

BIG ISLAND



EMILY O'BEIRNE



PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

SAMIRA

SAMIRA DROPS HER BAG ON the floor and eyes the envelope sitting on her bed, stamped and all. She can't remember the last time she received anything by actual mail.

It's a brochure, with just the briefest of notes printed in small, sharp letters.

Sounds like your kind of thing, fellow black sheep.

It's from her uncle Micah. A pamphlet for a short summer journalism course in Tasmania, run by a husband and wife who worked as an investigative journalist team for years. As soon as Samira sees their names, she knows exactly why he sent it. But the address makes her wonder why he bothered.

That question is answered at dinner.

Her father is fuming as usual. He's in his blue suit. His "friendly" suit, her older sister calls it, as opposed to his "heads will roll" charcoal or his "make a deal" pinstripe. Blue is for school visits and old people's homes.

"You know what some hack wrote today?" He glares at his iPad. "That I spoke out against the carbon tax. Six bloody years ago! We didn't even know about climate change back then."

Samira had been eleven then, and she knew.

"Careful, Dad." Her sister glances up from her phone. "The under-thirty-fives hate a climate denier."

He grunts. "I just think there are more economically effective solutions."

"Don't worry." Tehra's lime green fingernails tap at her phone. "I'm on damage control."

Samira smirks into her salad. That probably means making a TikTok telling "the youth" how their dad planted some trees at a school fete last year.

"I can't afford to have those newspaper bastards slandering me this year," he grumbles.

"Stop agonising." DeDe, Samira's grandmother, pokes a piece of carrot into the parrot cage. DeDe never really sits down to dinner; she just holds court by Rudy's cage. She insists on taking it into every room she's in so everyone can be privy to the bird's every mood. "They'll write what they write."

DeDe should know. The media did a fair bit of demonising of Samira's grandparents back in their greyhound-breeding days.

Samira's father turns to her. "I'm going to need you to come to a charity afternoon tea with me on Saturday, okay? The ladies were asking about you."

She swallows a sigh and nods. Is she going to have to be her father's accessory at public appearances for the rest of her life? She thought going viral lasted minutes. It's been eight years.

Her sister is frowning. Why doesn't she know that Samira would give anything for it to be Tehra that they wanted? How much better would that be for everyone?

"Samira's uncle Micah called me today," DeDe says to her father. "You haven't answered his calls. He wants us to send Samira down this summer."

Samira's fork stops midway to her mouth. "Me?"

"He took a liking to you, apparently."

Her dad finally yanks his gaze from his screen. "What's this?"

So that's why Micah sent the brochure. Samira chews slowly, feeling the vaguest flickers of excitement. Two weeks away from here? Away from the boredom of her summer job handing out pamphlets

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promising that her dad will be the best thing that ever happened to local politics. Even though she knows that if they weren't related, she'd never vote for him.

Instead, two weeks doing a journalism course in a place where no one knows her or her family? Amazing. She plays it cool, though.

"I thought you were going to help out at the campaign office these holidays?" her father says. "And you had that dance camp thingy?"

"I missed out on a place. It filled up really quickly."

"I could make a call?"

"That's okay." When her father makes calls, or gets one of his friends to, he usually gets what he wants. This time, she isn't sure she wants him to.

"She probably should get to know her mother's only sibling, you know," DeDe says. "Get to know her heritage."

That's the word she uses for the fact that Samira's mother was Turkish. Well, her mother's parents were. DeDe has no idea what that means. Neither does Samira, really. Her mother never got a chance to tell her.

Her father just clenches his jaw and goes back to his iPad. The fact that he doesn't say no is promising. Having DeDe invested is three-quarters of the battle.

"Why would you even want to go to Tasmania?" Her sister plucks a piece of tomato out of her salad with a neon talon. "I heard it's cold and dull as crap. Wasn't it basically a prison for convicts?"

Samira doesn't care if it's cold. Or boring. The course won't be. And she already knows her uncle isn't boring. Not one bit. As she eats her dinner, there's this small charge of excitement. Maybe this could actually happen.

* * *

Samira's only met Uncle Micah a handful of times. The last time was a year ago, when he flew in for the anniversary of her mother's

death. It had been ten years. Ten years of hazy, honeyed memories of the woman who put her on this earth.

Her uncle only stayed two nights.

"That's all he can stand of us," DeDe said as she watched the caterers like a hawk. "Bit of a leftie."

