

THIS IS MY TRUTH

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HOT
KEY
BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by
HOT KEY BOOKS
80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE
Owned by Bonnier Books
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden
www.hotkeybooks.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-1052-9

Also available as an ebook and in audio

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This book is typeset using Atomik ePublisher
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Hot Key Books is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

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School passes in a weird rush. Maybe that's what happens when you're late (and trying to forget the image of your dad being humiliated on live TV). Homework is doled out in most lessons, we're reminded about coursework due in others. Biology was fifth period and my brain is still hurting from the practice exam as I walk towards the gates after school. There's a big notice board right in the middle of the quad. It's usually filled with posters about discos, parent-teacher evenings and upcoming school trips. That's all been replaced now with a countdown. One just for us Year Elevens.

22 DAYS TO GO

Twenty-two days left until exams start. Until the end of school. Of course there's still sixth form, but that doesn't seem the same. It's the end of an era. And every time I think about it, my stomach churns. It feels like I'm in a car speeding towards an unfinished bridge. The ones that only appear in bad action movies, or cartoons. Except I don't have the skills to avoid the inevitable crash – I don't even know how to drive the car I'm in. That's why I usually avoid walking through the

quad. I don't need any more reminders about the terrifying future ahead of me.

I put my head down and walk faster. Past the board, past the horrible visions of the future, and towards the art block, where Huda is waiting for me. She's talking to a boy in our year. Ezra Fitzgerald. Huda's that person who knows EVERYONE; we'll be walking around and every other person will give her a nod, a high five, even a hug. I didn't realise she was friendly with Ezra though. Our year is separated into two halves – the X band and the Y band. Each band has three classes. The separation is just for registration – our actual lessons are a mix of all students. But even so, there's a sort of unspoken rivalry. The X band thinks all the Y band are losers, and the Y band (which includes me and Huda) thinks the X band are troublemakers. Which is why I'm shocked to see Huda with Ezra. He's like the most popular boy in the X band. Also a dickhead. Back in Year Nine, he once called me a towelhead, and I've never forgiven him. Huda, on the other hand, doesn't seem to remember any of that, considering how she's laughing with him. I'm too far away to hear what they're talking about. I try to remember whether he's in any of her classes, but no – Huda is in top set for everything, and Ezra . . . well, Ezra is in the X band for a reason.

'It's gonna be epic!' he says as I get within earshot.

Huda notices me finally, and smiles. 'Talk to you later, yeah?' she says to him before walking towards me.

Ezra turns and our eyes meet. I swear his smile drops. His focus goes to my headscarf, and I instinctively reach up to adjust it. Which is stupid, because he was all laughs and jokes

with Headscarved Huda just a second ago. Why doesn't he look at her like this, with the scorn he's giving me?

Actually, I can answer that. Huda just fits in. With everyone, everywhere. She is one of those people everyone loves, and trusts. Which is ironic, considering how many foster homes she's been in. OK, that was a bit harsh. But I'm ashamed to admit, I really am jealous of her ability to fit in. What I would give to be able to join any group and not feel like a sore thumb. It's effortless for Huda, and she doesn't even notice it.

'What was that about?' I ask her as soon as Ezra's behind us. I can't help the tinge of annoyance in my voice.

'What was *what* about?' she asks nonchalantly. The thing is, I don't think she's doing it on purpose; she probably genuinely doesn't understand why it's weird for her to be talking to Ezra.

'Since when are you two such good friends?'

'Jealous, are we?' she teases, nudging me off the path with her elbow, then pulling me back into a one-armed hug. 'Ah, no one can replace you, Amani – thought you'd know that after all these years. I love you, bestie.'

I shrug her off. 'I didn't say you were besties. It's just . . . It's *Ezra*. What does he even talk about besides how often he goes to the gym?'

'How many protein shakes he has,' Huda replies.

I can't stop the snort that comes out. 'How many packs he's got. Because a six-pack isn't enough nowadays.'

'I hear he's up to sixteen. If he gets to eighteen, it'll be a world record.'

I laugh as we walk out of the gates onto the main road.

‘Seriously though, what did he want? Was he giving you grief?’ I think back to his stupid comment from years ago.

‘Ezra? Nah, as if. We were just talking about the prank war.’

‘Oh God, is that starting already?’

