A. M. Dassu

Winner of the Little Rebels Award for
Boy, Everywhere

Kicked Out

"A powerful and empowering
portrayal of hope against adversity"
—Hannah Gold,
author of *The Last Bear*



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A. M. Dassu



AN OLD BARN BOOK
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Publisher's Note: whilst the author, in the course of writing this book, spoke to many people who had been through the experiences described, the characters and events in this story are fictitious and not based on any particular individuals or their life stories.



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For everyone who felt they weren't worthy or good enough because of the way they were treated by others.

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Chapter 1

Living. My. Best. Life. I typed over a selfie of me in front of my best mate Mark's massive pool and shared it on my Snapchat story. I grinned, looking through my camera roll at all the goofy photos of Sami and Mark splashing each other. I didn't think I was *ever* going to get used to how supreme Mark's new place was. Life had totally changed since his mum won the lottery.

I picked up a slice of toast while still scrolling through my photos at the kitchen table. You'd never have thought from looking at them that Sami wanted to run off back to Syria just a few months ago because he hated it here so much. It was so good to see him having fun. We'd clicked like we'd always known each other. Spending time with Sami and Mark always made my day, and hanging out in a massive mansion with a heated pool on a school night, made every minute *even* better.

I was selecting a video of all of us shoving four cookies in our mouths to post on Snapchat when someone snatched the slice of toast from my hand.

'Oi!' I turned.

'I'm running late! Make another one!' Samira, my big sis, waved her hand at me dismissively as she walked out the kitchen.

'*You* make yourself one!' I shouted.

'I've got a revision session at uni and you're just sitting

around, so no.' She slipped into her shoes in the hallway, opened the front door and left.

'Here, have mine,' said my little brother, Ahmed, scraping his chair back from the kitchen table and pushing his plate towards me. His brown hair was as messy as ever and he was still in his *Minecraft* pyjamas.

'Why you not eating?' I said, taking his leftover slice.

'I had some Monster Munch.' Ahmed shrugged.

I made a face. Stinky crisps first thing in the morning was a whole new level of yuck.

'Are you going to Mark's again today?' Ahmed said, glancing at my phone over my shoulder.

'Yeah, man!' I said, mid-bite.

'Can I come?'

'Err, no!' I swallowed and swiped out of my camera roll. 'You ain't ever hanging 'round with us. You better get that idea out your puny eleven-year-old head now!'

'Not fair!' He huffed and walked out of the kitchen.

I went into WhatsApp to message Sami to find out how long he'd be.

'What's not fair?' Mum walked in with a basket full of dirty laundry.

'Life, innit, according to him.'

Mum lifted her kameez from the hem so it wouldn't touch the floor before bending down and loading the washing machine. 'Oh, Ali, make sure you pick up Ahmed from football practice tomorrow. The optician can't reschedule my appointment, so I won't make it in time.'

I gobbled up the last of the toast. 'I can't,' I said with my

mouth full. 'Samira will have to do it.'

'She's revising for her exams… and you, my dear, have nothing to do.' She shoved the last of the clothes in and clicked the washing machine door shut.

'Yeah, I do! I'll be at Mark's and it's well far. By the time I get there, I'd have to come back!' I pushed my chair back and got up.

Mum poured washing powder into the compartment. 'Ali, you were at Mark's house after school all of last week! You're going to be there all day today. You can spend Sunday at home.'

'Not the whole week. This will only be my fourth time!'

'Only!' She turned and smirked. 'Only FOUR times in ONE WEEK.'

'Well, it's amazing.' I put my phone in my back pocket. '*You'd* be there every day too if you saw it.' I still couldn't believe that Mark's mum had actually won the lottery and moved them from a tiny council flat into the most mind-blowing place.

'Take me to see it, then.'

She pressed the start button on the washing machine and picked up the empty grey laundry basket, tucking it between her arm and her bright pink kameez.

'I can't do that!'

She turned around and grinned. I wasn't sure if she was serious or not.

'You need to tell Mark's mum to have a housewarming party for the Year Eight school mums!'

'Oh my God, no way!' I headed to the door.

'Wait, Ali.'

I turned.

'Make sure you pick Ahmed up tomorrow.'

'But—!'

'Shhh, no buts. With your dad not being around, Ahmed needs you to be there for him. You know I wouldn't ask unless I had to. I *have* to get my eyes checked.'

I sighed. Because of my loser dad, I had to be the 'man' around the house. Even though I was just barely thirteen. I wondered what life would've been like if Dad hadn't left us all behind as if we were stale milk. Maybe he'd be having breakfast in the kitchen with us. Maybe he'd have dropped me and Ahmed to footy practice like the other dads did.

Stop. Block the thought, I told myself. *He's not worth it.*

'So you'll get Ahmed, yes?' Mum asked.