Micah's hair is curly and dark, just like Samira's, worn long enough that it always looks slightly chaotic. A history lecturer, he speaks like he's been thinking hard for a long time first.

It was the morning after the memorial, a night full of her mother's old university friends, who all talked about how much Samira had grown and how much she genetically reflected her mother with her wide-mouthed smile and tiny frame.

Samira was out on the terrace. Her friends were going to brunch, but her father had demanded her presence at some charity lunch later. So, instead of eating over-priced avocado on toast, she was sprawled on a lounge by the pool, devouring a story about some totally hardcore Victorian woman who'd gone undercover as a patient to expose the horrors of psychiatric asylums just to get a better job at a newspaper. Truly some next level bad-assery.

When Micah stepped out onto the terrace, his hair all sleep-ruffled, he didn't notice her at first. Clutching a coffee as if his life depended on it, he gazed out across the landscaped pool area, his eyes narrowed, as if thinking it was all some ill-gotten gain. Which it probably was, unless you think it's okay to breed dogs just to make them sprint in circles until they can't anymore. Samira doesn't like to think too hard about the source of her family's money.

"Morning," she said.

He jumped and smiled. "Morning." Then he opened a bag of candied ginger and held it out to her.

"For breakfast?"

"Buderim crystallised ginger is the only good thing about this state."

Samira raised an eyebrow. "Why do all southerners have to hate on Queensland? Is it, like, a rule or something?"

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He grinned. "They should make it part of the citizenship test."

"You all like it when you want a little beach holiday."

"I *never* want a little beach holiday." He pointed at her book. "I didn't know teenagers still read. What is it?"

She held up the book. "Total badass."

He nodded. "You ever heard of Anna and Bill Bell?"

"Nope."

"You should look them up." He headed back through the sliding glass doors.

* * *

Their second encounter was late that night. She was sneaking through the front door in her bare feet when she spied a shifting shadow in the front room. Micah was gazing at some painting of a horse the same way he had gazed at their back garden, somewhere between disbelieving and disapproving.

"Hello."

Once again, he jumped, nearly spilling wine this time. "I hope you're not planning on finding a future in stealth."

"What are you doing in here?"

"Looking at your grandmother's spurious decorating choices." He frowned at a gaudy lamp. In fairness, the lamp totally deserved it. "What is this room even for?"

"Couldn't tell you." DeDe only used it when they had super fancy guests. "Hey, those journalists you told me about. The Bells? I read about them today, how they exposed all that sexual harassment in the mines. Amazing."

"We work at the same uni."

"That's cool." She fiddled with a porcelain figurine of a greyhound.

"Is that what you want to do?"

"Dad hates journalists." She turned the porcelain figurine so it was facing the wall, wondering how long it would take anyone to

notice. "The serious ones, anyway." Of course, he's perfectly happy with the fluffy ones who want to trot out the old Baby Feminist story if it means some publicity. "I think it would be pretty cool."

"They don't seem too fond of him, either." He smiled. "What would he say?"

She gave him a wry smile. "You know what he'd say."

"Yes, I think I do."

They walk out into the foyer together, like they'd mutually decided they'd had as much beige and gold as they could take. Micah started to say something, but DeDe appeared, a bright pink apparition in her robe, clutching a teacup.

"What are you two doing up to at this hour?"

"Getting to know one another." Micah grinned. "The apple's fallen a little further from the tree with this one."

"It certainly has." DeDe eyed the shoes dangling from Samira's hand. "Did you just get home?"

"Nope," Samira replied. Not exactly, anyway. When Micah didn't say a word to refute her, Samira liked him even better.

"And what is this you're wearing?"

"Why, DeDe, you've not heard of this new clothing innovation?" she said in hushed, excited tones, gesturing at her outfit. "It's called...jeans and a T-shirt."

DeDe flashed Micah a *See?* look. "I hope you didn't go to the Allens for dinner like that."

"Gotta break it to you, I went like this. We had a barbecue by the pool. And Jaylin's dad wore his board shorts, so I was not even close to being the least under-dressed."

"Tell me you wore shoes, at least."

"Then I'll tell you I wore shoes."

DeDe gave Micah a weary smile. "She's always got to be a bit different."

"That's a good thing." Micah smiled. "Variety, spice, life, all that."

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“If you say so.” As soon as DeDe departed up the stairs to her bed, Micah regarded Samira. “So, you’re the black sheep, huh?”