Blithe Academy has a longstanding tradition for Year Elevens. The last few weeks of school are always filled with ridiculous, stupid pranks. It usually starts off as another way to enhance the rivalry between the bands, and then somehow everyone comes together to pull increasingly wild stunts. I don’t know how long this has been going on for – as long as I’ve been at this school, that’s for sure. It’s reached the point now where the last few years they’ve started study leave early. Last year they suddenly took all the Year Elevens out of class three days before the countdown was due to finish, to a special emergency assembly – I remember hearing that some people thought there’d been a terrorist attack or a school shooter or something. They got everyone in the hall and told them that school was over. That was it. They were escorted off the campus. Like, no going back to pack up the classroom or anything – a girl I know was halfway through doing a sculpture for her art coursework and wasn’t even allowed back in to wash her hands. Teachers have just become so scared of what students will do – they’re trying anything they can to get the upper hand. And to be fair, I don’t blame them. There have been some crazy pranks. One time everyone brought in hundreds of small alarm clocks and hid them around the school – in the assembly hall, in classrooms, even in the toilets. The alarms went off randomly and everyone was frantically trying to find and stop them.

'I tried to get Ezra to spill what they were planning, but he's giving nothing up,' Huda explains sadly.

'Tell me you're not getting involved with all that,' I say, surprised.

'I wish,' she says. 'Like literally. I *wish*. I thought that if I tried to mole out some details from the other side, they'd let me be part of things.'

'Why would Ezra tell you anything though? Doesn't that defeat the whole point of a prank *war*?'

'I pretended it was for the end. Y'know, when everyone gets together. I so wanna know what they're planning. It's gotta be huge, don't you think, to beat the clock thing?'

I shrug. 'I'm not really that fussed. I'd rather not bother with any of this; it's distracting.'

Huda scoffs. 'But this is what we'll remember! When we're old soggy grandmas, living next door to each other, ignoring our grandkids to sit in the garden eating samosas together, this is what we'll be talking about. The best times of our lives.'

'You really think this is as good as it gets?' I raise an eyebrow. 'You think in seventy, eighty years, nothing will beat some alarm clocks going off at our old school? I'd like to think I'd have had a few more adventures.'

She shrugs. 'I guess. It just feels like *a lot*, y'know? There's so many lasts – it feels like we need to recognise and celebrate them all.'

I want to tell her there's not much to celebrate. That the future is scary as hell. That I feel like the end of school signifies

the end of my freedom in a way. Speeding down a career path I'm not entirely comfortable with.

I'm planning to become a vet like Abbu. But the truth is that I don't think I'm going to be any good at it. Actually, I *know* I won't be. The number of times Mr Cavanaugh rolls his eyes at me during lessons is frankly quite insulting. I'm barely passing at the moment, and I need at least 7s in biology, chemistry and physics to do them for A level. I have this weird vision of me being the thickest student in sixth form – everyone laughing at me for not being able to identify an element or something. It's inevitable though. Regardless of how shit the situation is. Of how shit I am. I have no choice but to carry on.

'How did your biology test go?' Huda asks, proving that best friends really can read each other's minds.

I groan. 'Oh God, don't.' I theatrically throw my head back and feel a raindrop on my face. 'I am *so* going to fail.'

'It can't have been *that* bad.'

'You would say that. You're just naturally perfect at everything. Tell me your secret, please.'

She laughs. 'How about I help you study?'

'Oh God, yes please. Thanks, Huda. You're the best.'

'What was that?' she asks, cupping a hand around her ear.

I laugh; this is peak Huda. 'You're the best!' I shout. 'HUDA FARQUHAR IS THE BEST IN THE WORLD!' I scream it out loud, with her full name, because I know she won't stop until she gets me to that point.

'And don't you f—'

Huda is cut off by a voice behind us.

‘Oh, look, girls, Amani is publicly declaring her love for her girlfriend. Isn’t that cute?’

I turn around, but there’s no mistaking that voice. I’d know it anywhere. Cleo Walters. She’s surrounded by her two minions – Suzie Babble and Imogen O’Donnell. Those three are inseparable. You know those teen films where the mean girls make everyone’s lives hell? That’s them. Huda and I call them The Coven behind their backs. Well, Huda says it to their faces too actually.

‘Don’t be jealous just because you’ll never have someone say they love you,’ Huda retorts, without even batting an eyelid.

Here’s another thing I’m insanely jealous of Huda about. She always has the perfect comeback. The wittiest remark – the best response – to *anybody*. Regardless of what they’ve said to her. Nothing fazes her. Me, on the other hand, I’m already filled with anxiety, wanting Cleo and her sidekicks to just move on, to go as far away from us as possible, because it’s legit making me feel on edge just being *near* them.

