Chapter 1

'Gah, this skirt is the *worst*,' Layla muttered to herself as she studied the mirror on the back of her wooden bedroom door. Biting her lip, she tucked the cream shirt into her maroon skirt, untucked it, then tucked it back in again, weighing up which option was less ridiculous. OMG! Nothing was working. How was she supposed to make any friends at this new school when the uniform made her look like a nun? Layla squinted at her reflection, her bushy black eyebrows furrowing together. She wasn't even like one of those dope singing nuns from that movie *Sister Act 2*. No, in this uniform she looked like a mean old lady who'd

realized marrying God meant there was nobody around to help do the dishes.

'*Oh, happy day . . .*' Layla started humming, distracting herself with the thought of the famous gospel tune. The thirteen-year-old loved singing, even though her older brother, Ozzie, always said she sounded like a choking chimpanzee. *He doesn't appreciate my talent!* Layla giggled to herself.

Deciding to go with the shirt tucked in, she turned her attention to the next challenge: her headscarf. It was a shiny polyester maroon piece, made to match the burgundy skirt of the school uniform. The sheer polyester was lined with a slightly darker ribbon, giving it a formal look. Layla styled it in the traditional Sudanese way: the rectangle scarf wrapped round her head, covering her braids, ears and neck and leaving her face neatly framed by a smooth oval. The scarf was secured in place using a couple of maroon pins, newly and brightly bejewelled. Layla loved jewellery-making and she had been undeniably the best bejeweller in her class last year, but that was at her old school. She wondered what the kids she would

meet on her first day of Year 8 would think of her work with scarf pins.

Feeling good about the situation, Layla stepped back to suss out her handiwork in the reflection.

Hmm. Not quite!

She scowled. Despite what she thought was foolproof wrapping, a couple of tight black curls had escaped from underneath the scarf, ruining the whole formal-and-neat vibe. Tugging, Layla tried to adjust the hijab, but the silky material slipped back over her braids, exposing her entire hairline. Her afro hair was rarely ever well behaved, and today was no exception.

OMG! HAIR! C'mon! Today is an important day! She mentally scolded the rebellious curls. *Stay put and behave, hey?* Talking to her hair always worked. Layla pulled the scarf forward to cover her hairline again. Patting her head, then brushing her hands down the front of her shirt, Layla smiled inwardly. *You got this!* she told herself, and almost completely believed it.

'Layla! Where are you? We are going to be late!' Baba yelled at her from downstairs. Judging by the clattering, her dad was in the kitchen cleaning up

after breakfast. Layla hoped he'd packed something delicious for her lunch. She was going to need all the energy she could get. Today was special because it was the first day of school after the summer break. *Deep breath*, Layla told herself in the voice of an aerobics instructor. *Breathe in and out. In and out. You got this, gurl!* She was nervous because today wasn't just *any* first day of school. It was the first day of her *new school*. And that wasn't the only reason her knees were quivering under her pleated maroon skirt. Layla was starting at a fancy new school on the other side of town, where she didn't know a single soul.

Chapter 2

Layla had loved primary school. At the Islamic School of Brisbane – or ISB for short – everyone knew everyone else. It was family, and Layla had known she belonged. The students were from all over the world: India, Fiji, Nigeria, Pakistan (like her best friend, Dina), Lebanon, Jordan, Algeria, Malaysia and South Africa, just to name a few. So Layla, being from Sudan, was not strange at all. And even better – because most families at the school were recent migrants, their parents became friends and the families hung out together *all the time*. Layla would see Dina at school, again at the grocery store after school and then again at mosque in the evening. Sometimes, to top it all off,

they'd visit each other's house at the weekend, their parents talking about politics over a barbeque while the two of them were playing with Dina's pet guinea pigs. Dina would be going back to ISB this year, like almost everyone else in class. Layla was the only one leaving for another school, taking on this challenge all by herself.

See, ISB had been great, but Layla wanted something more. She wanted to be a full-on adventurer, travelling the world, exploring new horizons, bejewelling wherever she went. She might be able to help people too: Layla was a pretty good problem-solver, and loved getting involved in sorting out tricky challenges. Whatever it was, she knew that there was a big, wide world out there that she wanted to discover. She would do anything she could to get herself there.