For a second, she just blinked. It had felt a bit like an insult then. Now it feels like her reality, as if he spoke it into being. “Maybe.”

“I was too, don’t worry.” They smiled at each other. He tapped his wine glass and gave her a little salute. “Well, kid, I’m off in the morning. Back to the safety of the south. All I can say is do what you love. No matter who likes it. They’ll forgive you for it, eventually.”

She delivered him her widest smile. “Okay.”

And that was the last she saw of him.

Until the brochure arrived in the mail.

CHAPTER 2

ALEX

ALEX'S BROTHER SPEEDS UP THE coast road, drumming his fingers to the beat of the awful boy-rock he loves. Beach shacks rush by, already starting to fill for the holidays. Towels and bathers flap from clotheslines. Thongs and sandals line the verandas by the open doors. Barbeques sit open, ready for the night's catch.

"Why are you even doing a summer course?" Sam asks. "I didn't even know you wanted to be a journalist."

She shrugs, sniffing at the salt air as he pulls into the gravel parking lot. It's calm on the bay beach, where tiny waves take pathetic runs at the shore. "I don't know what I want to be yet. I could be a journalist. You don't know."

He laughs. "You don't know either. You just said."

"I'm doing it because Becca and I did that writing workshop last holidays, and the teachers were amazing." She pulls her towel out of the back seat. "And because it will look good on uni applications. And because...why not?"

It's not Alex's fault her two closest friends are going overseas for the summer, obliterating her already pathetic social life. This is what you get for getting a "country kid" scholarship to one of the fanciest schools on the island, where most kids' doctor and lawyer parents take them to Asia and random Pacific Islands for the holidays. Meanwhile, you get to sit at home on your own and stare at paddocks full of cows. Or take a course in the city so you've got something to distract you from your utter loner-ness.

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They cross the jetty and find a shady place under one of the straggly gums that lean over the sand. Kids from Alex's old school walk past, giving her a barely-there nod. Since she left, they all assume she's become some private school snob.

"Don't you want to do something fun this summer?" Sam asks, stretching out his legs to receive the lukewarm sun.

"Like what?"

He smirks. "I can't believe you have to ask. Party. Hang out with friends. Matt's asked you out, like, three times."

"The girls are away. And I don't want to date boys." She blushes. "I mean, I'm too busy."

He says nothing. But his silence is not nothing, either.

She deliberately busies herself, smearing sunblock over her shoulders. "So, when does your job start?" Sam's got a job in town, washing dishes in a community house that makes breakfast and lunch for homeless people.

"Monday. What about your nerdy course?"

"Monday, too. You're driving me, remember?"

"Of course I'll drive you. I start at eight, though, so you'll be a bit early."

"That's okay." It will give her time to prepare. She pulls off her shorts and shirt and stands, looking out at the rocky little island sitting just off the shore. "You coming?"

He drops back on his towel, tucking his arms behind his head. "It's way too cold."

He's right, the water is freezing. But the tolerable kind, which is about as good as it gets here until the very height of summer. Alex eases her body into its crispness, and strikes out. No matter where she swims, even in the chlorine stink of the school pool, she loves the feel of her limbs against the water's force, the spread of her lungs as they work to find air.

She swims the first fifty metres fast and hard until the water stops feeling like icy blades, then eases to a slow crawl. As the sea floor retreats, kelp shifts and undulates below her, as if the ocean

contains its own winds. With her goggles on, she can see the small fish darting between tendrils of seaweed and the rocks below. When she was a kid, it used to scare her, thinking of all the living things beneath. Now it just feels magical, as if she's a visitor on this alien planet, just breathing and thinking, escaping the world for a minute. She also likes escaping Sam's endearing but annoying way of noticing every single thing about her.

Back on the beach, she shakes out her hair, deliberately flicking water over her brother.

His eyes flutter open. "Sorry if I teased you about getting a life. I know you're driven. I just want you to remember that you can have fun, too."

She shuts her eyes and takes a slow, deep breath. "I know."

"And that you can tell me stuff, too. You don't have to make people guess."

"I know." But sometimes knowing a thing doesn't make it any easier.

At home, her mother is in the kitchen making baked beans on toast for Alex's nephews. They're in the corner, crouched over the cat, who's too damn lazy to be terrorised by twin four-year-olds.