Cleo rolls her eyes at Huda, then turns her sights back onto me. It’s like she has night vision, but instead of seeing in the dark, hers pinpoints the weakest link. And that’s always me.

‘Saw that video of your dad, Amani,’ she says, a smirk tugging at her mouth. Her groupies giggle.

‘What video?’ It slips out.

‘God, I know your people are from a different land, but surely they have social media there?’ She gets her phone out and taps away on it. After a few seconds, she turns it around to show me, and there’s Abbu. His TV appearance from this morning. My

heart stops and my vision blurs with tears, but I can still hear Abbu's voice screaming, 'Get this fucking piece of shit off me!'

'My favourite part is when the cat gets stuck to his chin,' Suzie laughs. 'Everyone's calling him cat beard, you know.'

Huda moves in front of me and pushes Cleo's hand away. She glares at Suzie. 'Better than being called Boozie Blabbermouth, which is what everyone calls you behind your back.'

Suzie says nothing back. I think she's scowling, but I can't tell. My vision has gone funny. Everyone was at school when Abbu was on air – how did they find this video?

'Oh, like you can talk,' Cleo says to Huda. 'You're so ugly that your own parents couldn't stand to keep you.'

'Right, yeah,' Huda says. 'Your parents kept *you*, the pretty baby, and look at the witch they're stuck with. They probably *wish* they'd given you up as a baby.'

Cleo starts to respond, but Huda cuts her off.

'C'mon, Amani, let's get away from these bitches. Oops, I mean witches. No, wait, bitches is also true.' She grabs my arm and drags me away.

I don't know if Cleo and her friends say anything else as we walk off. I'm not paying attention any more. All I can think of is that video. How on earth did Cleo find it? And how many more people have seen it? I pull out my own phone from my pocket as Huda moans about what a bitch Cleo is. My phone barely charged this morning, so I've been avoiding using it all day. There's only five per cent battery left now. My screen is filled with notifications. Twitter, Instagram, even Facebook. You know it's big when people are using Facebook. I flick through my notification screen quickly, just to make sure

there's nothing important I've missed. I try not to focus on any comment in particular, but I catch the odd word – 'omg' and 'lol' and of course 'your dad'. There's no way I can just skim this. I open Twitter first, but instead of pressing the notification icon, I accidentally click on 'Trending Topics'. A photo appears with the top trending story and . . . Holy shit, it's Abbu.

Abbu is trending on Twitter. There's a photo of him at the top, the cat clutching on to his beard. My thumb hovers over the hashtag – #CatBeard – as I try to decide whether it's better for me to see what they're saying about him, or ignore it all, pretend none of this is happening. I wonder if I can report this to Twitter for bullying. If Abbu catches wind of how big it's got, hears that people are making fun of me for it, he'll go ballistic.

Luckily – or maybe unluckily – the decision is made for me, as my phone runs completely out of battery. The screen turns black, blocking out Abbu's face, his humiliation, taking away all the people making fun of him. It's all gone.

'Did you know?' I ask Huda. We sat together at lunch today, and even in third period. She hasn't said a word to me about it. But she's constantly on Twitter, so she must have seen it, right?

'Know about what?' she asks, all innocent. 'I know about a lot of things. Like, did you know that to stop hiccups, you just need to press a finger to your –'

'About my dad,' I say, cutting her off. 'About the video.'

She doesn't reply straight away, which says it all. 'I didn't know if you'd seen it,' she says softly. 'I just . . . I didn't want you to feel . . . well, like you do now, I guess.'

'I saw it live,' I tell her. 'This morning, when we were running late, Ismail was watching on the iPad.'

'Have you spoken to your dad since?'

I shake my head. I can't think about talking to Abbu about this. Or seeing him. He's probably home right now, sitting in the living room, seething. Abbu in a bad mood is not something anyone wants to encounter.

We've reached the fork in the road where Huda and I split. The rain is coming down a bit heavier now. Huda's put her blazer over her head.

'Were you serious about the tutoring?' I ask her quickly. 'Can you do right now?'

'Uh, yeah, I guess so. I can come over –'

'No, no, let's just . . . Can we go to yours?' I stare at her intently, trying not to seem *too* desperate, but desperate enough that she feels she can't say no to me.

It works.

'Sure, let's go.'