'Yeah, yeah, OKAY!' I had to step up 'cos *he'd* stepped out. Mum had me. 'I'll get Ahmed.'

'Thank you, my gorgeous laddu!' She came over and pinched my cheek.

I leapt back and looked at her in horror. 'What the—? I'm not two anymore!'

'You're the man *and* one of the babies of the house.'

'How does that even make sense?'

She chuckled. 'Well, you're the man of the house, but will always be the baby of my heart.'

I forced a frown so she'd stop and headed to the door. Mum was hilarious.

'Here, have some barfi.'

I stopped in my tracks and turned.

Mum pushed a box of milky sweets on the table towards me.

'Rubina's son got engaged, so she sent these to mark the occasion.'

'Which ones are they?' I popped the red cardboard lid open.

'The plain ones you like. Not a pistachio in sight.'

'Ohhh yeaah!' I pinched a block of creamy barfi out of the box.

'Ey! Don't take a whole chunk! You're supposed to cut that!' Mum tutted.

'Well, the baby of your heart has to eat!' I said. I popped the whole rectangle into my mouth and the taste of cardamom danced on my tongue as I chewed on the soft, crumbly sweet.

Mum shook her head, smirking, and I hurried out of the kitchen and ran up the stairs before she thought of *another* chore for me.

The doorbell rang just as I got to the top. I sighed and ran back down and opened the front door.

It was Sami. 'All right?' I smiled, still chewing down the barfi. 'You're early. I thought you were running late?'

He unclipped his bike helmet. 'Yeah, I thought I would be 'cos Aadam went off on one after getting a letter from his lawyer about—'

'Where's big bro?' I looked around Sami, into the street.

Aadam wasn't really Sami's big brother; they'd met somewhere on their journey from Syria and now he lived with them and was like the brother Sami never had. To be honest, he was like a big brother to all of us. Aadam was sixteen, but just so much more grown up and with it. I'd rather have had him as my older sibling than Samira, but I'd never dare tell her that.

'He's gonna go straight to Mark's house from the lawyer's.' Sami bit his lip and shifted.

'Oh cool, we'll see him there then.'

'Nah, we probably won't.' Sami shook his head. 'He's gonna be busy. Mark's mum messaged to say she'll pay him a full day's work 'cos she wants him to do the whole lawn today. She's gonna do a barbecue or something.' Sami pushed his floppy hair off his face and hung his helmet on his bike handle. 'You ready?'

'Yeah, man! I'll just get my swimming stuff.'

We got off our bikes as we turned into Mark's road. Actually, Mark's *private* road. That's what it said on the street sign. We'd always get off and walk up the long, pretty, tree-lined street, so we could gawp down the deep driveways and catch a glimpse of all the mansions.

'Hey, is that Aadam?' I said. A tall dark-blond teenager in joggers and a grey T-shirt was strolling along up ahead. His black rucksack had a Syria flag stuck on the front compartment.

Sami cupped his hands around his mouth. 'Aadam!'

''Course it's him. Ain't no teenagers 'round here,' I said, looking at Sami. We'd seen no one else our age on the street all week. It was probably full of old, rich people.

Aadam turned, smiled and walked back to us.

'How did you beat us here?' asked Sami.

'I got a lift!' He pulled on the strap of his rucksack.

'From who?'

'This guy from Syria who was at the lawyers too.'

Aadam clocked me and put out his fist.

I bumped it. 'What's happenin', bro?'

'Ah, got problems, akhi.'

'Nothin' some football after school won't fix.' I smiled. 'I know you're working all day today, but join us again tomorrow?' Even though Aadam didn't go to our school – in fact, he didn't go to school at all right now and instead worked for cash-in-hand jobs, when he should've been doing his GCSEs – whenever he had the time, he'd meet me, Sami, Mark and the other guys from our school footy team in the park after school to basically thrash us. Although, he'd call it 'helping us train'.

'No, this time it is serious problem,' he said, in his Syrian accent.

'What's up?' I asked.

Sami looked down. Okay, so this was not good.

Aadam sighed. 'I got a letter from Home Office. They reject my asylum application again.'

Oh man, I'd just talked all over Sami earlier when he'd tried to tell me about Aadam's lawyer. I thought he didn't look right but got distracted when he'd mentioned Mark's garden.

'But you did an appeal and everything!'

'Yeah and the judges decided I wasn't… how do you say it?' Aadam looked at Sami. 'What was the word in the letter?'

'Credible.' Sami shifted his feet.

'Yeah.' Aadam faced me. 'They say I'm not believable because I got my dates wrong about when I left Syria. I said one date in the statement when the man at the homeless hostel

helped me fill in form and then a date before in the interview with Home Office... just one day difference! I was stressed; I didn't remember dates! And now they say I'm not credible.' He dropped his shoulders and sighed, his mouth drooping into the saddest curve.