"Hi." Alex stands by the door, her wet towel over her shoulder.

Her mother turns, nods, and goes right back to what she's doing. "Where's your brother?"

"Gone to Mikayla's. How was work?"

"The same." Her mother cleans motel rooms down near the historic site. Alex used to help her before she went to the new school and her weekends filled with homework. All summer the rooms are jammed with families coming to do their historic diligence, learning about the state's convict history before traipsing off for the fun parts of their holidays. Her mother cleans up whatever they leave in their wake. She used to tell funny stories about the traces left of people's lives.

"Alex!" One of the boys spots her. "Kick the ball with us?"

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“Don’t,” her mother says. “I need them to eat lunch before your sister gets back from work.”

Her sister, Kelly, works six days a week at the general store. Afternoon shifts, so Alex’s mum can look after the boys. They are here, filling the house with sound, until Kelly’s boyfriend finds a house for them down south. Alex doesn’t mind it. It absorbs the silence that grew when Dad left to work in the mines in the west, two weeks out of every three.

“I’m starting that course next week.”

Her mum scoops beans into two bright plastic bowls. “What course?”

“The journalism one in town.”

“Okay.”

Alex waits a beat, to see if she’s going to ask anything about it. She doesn’t. “I’ll be gone every day. Sam’s going to drop me off and pick me up after work.”

Her mum puts the bowls down and calls the boys to the table.

“I can look after them after their lunch if you want a break?” Alex waits.

“No love,” she says in a weary voice. “I’ve got to go up to Pat’s. I’ll take them there to chase the sheep.”

“Okay. See you.” If her mother replies, Alex doesn’t hear.

The screen door slaps behind her as she heads out across the stretch of grass and up the hill that is their backyard to her grandfather’s old bungalow. She’s been sleeping in it all year, to make room for Kelly and the boys. It still feels like it’s her grandfather’s, the man she followed around this property for the first twelve years of her life. And it still feels a little bit like exile.

It’s nice to feel near to him, though, to live between the wooden walls he chopped and fixed into place himself when he passed the family house to her parents. He built the house too, tucked between two high hills, out of sight of the sea, sheltered from its winds.

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Inside, there is just her bed, dresser, and desk, last year's school-books still piled neatly in the corner. She's kept his favourite picture up, too, the bright yellow of a canola field at sunset.

When she gets out of the shower, there's a message from Becca.

Hey, I know it's last minute, but do you want to come to a party tonight? You can stay at mine, Becca adds, before she can answer. *Come for dinner. Dad's making Sri Lankan.*

Going would mean catching the last afternoon bus an hour into town. Alex chews her lip. She was going to make sure she'd completely caught up on all the local news, but this is her last chance to see her friends before they go away.

Through the window she sees that Sam's back. Her mother is leaning over the porch rail, her favourite old blue tea mug in her hand, grinning at something her brother says as he kicks the ball to the boys. She says something and then tosses her head back and laughs.

Alex turns away and picks up her phone.

Okay. I'll get the 6 o'clock bus.

A few hours later, she's standing in a corner of someone's huge living room.

"I'm sad I'm leaving town in summer. I just want to go to the beach and hang out," Becca grumbles over the music. "You know, in the few weeks a year where you can actually swim."

"You're *sad* that you're going to travel around Cambodia and Laos for three weeks?" Alex pulls a face. "*Okay.*"

"I know. I'm a spoilt brat. I just wish I could do this course with you."

"Me too." When Alex signed up, she'd thought Becca would do it too. Now, every time she thinks of it doing it alone, she gets little quivers of nerves.

"It sounds like work on the summer holidays to me," Leilani says, eyeing a new group of people pushing through the front door.

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One of them is Becca's boyfriend. He comes over and grabs her around the waist, making her giggle. Their group expands, absorbing his friends. Chat flows around Alex—quips and comebacks, and references she can never quite keep up with.

No matter if she's talking to people or not, Alex always feels lonely at parties. The more people she's surrounded by—especially the kids from her school with their special brand of moneyed, therapied, well-travelled confidence—the greater the clarity of her misfit status. She's not the only country kid granted a bursary to her school, and deemed disadvantaged on the basis of distance. And she's not even close to being the biggest misfit among them. In fact, of all those kids, she's been carried the furthest on the social wave. Mostly because Becca and Leilani decided a year ago that they wanted social lives. But Alex never really knows how to talk to these kids.

