FIGHT BACK

Published in the UK by Scholastic, 2022
Euston House, 24 Eversholt Street, London, NW1 1DB
Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate, Glasnevin,
Dublin, D11 HP5F

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ISBN 978 0702 31588 6

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

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Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
Paper made from wood grown in sustainable forests and other controlled sources.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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CHAPTER ONE

Maths – we had a substitute teacher in. And he was SO boring. I could barely keep my eyes open as he droned on about ratios. We'd covered this last week but I don't think the teacher knew, so I looked out of the window at the tiny Year Sevens squealing and shouting as they played cricket on the sunlit field.

Someone prodded my shoulder from behind and I jumped. "Aaliyah!"

When I turned, Sukhi handed me a folded note. Huh? She didn't do this kind of thing.

She shrugged and mouthed, "Jayden."

A note from Jayden? Bad boy from the back of the class to *me* at the front? Weird. I glanced at the teacher – he wasn't watching, so I dropped it in my lap.

Aleeyar

He had totally misspelled my name. Ignoramus. I unfolded the paper slowly to make sure nothing fell out; you never knew what Jayden and his gang were going to do. But there was just a black scrawl in the middle.

I felt another nudge on my shoulder. Sukhi splayed her hands, asking me what it said. Three tables behind, Jayden's blue eyes pierced into me. He was grinning, his two goofball mates mirroring him. I don't know how they got into the top set in maths.

"One sec," I whispered to Sukhi before turning to read it.

Is the London attacker one of your uncles? I heard your dad got the weapons from Pakistan for him.

Heat rose in my cheeks. My chest tightened. He was blaming *my* family for the terrorist incident in London flashing all over the news this morning. As if we were all related.

Ugh. I hate him, I hate him, HATE HIM.

I didn't want to give Jayden the satisfaction of seeing he'd got to me. I scrunched up the note and shoved it in my bag, picked up my pen and tried to focus on what the teacher was saying.

Ignore them, I told myself. *Their brains are full of snot. They haven't got a clue about anything.*

*

"So, what'd it say?" Sukhi caught up with me as I pushed through the door, trying to race out of class before Jayden got a chance to say anything else. "Did he ask you out?"

"NO!" I shouted a lot louder than I'd intended, my voice carrying over the rabble of kids in the tiled corridor.

"All right! Calm down! What *did* it say, then?" She rubbed her hands together. Sukhi was always cold, even in the middle of May.

"I don't wanna talk about it, Sukhi. Not here."

"OK, OK. But you have to show me later." She adjusted her backpack strap and linked her arm in mine. "Have you done your biology homework? Bet it took you, like, five minutes."

"'Course. Would be pretty embarrassing for a future doctor not to know how to label an eye, right?"

"Don't you start with your gory eye stories. Bleurgh." Sukhi rolled her own eyes dramatically and pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

"Ha! I've got a new one, but I'll save it till lunch!"

"Great! So much to look forward to." She raised her neatly shaped brows.

"What you got now?" I asked.

"I've got art. You've got drama with Lisa, right?"

"Yeah." I turned my head to check Jayden wasn't around. "That's kinda an appropriate statement right now. Plenty of drama in *my* life!" I said, singing the last of my words as if I was in an opera.

"Meet you in the hall at lunch, yeah? I so wanna know what he wrote!" Sukhi unlinked my arm and headed towards the stairs.

"I've got library duty today."

"Oh, yeah. See you after that, then!" she shouted as the swarm of kids carried her away.

*

Books. The comforting smell of books. The calm and quiet library was the best room in the whole school. A safe space for kids like me, a place no Jayden or Mark or Rikesh would ever willingly enter.

Half an hour had already flown by when Mrs Patel came through the door with her steaming cup of tea and smiled. "Thanks, Aaliyah. Any issues today?"

"No, miss." I finished shelving the copy of *Romeo and Juliet* that one of the Year Ten girls had left on a table and rushed back to the desk to pick up a piece of notepaper. I handed it to Mrs Patel as she came into the

wooden booth. "Mrs Smithers asked me to give you this list. She said she needs the books ordered in before the end of the month."

"Thanks, I'll take a look later."

"OK, bye." I grabbed my bag and went to join Lisa and Sukhi, who were waiting for me at the door.

"Hiiii!" I said as Lisa linked one arm and Sukhi my other before we walked down the corridor together. I was now complete, all the different parts of me reattached. It never felt right being at school when the three of us weren't together.

"How come you were at your holy place so late on a school night?" Lisa was asking Sukhi about the pic she'd posted on Snappo yesterday.

"Oh, the gurdwara?"

"Yeah."

"We had a big langar meal last night for the Bhai Saab Ji who passed away," said Sukhi.

"Oh, right, sorry." It was obvious from Lisa's expression that she had no idea who Bhai Saab Ji was or what it meant.

"He was the guy in charge of the gurdwara, so we all had to go," Sukhi said as she squeezed into me to let a kid from Year Nine pass with his cello.