Sami looked up. 'The letter also said you said the wrong name of the street the mosque is on.'

'Yeah.' Aadam blinked hard as if he was annoyed with himself. 'I was panicking in the interview so I forgot. It was like a big test and they made me talk about what happened to me on my journey and I was upset and not thinking right.' His voice shook and he bit his lip.

'Worst thing is, even the judges said they believe the Home Office that he's an adult.' Sami shook his head.

I gasped. 'How can they say you're an adult?!'

Aadam showed me his leathered hands. 'They say my hands are too wrinkly for sixteen year old. I tell them I have eczema and it's because I was homeless on the streets for months and my hands got worse, but they don't believe me.' Aadam shrugged and shoved his hands in his pockets as he walked alongside us.

'So, hang on.' I glanced at Aadam. 'They're saying you can't stay here anymore?'

Aadam nodded. 'I have fourteen days to appeal the decision, but my lawyer said it's not going to pass because of weak evidence in my application and we will have to do a fresh claim. But other problem is I have run out of free legal aid because he spent so much time on my case already. So now I have to pay lots of money to my lawyer to do this

and to prove I am sixteen… I need three to four thousand pounds, and I only have one hundred!'

'What happens if you can't pay him?'

'Government will deport me.'

I stopped dragging my bike and Sami and Aadam stopped too. 'What, send you back to Syria?'

'Yep,' said Sami. I now noticed the dark circles under his eyes. They'd probably been up late talking about it.

'But it's not safe!' I said, a bit too loud.

'The government don't care!' said Sami. 'They just want him gone.'

Aadam sighed loudly and walked off. 'I better go. Don't want to be late for work.'

'Oh, man, wish you could join us,' I said after him.

Aadam shrugged. 'I need to save all the cash I can. Got to keep head down and work every chance I get!' He started jogging away.

'We'll see you there,' Sami said.

'Hey, Aadam!' I shouted, and he turned. 'Don't worry, man. We'll figure something out, yeah?'

Aadam put his thumb up as he continued to jog down the road. He worked so hard, even though he was only sixteen. It wasn't fair.

Sami glanced at me and I nodded at him. We had to do something. There was no way we could let Aadam get deported. He'd only just about made it here in one piece. God knows what would happen to him if he went back.

Chapter 2

Sami smiled even though his face looked sad.

'Are you worried about Aadam?' I asked, as a bird on a branch above me flapped its wings and flew off.

'Yeah.' He sighed. 'I don't know what'll happen to him if he goes back to Syria. The government will probably make him fight in the war. He could die…'

'Listen, yeah. That ain't happening. He is going to get that refugee-leave-to-remain thing like your family did. He ain't going nowhere.'

Sami blinked long and hard. I could tell he didn't believe it. I suppose it was all too fresh for him. Life had only just got to some kind of normal after his own traumatic journey to Manchester earlier this year.

Sami's little sister had stopped speaking after she was in a mall that got bombed and it was because she'd gone with his mum to get him some football boots. I think he still thought it was his fault they'd had to leave Syria. And on top of that, now he was worrying about having to lose Aadam after they'd only just met again in England a few months ago.

I looked through the black iron gates of the house we were passing and tried to distract him. 'Was your house like this in Syria?'

'No!' Sami laughed. 'We weren't that rich! We lived in an apartment building. Most people in Damascus do, but ours was a nice stone one and we had a small garden too.'

He glanced at the houses. 'There *are* huge houses like this, but they're further up the mountain and belong to all the government people and super rich.'

'Oh right… so no pool then?'

'Nah! I wish! We used to go to an outdoor one which was open to everyone. I've not seen one like Mark's.' He grinned.

'I don't think anyone we know has!' I said.

Mark's pool was next level. It was a huge rectangle shape which ended in a semi-circle. It was lined with bright blue tiles that made the crystal-clear water reflect onto an arched painted ceiling above, making it look like the sky. It had six floor-to-ceiling stone pillars either side of it and the wall that was attached to the kitchen side had arched mirrors so the pool looked twice its size. The wall on the semi-circle side of the pool was all glass doors that looked out onto the garden and all of the floor tiles were heated.

Sami's face had brightened. I'd cheered him up. Phew.

We pulled our bikes up to Mark's front gate. I looked at Sami and grinned, thinking back to our first day here and how amazed we'd been to see Mark's new house. We knew in that very moment our evenings and weekends were about to change.

A few weeks before Mark had moved, we were ecstatic because we'd all made it onto the school football team. We'd been in the park every day after school, practising drills to prove we were worthy of being on the team, but we lost the chance to go through to the next round of the County Championships. Then Sami had been made captain

because Nathan, the previous captain and also a total thug, got dragged for being a racist and was demoted.