Her attention and her gaze wander. A girl from her history class is standing in the corner with a girl from another school, talking close. The other girl laughs, pulls her close, and kisses her.

For a moment Alex stares. Then she flicks her glance away, her face heating. Did anyone see her looking? That's a thing she's not ready to let people know. Not even her brother. Because at the ripe old age of seventeen, Alex Stanton has never kissed anyone. And mostly because no one knows that she's decided that if she kisses anyone, it's going to be a girl. Though Alex is not even sure she knows a single girl who would *want* to kiss her.

Maybe when you live in town it's easier to find each other. Maybe when you've been at a school like this all your life, where diversity and inclusion are even written into the maths curriculum, it's easy to tell the world what and who you are. But not when you live in a house where no one talks, and definitely not about things like that. Not in a tiny beach town where the greatest trade is in everyone else's business.

Becca and Leilani write off Alex's lack of interest to her being wilfully socially behind because she's too busy studying. They don't ask, either. It's not fair. No one else has to announce themselves. Her

friends just get to go about their business, doing what they're expected to do: crushes, dating, whatever. There's no having to explain it—or who—to anyone. And that sucks because Alex has never been that great at putting her feelings into words. Nor having people see them. She definitely has no idea how to say these kinds of things out loud. So, she doesn't.

“Hey.” A hand touches her arm. Becca. “You okay?”

She nods. “Of course.”

“Want to go soon?” She tucks her arm through Alex's. “We can watch a movie and eat leftovers?”

“Sure.” That's exactly what she wants to do, sit in Becca's loud, friendly house, and maybe even talk about real things for a minute.

“Peter might come over for a bit too.”

“Okay.” So instead, she'll play third wheel and eat popcorn on the far end of the sofa. But it beats the hell out of sitting alone in her room.

CHAPTER 3

SAMIRA

IN WHAT SEEMS LIKE THE freakiest turn her life has taken for a while, Samira is in Uncle Micah's battered jeep, flying along the freeway leading from the airport.

The sun hits their eyes as they drive onto a long bridge stretching across a harbour to where a mountain hulks over the tiny city. At least it's sunny. She thought it was always cold here.

"You'll have to clean up after yourself at my house." Micah switches lanes. "Please tell me my niece at least knows how to do dishes and vacuum, and can operate a washing machine?"

"Sure." She can Google how to wash clothes. Close enough.

"You'll have to catch buses to the uni."

"Of course." Hopefully the internet will be her friend here, too.

"It's not far to the campus, so it won't take long."

Navigating this whole thing is going to be harder than she thought. And the fact that figuring out buses and washing machines is going to be among the challenges is kind of embarrassing. She stares out at the water, trying to quell the fluttering in her belly, and reminds herself that this is what freedom looks like.

Micah turns off the freeway. "So how did you get your dad to give in?"

She lets a hand trail out the window as they drive through a hilly suburb. "I told him it would be good for me to bond with you, my only uncle."

"Smart girl."

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His small terrace house sits snug among others along a steep little hill that stretches up towards the mountain, sending the world vertical.

“That’s Kunyani.” Micah pulls her case from the car. “Or Mount Wellington, it still says on some maps.”

The house is two-storey and sagging like it’s sick of holding its own against the elements. It’s sweet, though, with a forest of shrubs and ferns squeezed between the high garden walls, all green and secret.

They enter through a side door into a faded but friendly kitchen, painted green and white and busy with pots and pans hanging from the ceiling. On the far side, there’s a sofa under a windowsill lined with plants.

Samira pulls a package from the top of her case. “Here, I brought you a present.” She hands him a jumbo bag of candied ginger.

He grins. “Where have you been all my life?”

“In your least favourite state, benefiting from generational wealth.”

He laughs. “Actually, South Australia is my least favourite state. Come on, I’ll show you the room. It’s small,” he warns her. “No Brisbane McMansions around here or ‘everyone gets their own bathroom’ crap, either.”

Samira did share a bathroom with her sister until she was twelve, when they moved to the new place, but she’s pretty sure that won’t help her spoiled rich kid case one bit.

He pushes open the door to a tiny, bare room. “Welcome to the real world, Samira Benson. You’ll cope, I know you will.”

She grins and puts her case down on the floor. “Gee, thanks.”

