 'She's picking up my football boots before the trials.'

'Well, no one's ever bombed the centre. The government's always on high alert. Just chill, bro,' said Joseph, lightly pushing his fist into my shoulder before turning to put his tablet away.

He was right. But every time there was a bomb alert, I couldn't help worrying. *Damascus is safe*, I told myself. I took a deep breath, gathered my books, and packed them into my bag while Mr Abdo spoke to Miss Majida. She had her hand over her mouth and looked like she was about to burst into tears.

A backpack pushed past my arm, followed by another – everyone was leaving.

'They're doing you a favour, Sami. You weren't gonna pass the English test later anyway.' I turned to find George grinning at me, then pushing Joseph. 'Neither were you, sucker.'

Even at a time like this, George couldn't help being an idiot. Maybe it was his way of showing he wasn't nervous like me, but it was so annoying.

'You're the one that's gonna fail, loser,' said Joseph, sticking his face into George's.

George sneered at Joseph. 'Shut up! You're so fat, the only English letters you know are K, F, C.' He turned to me, raising his eyebrows and running his hands through his hair.

So *dumb*, I thought. George still hadn't gotten over Joseph coming from a non-English-speaking school.

The class babble and sound of scraping chairs made it hard to think of a quick response, but I had to stick up for Joseph, whose cheeks were now the colour of tomatoes.

I rolled my eyes at George. ‘We’ll see. *K*, *F* and *C* are still three more letters than you know. Did you stay up all week thinking of that one?’ His grin grew, so I added, ‘Should I use *smaller* words to make sure you understand what I’m saying?’ It wasn’t the greatest comeback but I couldn’t think of anything else.

George’s mini fan club, which consisted of exactly two friends, tugged him away.

‘Loser,’ I muttered as they left.

Joseph and I joined the stream of kids leaving the classroom. Mr Abdo was now speaking to Miss Majida at the door, but she stopped talking the second I drifted towards it.

Joseph clutched his backpack, his head lowered. He was unusually quiet. Ugh. George had gotten to him again.

‘You want to go to Damer’s for ice cream after the trials?’ I asked to cheer him up.

‘Yeah, of course, man!’ Joseph said, his eyes sparkling with excitement. ‘Then we can go again tomorrow after ice-skating.’ He grinned.

Mr Abdo marched past us. ‘Hang on,’ I said to Joseph and ran to catch up with him.

‘Um, Sir, we’re supposed to be going to football after school. Where should we wait?’ I asked, wondering if Mama had collected my football boots.

He picked up his pace and strode into the classroom next door to ours and started talking to the teacher inside. I shrugged at Joseph as he caught up with me.

We rushed down the central stairway of the school behind the swarm of students and flowed into the large reception area, where our physics teacher, Miss Maria, was

ushering everyone out of the side exit. I slowed down as I spotted Joseph's dad in a smart dark-grey suit, sitting on the deep-buttoned green leather sofa with his head in his hands. No one else's parents were inside, which was odd. The dark wood-panelled walls where the president's portrait hung made him look even gloomier.

'Baba?' said Joseph. His dad looked up.

'Ah, Sami, come here.' Joseph's dad stood up and reached out to hug me first. *Weird*. I went to him, feeling awkward, and as he embraced me tightly my heart began to race.

He pressed my head against his shoulder and ruffled my hair, then released me and grabbed Joseph. I stepped back, feeling woozy from inhaling his strong aftershave.

'Right, let's get you both home,' he said in Arabic, turning from Joseph.

'But what about the football trials?' I asked. 'Our driver is bringing my boots. I have to wait for him!'

'Your baba asked me to pick you up. It's not safe to be out today.'

'But Baba!' Joseph interrupted. 'We were gonna get on the team today! This is so unfair!'

'Joseph, I already told you, it's not safe to be at the stadium.'

Joseph tutted, shoved the carved wooden door open, and walked out.

'Thank you! I'll keep you updated,' Joseph's dad shouted at the school receptionist as he followed Joseph out. I ran after him, my stomach lurching. Baba wouldn't send Joseph's dad to pick me up unless it was serious. Maybe the bombing was really bad. Baba would know because of the

number of casualties coming in at the hospital.

The street outside school was a tangle of gridlocked cars and beeping horns. Cars were double parked across the sidewalk, leaving hardly any room to walk between them. The newspaper seller pushed papers and magazines into our sides as we walked past his stall, desperately trying to get them sold while the street was jammed with people. We all got into Joseph's dad's Honda CR-V and I pulled the seat belt over me slowly, looking out at all the parents frowning in their cars. Joseph glanced at me and then pulled out his tablet.

'Can't believe they dropped a bomb today of all days... I've been waiting ages for this,' he muttered under his breath.

'I know...' I said. 'I bet Avraham's on his way with my boots as well. He's probably stuck in all the traffic now.'