"When's your Diwali, then?" asked Lisa, eyeing a

colourful Hinduism display as she pushed through the door into the empty English block.

"In October, same time as everyone else." Sukhi unlinked my arm and followed me through the door. It was always strange to be in school at lunchtime in the summer when barely anyone was inside.

"You gonna wear a sari this year?" I smirked, knowing what Sukhi's answer would be.

"Err, no way, not after last time! Couldn't walk in one if I tried." Sukhi laughed and waddled as if she was wearing a mermaid's tail.

"I'd SO love to try one," said Lisa.

"My mum's got some," I said. "Try one on when you come over. You're almost as tall as her – her underskirts should fit you."

"That'd be fab! Yay!" Lisa nudged my shoulder with hers.

We walked into our citizenship class and slid into our seats – Sukhi to my right, and Lisa to my left. The tables were set in a square, so we could all see each other. I got out my exercise book and started doodling with the pencil I'd left inside it.

Lisa rolled the ends of her glossy blonde hair, which still looked freshly straightened, between her fingers. "I'm soo tired," she said.

"Why? Were you on YouTube again all night?" Sukhi bent down to get in her bag.

"Nooo, I wish!" said Lisa. "Darren got home late. He was drunk and shouting soo much."

"Why?" I asked, leaning closer to hear her answer over the chatter and shoes shuffling into class.

"That stupid terrorist attack in London. He was *fuming*."

"Yeah, but that's in London. Like a hundred miles away. What's it got to do with your brother?" said Sukhi.

"Did he have friends there?" I asked.

"Nah. He thinks we're not safe."

"Yeah, I get that. I'm scared to go to London now." I felt around the bottom of my backpack for my pencil case.

Sukhi whacked her citizenship book on the table. "Yeah, I know! Can you imagine living somewhere that's, like, a target? Must be hard," she said.

"Yeah." I put my pencil case in front of me.

"Anyway, I'm tired 'cause he couldn't get over it. He was so angry that innocent people died on a night out. That's all he talks about with his new mates at the Hare and Hound, ever since his friend's dad died in that bombing in London last year. He went on and on for hours, and I had to listen to it all 'cause Mum and Dad were at work. It was like he was ready to kill someone."

I remembered how laid-back Lisa's older brother was when we started Year Seven and first met him. He used to be so much fun, but now he hunched his shoulders and screwed his face at us if he ever opened the door at their house.

"He needs to get a life," Lisa went on. "My mum was really annoyed with him too when he started ranting first thing. Anyway – did you see Jo Mumford's post on Snappo this morning?" Her face lit up. "Can't believe she managed to get NINE extra tickets for 3W from her cousin who works at Montfort Hall! We're going, right?"

"Errr, yeah!" Sukhi chimed in. She rolled her left shoulder back twice and then her right, like Won in the "Wreck" video.

"Obviously!" I said, my insides squealing with excitement. "I thought they were all sold out! Will you ask Jo to save some for us?" I didn't really know Jo Mumford, but Lisa and Jo sat together in history so she would hopefully get Jo to save tickets for us. "I'm gonna beg my mum tonight!"

"Me too!" Lisa and Sukhi said together. We all laughed and then straightened our faces as Mr Wilkinson emerged in front of our table.

"OK. Today, we're going to talk about current affairs."

Mr Wilkinson swiftly turned on his heels and paced towards the front of the class just as the last chair scraped under a table. His long arms stretched across the whiteboard as he scribbled something.

TERRORISM

Oh, great. I kept my head down and tried not to look bothered.

"Yes, Jayden," said Mr Wilkinson.

I looked up. Jayden had his hand in the air. He was grinning and staring right at me from across the room.

"Sir, we've got an expert in here. Just ask *her* all about it," he said, nodding at me.

A few people laughed. As if Jayden was actually funny. I clenched my jaw and started clicking the button on my pen.

"Jayden! I'm warning you!" said Mr Wilkinson.

Sukhi put her hand up. "Err, sir, maybe we could discuss bullying next week, we've got an expert on that here." She made a face at Jayden and his smirk became a frown as the class whooped.

"Right, ENOUGH!" shouted Mr Wilkinson, sweeping his blonde hair across his forehead. "We've got a lot to get through. Turn over your sheets and read the newspaper

article. I'll give you three minutes before we start discussing it."

I kept my head down and flipped the yellow sheet over, hoping Mr Wilkinson wouldn't let Jayden speak for the rest of the lesson. Sukhi elbowed me and mouthed, "Ignore the idiot."

It was easy for her to say. Jayden didn't send her a note saying she was related to a terrorist, and Sukhi never got bullied for her skin colour or her religion. Most people didn't even know Sukhi was Indian when they met her. And it wasn't like anyone who called themselves Sikh was going around bombing places.

Even though I knew the attack had nothing to do with me, I couldn't help letting Jayden's words get to me. He'd always been nasty, but until recently I'd somehow managed to avoid being his target.

Tell him we're not all like that. Maybe it'd shut him up if I didn't stay quiet when he dissed me.

Next time, I told myself. *Next time I have to speak up*.