Nathan was Sami's arch-nemesis. Actually, mine and Mark and Elijah's too. Pretty much half the school football team's. He was like the Joker, and all of us were more like Batman – obviously. He'd wanted us all to worship him as our team captain, but he was a bully and basically a racist crudhead.

The promotion to captain for Sami could not have happened to a better human. With Nathan demoted, things were finally looking up for us, and to top it off, Mark had moved to the best area in the whole of Greater Manchester: Hale Barns, where people had spotted Manchester United footballers…

'Wait, is this number twenty-seven?' I'd asked Sami on that first day as we stopped outside the biggest house I'd seen in my entire life.

'It must be,' Sami had said, his eyes all googly wide and sparkling. He'd pressed the silver entry buzzer on the wall next to the humongous iron gates. 'Mark's mum has got some good taste, man!'

'Come throoooough!' someone that sounded like Mark said over the fuzzy intercom, and then the gates had started slowly opening inwards. We waited for them to open wide enough to let us through and wheeled our bikes onto the long, neatly blocked paved driveway that led to a sweeping staircase going up to a perfect house with four big windows either side of huge wooden double doors.

'All right?!' Mark said as he held the front door open and beamed.

Sami and I had just stared. The front lawn was perfectly trimmed, the trees were perfectly sweeping in the breeze and the birds were chirping pretty perfectly too. It was all just so… perfect.

'Are you kidding me?' I'd said, fist-bumping Mark as we entered a marble hallway facing a staircase that split into two upstairs. A bit like a Disney palace.

'I kid you not. Mum actually did this!' Mark laughed and splayed his hands either side of him.

'Check out your shooooes!' Sami pointed at Mark's Air Jordans. 'Are those the latest ones?'

'Yeah!' Mark kicked up one of his black Jordans and showed off its red sole.

'They're awesome,' said Sami. 'Like this house. Is she gonna buy it?' Sami looked up at the high ceiling and crystal chandelier hanging over our heads with his mouth wide.

'I think so. She said we'll be renting it for a few months first, until it all goes through.'

'Are those cameras?' I'd pointed at a white ball in one of the ceiling corners.

'Yeah, that's CCTV. It's everywhere except the bedrooms and bathrooms.'

'I didn't think I'd *ever* see anything like *this* in real life,' I'd said, peeking into one of the large rooms on the left with polished wood floors and a huge marble fireplace.

I heard some footsteps and glanced back into the hallway. A man who looked like he spent every waking hour in the gym

and under a tanning bed had come down the stairs, wearing a fitted black vest and tight white shorts. 'These the mates you wanted over so bad?' he'd asked Mark, looking straight through us.

Mark had jumped as soon as he'd heard his voice. 'Yeah.'

The man grunted as he passed us, his shoulders hunched like a Neanderthal, his hands fisted. It had looked like he was trying to show us how ripped his muscles were.

As soon as he'd gone into one of the rooms, Mark had whispered, 'That's Callum, my mum's new boyfriend. He's a bit…'

'Rude?' I'd said.

'Scary?' said Sami.

'Yep, both those,' confirmed Mark. He'd waved us to follow him. 'Let's go to the pool. That's gonna be *our* place.'

I remembered how my stomach had twirled as we'd followed him through a massive kitchen with enough space for a corner sofa AND a dining table, and then into the big indoor poolroom. A heated pool we could swim in all year round. It had felt like the perfect end to the school footy season. We only had to wait a couple of months until the summer holidays started, and then we'd be spending the whole day here, not just after school and on weekends. We were gonna live the high life, like proper footballers did. And it was gonna be epic…

I pressed the silver buzzer on Mark's gate for the fourth time, my insides bubbling just like they did that first day. This was going to be the best summer ever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



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A. M. DASSU is the internationally acclaimed author of *Boy, Everywhere* and *Fight Back*, which have collectively been listed for forty-six awards, including the Waterstones Children's Book Prize, the Carnegie Medal, The Little Rebels Award for Radical Fiction and *The Week Junior* Book Award.

She is a director at Inclusive Minds, an organisation for people who are passionate about inclusion, diversity, equality and accessibility in children's literature; a patron of *The Other Side of Hope*, a literary magazine edited by immigrants and refugees, which celebrates the refugee and immigrant communities worldwide, and one of The National Literacy Trust's Connecting Stories campaign authors, aiming to help inspire a love of reading and writing in children and young people.

A. M. Dassu grew up in the Midlands dreaming of becoming a writer but studied economics instead, working in marketing and project management before realising her dream. She writes books that challenge stereotypes, humanise the 'other' and are full of empathy, hope and heart. Her most recent book, *Boot It!* was a bestselling World Book Day title.

She has donated a portion of her advances for *Kicked Out* to Baca, a UK charity that supports young people who arrive in the UK alone seeking asylum (www.bacacharity.org.uk/about), and to Syrians in Idlib, who lost everything once again due to the devastating earthquake in 2023.

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