'What did you end up ordering?' he asked, pressing *Play* on a game.

'Can't get the Nike Magistas in Damascus. So I got the Adidas Predators.'

'Oooh, nice.' He looked out of the window and then said, 'Thanks for sticking up for me with George.' His cheeks were flushed again.

'No worries. I'd never leave you to face that thug alone.'

George and his stupid gang had bullied Joseph ever since we started middle school. They thought they could do or say anything they wanted because they were *ulad masooleen* – kids of government officials. I'd never seen Joseph look so sad or alone as that first week of middle school, and I never wanted him to feel that way again. I'd always be there for him. It had always been Sami and Joseph. And it would be for ever.

‘Ignore him,’ I said. ‘He’s just jealous of your skills – still hasn’t gotten over last semester when you scored that penalty.’

Joseph smiled. ‘Yeah, that was awesome. Do you think they’ll rearrange the trials to next week now?’

‘Yeah, probably.’

As Joseph went back to his game, I stared out the window, checking out everyone’s cars. Leila’s mama was in her grey Lexus RX, but I couldn’t see Leila through the tinted glass. *Oh man*. I realised I’d totally forgotten to reply to her note after Mr Abdo walked in. I hoped I hadn’t upset her. I’d message when I got home and tell her me and Joseph would be at the ice rink at 3 p.m. tomorrow.

It took twenty minutes to get out of the school street behind all the other cars, but when we got moving I could see the high-rise buildings were still intact, the roads were clear, traffic only building up near the checkpoints. There were a few fluffy clouds scattered in the sky. Something circled the blue far away, probably a helicopter. I still couldn’t see any smoke in the air. *They probably bombed the outskirts of the city*, I reassured myself again.

On the way to Joseph’s neighbourhood, a crowd of people were gathered outside a big villa, the men in smart suits and the women in dresses, some wearing headscarves. But I was more interested in the cars they were standing next to – a black Bentley and a white Rolls-Royce parked on the road. Both Joseph and I sat up to get a better look, our mouths open, practically drooling.

‘Whoa. What do you think they’re here for?’ I asked Joseph.

‘Probably a wedding... or a funeral,’ he said, showing

me his game score and smirking. 'I beat you, right?'

'Hey! Give me that,' I said, grabbing his tablet and pressing *Play*. We'd been doing this for weeks.

Joseph's dad parked outside their apartment building. As the car stopped on the smooth black tarmac, we heard what must've been gunshots in the distance. I always thought it sounded like rain hitting a tin roof. But it wasn't raining. We jumped out, sheltered our heads with our arms and ran through their black front gates. We raced straight up to Joseph's bedroom, throwing our bags down next to some dried orange peel he hadn't bothered throwing away.

I sat on the end of his bed while Joseph switched on his PlayStation and small flat screen TV. 'May as well play *FIFA* if we can't play the real thing, eh?' he said, his chin jutting out because of his grumpy face.

'Yeah, may as well,' I said, wishing the trials hadn't been cancelled and that we were showing off the skills we'd been practising in the stadium instead.

There was a small knock on the door and it opened. 'Hi, you two. Do you want anything to eat?' asked Joseph's mama.

'Nah,' said Joseph, still facing the TV screen, waiting for the game to load.

'How about you, Sami?'

'No thanks, Aunty, but can I have a drink, please?'

Joseph's mama smiled. 'Sure. What would you like? Coke?'

'Yes, thanks. Shall I call my mama to get Avraham to pick me up? He's probably waiting for me at school.'

'No!' she said quickly, in a strange high-pitched voice. 'Your baba wants you to stay for dinner. Stay there – I'll be

right back with that Coke!’ She pulled the door tight and left.

I bit my lip and frowned. Even Aunty was acting weird. I grabbed the remote from Joseph’s hands and put it on TV mode.

‘Hey! What you doing?’ shouted Joseph.

‘Shhh, I just wanna check the news. See why Baba got us picked up. Don’t you wanna know?’

‘Not really. All they’ll show is more dead people.’

‘Oh, come on, it’ll only take a minute.’

‘Go on then,’ said Joseph.

I flicked through the channels one by one. Kids’ cartoons, music, documentaries, news channel. My head started spinning as I read the headline flashing in red at the bottom of the screen.

DAMASCUS: CHAM CITY CENTER MALL REBEL TERRORIST BOMB ATTACK

I sat staring at the image on the screen. The once-shiny glass building was now partly rubble. The glass half of the mall was a broken grey shell and the concrete half was just barely standing. There were no windows or doors left in any of it and people in high-vis jackets rushed through the smoke, debris, and rows of police cars and ambulances. I watched but couldn’t move. My ears throbbed. I could see Joseph’s arms waving around next to me. Everything had slowed down, the noise from the TV and Joseph’s words muffled. I tried to say something, but nothing came out.

The mall had been bombed. Mama and Sara were there. Buying *my* football boots.