* * *

The next day she emerges from her first tangle with the public bus system bloodied but unbowed. She was so convinced something was going to go heinously wrong that she left Micah’s house way

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before she had to. She'd leaned against the seat in front of her, her map open on her phone so she didn't miss her stop.

It's still stupid early on campus, so she ducks into the first coffee shop she sees. There's a constant trickle of people in and out. Mostly students. Every time she thinks of the morning ahead, there's this buzzing feeling that is equal parts excitement and terror. *Please don't let me look like an idiot*, she asks whoever's in charge of the universe. What if the other kids are like these child genius journalist types, and she's a fool for thinking she could do this? She takes a long sip and a deep breath, one after the other. *Fake it until you make it*. That's what Jaylin said. Easier said than done, especially when you don't really know what you'll be faking.

Opening her news app, still set to home, she holds her breath in case her father makes an appearance. There's nothing. These days, no news is good news. She breathes out. When she switches to local stories, she has to smile. You know you're in a small town when the main stories are about a new hiking trail and a local in *Big Brother*, season 418.

The café crowd thins to just a few earnest types studying, and a couple trying to pretend they're not arguing. They talk in hushed, sharp whispers. The woman jabs a finger into the tabletop to punctuate everything she says. The guy sits back, arms folded. It's something petty, Samira decides, like housework or whose turn it is to do something. Neither looks hurt, just pissy and tired.

That's when she notices a girl in the corner watching them too, head tipped, like she might be playing the same game as Samira. She's all pale face and angles, her light hair pulled tight into a neat ponytail. The moment the couple leave, she returns to her laptop, super intent on whatever is on her screen.

A few minutes later, she checks her watch, frowns, and strides for the door, clutching the laptop. She's one of those tidy looking people, even in jeans and a simple blouse. The kind of girl whose hair is always neat and make-up un-smudged, without even seeming to try. Samira can't get through a day without looking more

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wild-eyed and wild-haired than she started it. She decides the girl is an economics or business major. Something requiring suits in her future.

Samira checks the time and bounces out of her seat. She's been so busy judging cute, uptight-looking uni girl that she nearly made herself late.

* * *

In the room where the class is held, about twenty kids sit, some talking, but most doing awkward silence. As she hesitates by the door, she spots the girl from the café, clutching her laptop. Okay, so, not an economics major.

"Hi."

The girl just looks blanky at her.

"I saw you in the café earlier. Down the street."

"Oh." Her eyes widen.

"I'm Samira." She gives her a smile.

"Oh, um, hi. Alex." She clears her throat, gives the barest of smiles, and looks down at her computer.

Awkward or rude? Hard to tell. Samira keeps walking, slipping into a seat next to a boy in one of the brightest floral shirts she's ever seen in her life. His hair is a shorter version of hers, all wild dark curls. She tries a smile on him. "Hi. Nice shirt."

"Okay," he says, sarcastic.

"I really mean it. I like it."

"Oh, then thank you." He gives her this crooked grin. "Sometimes my fashion sense is not widely nor well received."

"I see how some people might be challenged by the..." She taps her chin. "How to say it diplomatically?"

"Highly chaotic nature of it?"

"Yeah, that'll work." She grins. "So, would it still be called a Hawaiian shirt if you were in Hawaii? Or would it just be a shirt there?"

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He actually thinks seriously about it for a second. "I do not know the answer to that," he says in a way that suggests this doesn't happen often. He nudges the kid to his left, a lanky boy with a shaved head, chewing on a lip ring. "Loc, do you think it's still called a Hawaiian shirt when you're in Hawaii?"

"Yours?" Loc looks the shirt over. "I only know that its obnoxious."

Floral Shirt Boy holds up his hands. "See what I mean? Not always well-received."

She laughs. "I'm Samira."

"Ollie. This is Loc. We went to primary school together, but I haven't seen him since."

"Yeah, well you went off to that snob school." Loc gives her a wave.

"And you became a skater boy," Ollie counters.

"It's a noble pastime."

"If I were half as coordinated and cool as you and I could cope with sunlight, I'd be one, too," Ollie says. "But alas, I was anointed by the nerd gods to be doomed to a life of mastering modern technology."

"That's his fancy way of saying he's a computer geek," Loc tells her.

A man and woman walk in, sending a hush around the room. Bill and Anna look older than their pictures. Super ordinary, too, like someone's mum and dad, ready to pick them up from school. It doesn't help that Bill is wearing socks with sandals. Samira thought they'd be a little more...edgy? Or academic, at least. Plaid and patched elbows or whatever.