Being a community school, ISB didn't have a lot of money. Students didn't get the chance to travel, try exotic things and have different adventures, but some kids at other schools did. Layla hadn't known this, living in ignorant bliss, until one fateful afternoon last summer.

It had been a Tuesday like many others, the sky clear and crisp in the hours before sunset. Layla and her younger twin brothers went to the neighbourhood park almost every afternoon to play. They usually started on the court, the loud smack of the rubber basketball ringing out against the concrete. Once the twins got tired of being beaten by their elder sister, they tended to run off on to the swings and Layla would take to the trees. Layla loved climbing. She did it every chance she got and would often disappear up trees whenever the family went out to a park at the weekends. Something about looking up at an enormous eucalyptus or paperbark tree and figuring out the best route to the top gave her a sense of achievement like no other. The closest she got was when she nailed a bejewelling project, but even then . . . Climbing trees was like a *proper* adventure. That Tuesday, Layla had tackled the biggest tree in the park: the avocado tree. It was the neighbourhood's pride and joy, and one of the toughest climbing assignments she'd given herself yet. Its branches sprawled across the sky, thick and heavy with the weight of dark green leaves

and fruit just starting to ripen. Up Layla went, puffing and determined, her hands gripping the smooth brown trunk as she ascended.

Straddling one of the thickest branches about halfway up, she stumbled across another person with a climbing habit: Adam. Adam was white, much taller and lankier than her, with chocolate brown hair and dirty fingernails. He wore a baggy black Stussy top, and his Nike shoes were so shiny and new Layla swore she could see her own reflection in the white leather. He didn't seem to mind her tattered Kmart sneakers though.

The two became fast friends that afternoon, a sweet, light-filled friendship that lasted all summer. They would chat and play for hours, legs swinging when they sat on their favourite branch of the avocado tree. As night fell, the orchestral singing of the lorikeets cloaked the tree and their silhouettes in a soft, silky darkness. They yakked about school, music, sports, places they'd been and where they wanted to go.

Layla told Adam about one time when they went back to Sudan and the family home was hit by a

sandstorm. 'It's like this huuuuuuge cloud of dustiness just rolls over your house, you know?' she said, her arms flailing as she badly attempted to mimic the billowing sand. 'It gets EVERYWHERE. In your nose, mouth, in the air vents in the car, inside of your wardrobe . . . you end up eating sandy dust with your meals for the next week!'

Adam laughed at the idea of eating sand for breakfast. As a comfortable silence settled upon them, he looked up at the sky. 'Laylz, it's getting late. Race you to the bottom?'

'You know I beat you every time, boy!' Layla retorted, her ratty shoes scrambling across the branch, starting the race before Adam had time to finish his sentence. Layla always won, whether it was up the tree, down the tree, across the road to the shops, or just a sprint round the park.

Adam said that he had never met anyone like Layla before; and it wasn't even because she was Muslim, with a scarf and from the Sahara Desert. No, Layla just had this way of telling stories and seeing the world. She was always asking questions, wondering

why. Everything was dramatic through Layla's eyes, and Adam loved it. He inhaled stories about her enormous extended family: her gazillion cousins, eccentric aunties and the hilarious conversations she had with her grandmother on the phone every week, conducted at full volume.

'Why is she always yelling at you down the phone?' Adam asked one day, his curiosity getting the better of him. 'Doesn't she know you can use the volume button?'

Layla chuckled, shaking her head. 'It's either because her hearing is bad, or she thinks she has to yell as we're very far away. Or both.'

Adam became part of the family that summer. He joined Layla and her family for Eid. ('It's kind of like Muslim Christmas,' Layla explained.) He learned to eat *kisra* (a thin savoury pancake used as bread). And he even tagged along to a couple of Ozzie's soccer games with her and Dina. Layla was so happy they seemed to get along.

Phew! Now I don't have to pick a bestie – they both are!