"So, who wants to be a journalist one day?" Bill asks as soon as they reach the front of the room.

Samira's hand goes halfway up. Ollie's and Loc's stay down. She sneaks a look at the blonde girl, Alex, but it's too late to tell. She's sitting there straight-backed, arms folded, like she's receiving instructions for a mission.

“And who here is just curious and thought they’d try it out?” Bill asks. “Also, totally valid.”

The rest of the kids put their hands up. Again, Samira puts her hand half up.

“Either motive is just fine with us,” Bill says. “But, given you’ve signed on to do this course, we’re going to assume that you’re budding journalists until you walk out this door in two weeks.”

“This week the mornings will be for theory, and the afternoons for practice.” Anna sits on the edge of a desk. “Then next week, we’ll be working on projects. Two weeks is not long to give you a real taste, so let’s get moving. This morning we want to run you through some basics of journalism ethics and law so you’re not a menace to society when you get started. No one wants to be sued for defamation before they graduate high school, do they?”

Samira doesn’t want to be sued for defamation, period. She also probably needs to know exactly what it is.

The next two hours contain a whirlwind lesson in everything to do with professional and legal behaviour. Turns out you can’t just go undercover like Nellie Bly without good reason, and you can’t go digging around in people’s bank accounts and stuff like they do on TV. And you can’t write smack about people unless you have proof that it’s true. Well, Samira kind of already figured that part.

The best part is that Bill and Anna have an anecdote for everything. Bill tells them about a guy who disguised himself as an immigrant worker to understand how they were being treated, and a woman who floated in a rubber dinghy down a river to enter and report on a war zone. They tell tales of their own work, too. They might dress like a suburban mum and dad, but they’ve been everywhere and done everything.

When the morning session is done, Anna says, “I know it seems like a lot of ethical and legal jargon, but the reason we ran you through all that is because we need to make sure you know how to behave like professionals from day one.”

Big Island

“This is particularly important today.” Bill grins. “Because I am about to do to you what my professors did to me on the first day of my journalism degree.”

Samira bites her lip, nerves rising. Does this guy remember that they’re only high school students?

“I’m going to send you out for the rest of the day,” he says. “And you’re going to come back here tomorrow morning with a story. In fact, you’re going to email it to us before nine a.m. So, as of now, you’re journalists employed by us to work for the...I don’t know, let’s call it the Sandy Bay Gazette.”

The other kids look as freaked as Samira feels. Except Ollie, who’s rubbing his hands together.

“It can be any kind of story—news, profile, feature,” Anna adds. “The only rules are, everyone works on their own, does at least one interview, and doesn’t come back empty-handed. Any questions?”

“What if we can’t find one?” a girl asks.

Anna smiles. “You’ll find one.”

“Remember, stories are about people,” Bill says. “People are everywhere, so stories are everywhere. You just have to choose one worth telling.”

“Helpful,” Loc mutters.

Anna points somewhere behind them. “Yes, Alex?” Samira wonders how she knows the girl’s name.

“Word count?”

“No limit, but keep it nice and tight. Good luck, folks.”

Alex stands and strides out of the room, clutching her laptop.

“Sheez, someone’s eager,” Ollie says as they walk out into the sunshine behind her.

“Mhm.” Samira wonders if her grandmother was right. DeDe didn’t understand why Samira wasn’t spending her holidays at the beach like normal kids.

“Right, I’m off home.” Ollie hauls his backpack onto his shoulder.

“Home?” Samira frowns. “To get your story?”

“Yes,” he says like it’s obvious. “See you.” And he’s gone.

Emily O'Beirne

Loc grins. "I bet he's gonna pluck something obscure from the deep, dark web."

"Of course, computer geek. I bet that helps." Samira sighs. "This is terrifying."

"Yeah, kinda."

"I've only been on this island for one day. Where do I even start?"

"I've lived here all my life and I can't answer that." Loc shrugs. "Sorry."

"What are you going to do?"

He thrusts his hands in his pockets. "Head back to my part of town and look for one, I guess."

"Where's that?"

"Southeast coast. Near Kingston. I'll ask around with the locals." He gives her a sort-of smile. "Good luck."

"You too." She turns for the bus stop. Maybe something newsworthy will happen on the bus.

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BG ISLAND

BY EMILY O'BEIRNE