Layla sometimes visited Adam's family as well, but they were very different to the rough and tumble of

the Hussein household. Everything was quiet, still and very, very clean. Adam was an only child and both of his parents were busy lawyers, so he spent a lot of time on his own. But his life seemed amazing to Layla. When Adam talked about it, she listened intently, eyes wide, her mind blown. Not only did their family go on holiday to places like the Bahamas, but the school he went to was on another level. Adam told her about camps, sports lessons with high-ropes and trampolining, exciting trips. They even had a whole woodwork workshop where you could build anything you wanted. Layla thought it all sounded soooo cool, especially the part about the workshop.

She imagined going to a school like that would be the perfect way to learn about becoming a real adventurer. She could see so much of Australia and learn about building things she'd only dreamed of. She could do all the stuff she just wouldn't have the opportunity to do at ISB.

Layla thought back to when she had wanted to enter the local go-kart-building competition, but wasn't able to because ISB didn't have the space,

equipment or tools for her to build one. To be fair, they only got a basketball court when she was in Year 5, so a workshop was probably asking for a lot.

Layla wished things were different.

She had this deep urge to learn how things worked, spending hours on YouTube watching videos that explained everything from how a toilet flushed to how to drill for oil. She dreamed of making videos just like these – running cool experiments like on *Mythbusters*, or going on voyages to wild places, just as Bear Grylls did. Her home experiments were never as good as the YouTube ones: Layla didn't have much at home to make things with, which was why she often settled for making jewellery out of beads, shells, nuts and anything she could find as a compromise. And even though they weren't award-winning pieces, the process always helped soothe her if she was in a bad mood. After she'd had a fight with Ozzie or the twins, she'd run to the bedroom, scramble for her shoebox full of beads and string, sit on her bed and start threading. Concentrating on one thing that required precision made her feel totally calm and focused. Her breathing

would slow down, her mind would stop racing and she could then focus her energy entirely on the now: stringing the next bead. It was the same with some of the other things Layla loved to do: climbing the next branch, placing the next Lego piece. In those moments, nothing else mattered but the task at hand. But there was a limit to what she could make with the tools she had at home – the small screwdriver and *shakoosh* she got for her tenth birthday were not quite enough.

Layla imagined all the types of things she could make at a school like Adam's. She wouldn't have to limit herself to jewellery! She'd always wanted to build a treehouse . . .

'Maybe you could come visit the school sometime,' Adam suggested one afternoon as they swung through the avocado tree, startling the resident lorikeets.

'You reckon?' Layla replied breathlessly as she strained for a branch just out of reach.

'Yeah, I'm sure the teachers wouldn't mind, and I can show you the shelf thing I made last year!'

'Yo, that would be sooo dope. I'll ask my parents for sure!' Grinning, Layla let her mind wander. What

would the school look like? What would the workshop *smell* like?

What will people think of me?

The last thought nagged at her momentarily before Layla willed her mind to push the feeling aside. *No time for that kind of thinking.*

Layla bolted home that evening, bursting with energy. Her dark blue mini hijab almost slipped off her head in her excitement.

'*3indi FIKRA!*' she'd announced loudly in Arabic as she'd barrelled through the back door, clutching her headscarf as it slid down her head (again). 'I have an idea!' she'd yelled, and her parents patiently smiled, waiting for Layla to calm down.

'*Barra7a, barra7a*,' her mother cooed, soothing her excitable daughter.

Layla threw herself on the stool at the vinyl kitchen bench, as her mother stood in a thin blue *jalabeeya* in front of the sink, peeling potatoes for a stew. The hem of the simple Sudanese dress reached just above the ground and rustled when she moved. Fadia – Mama, as Layla called her – was a tall, dark-skinned Sudanese

woman, with strong arms, scarred hands and a gentle face. Her hair, covered in public, was always in two thick braids running along the side of her head, reaching all the way down to her waist. Flecks of grey had started to appear in Fadia's curls, and she had fashioned them into her look, giving her the appearance of a salt-and-pepper warrior queen.

Layla had yet to meet a woman more awesome than her mama (even if she was terrified of her about half the time!). Doctora Fadia was how she was known. Nobody messed with the Doctora.