

## Chapter 7: "You're fine."

To think about while reading:

- 1 How does Ash try to get out of going to school?
- 2 What does he overhear from outside the music room door?
- 3 What is an axolotl?

## Chapter 7: "You're fine."

After reading the chapter:

- 1 Why do you think Ash was 'twiddling with his hair'?
- 2 How did Ash feel before talking to Noah?
- 3 Do you think Ash feels better or worse after talking to Noah?
- 4 What impression do you get of Noah in this chapter?
- 5 Do you agree with the way Janelle acted? Why?



## Chapter Seven

"You're fine."

"Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

I sat in the car, on the way home from Janelle's party. Mum was trying to start one of those deep and meaningful conversations, I could tell. But I wasn't talking. My brain seethed with a million horrible thoughts, but there were too many to make sense of. I

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"You're fine."

stared at the windscreen wipers as they swished up and down, smearing the pigeon poo across the windscreen.

"Ash, stop twiddling your hair, or it'll all fall out."

I hadn't even realised that I was twiddling my hair. I sat on my hands so that I'd stop. But after a few seconds, my fingers wound themselves in my hair again, without me even telling them to.

"Ash!"

I ignored her.

Mum sighed. "You hadn't even been at that party half an hour before TJ called."

I twiddled harder and harder. I didn't need Mum to remind me what an embarrassment I'd been. Maybe there really was an alien maggot living in my head. Maybe that's why I was acting so weirdly. It was the only thing that made sense.

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On Monday, I tried to convince Mum to let me stay off school. I wore every jumper that I could find and

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wrapped myself in two duvets until I started sweating. Then, I limped downstairs.

"Mum, I've got a temperature."

Mum was already in her smart work clothes. She took the thermometer from the 'useful things' drawer and unclipped it from its special case.

"Open wide."

I let her poke the cold metal end under my tongue and clamped my mouth around it. I felt myself burning with the heat of a thousand jumpers. At last, the thermometer beeped.

"Thirty-seven degrees," read Mum. "You're fine. Get your uniform on, quickly, Ash."

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That week, school was exactly as bad as I expected. Everyone seemed to be avoiding me. Everyone except Hassan.

"Did you know that The Boulder was fostered as a child, like I am?"

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"You're fine."

"I did." Hassan loves The Boulder so much that he'll repeat the same facts again and again.

"And did you know that he actually started a charity for children in care, and he gave ten million dollars to it last year?"

"You've told me."

"Wrestling isn't really a sport, it's a performance art. So in some ways, The Boulder is an artist."

That was the same morning that Janelle brought in her fully edited flash mob video. She handed a memory stick to Miss Underbridge, who displayed it on the whiteboard. The class whispered and nudged each other as Berry and Tamsin hastily shut the blinds.

Miss Underbridge pressed play. On the board, crowds of shoppers milled around the Southgate shopping centre. They just looked like normal people but when I peered closely, I kept spotting kids from Class Six walking in and out of the crowd.

The video zoomed in on Janelle, walking alone and playing on her phone. Then, a beat kicked in. Janelle stopped in the middle of the shopping centre and... just

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began to dance.

She was really good. Even though it was just her dancing on her own to begin with, shoppers stopped to watch.

Then, the other kids joined her: Berry and Tamsin ran out of the clothes shop. Freddy and Isaac from choir jumped out from behind a stall selling phone cases. The troupe of dancers grew and grew, and the audience grew bigger and bigger.

"I can't see you," I whispered to Hassan.

"I didn't start dancing till the very last moment," he whispered back. And there he was, on screen, running in from the pick 'n' mix stand. He threw his arms in the wrong direction, and jumped in a circle a beat behind the rest, just like in the practice, but it didn't seem to bother him. Next to me, Hassan started to dance in his seat. "You know, Ash, even though dancing isn't really my thing, it was a fun party."

I caught Noah looking at me from across the classroom and I remembered that he wasn't in the video, either. He smiled at me and looked away.

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That lunchtime, I was supposed to go to choir but just as I reached the music room door, I heard loud voices from inside.

"Janelle, are you going to do a Glitter Riot song with Ash?" asked Tamsin.

"After what he did at my party?" said Janelle. I froze and bent forwards to listen. "Not likely."

"Yeah, he was acting really weirdly," said Berry.

"Hey, you know which Glitter Riot song he should do?" Janelle said. She paused for effect. "'Monster'." Then, she started to sing:

*"I'm the odd one in the crowd,  
People point and laugh out loud."*

"It's perfect!" gasped Tamsin, then everyone started to laugh.

I didn't stay to hear any more. I sped away, pushed open the playground door and headed to the tree in the corner, far away from everyone else. Not that there

was anyone to avoid; almost all of Class Six went to clubs on Wednesday lunchtimes.

I leant against the tree trunk, twiddling my hair and worrying about whether the alien maggot that infested my brain was eating anything important, like my memories or the way to calculate the area of a trapezium.

That was when I noticed Noah shuffling towards me over the tarmac. He had his hands in his pockets and he was shivering slightly in the blustery spring wind.

"How come you're not in choir?" he asked, looking at the tree roots, which poked like tentacles out of the ground.

"Didn't feel like it," I mumbled.

"Oh."

We stood in silence for a moment. I forced myself to stop twiddling my hair. Then, I started stripping leaves from the lowest branches, instead. Noah kicked the roots, first with one foot, then the other. I suddenly realised that I'd never really hung out with Noah, not unless there were other people around. Come to think

of it, no one hung out with Noah. He was a bit of a loner. Just like I felt, right then.

"How come you're not at computer club?" I asked.

"I'm not in computer club." Noah sighed and kicked the tree again. "I tried it, but it was full of people who wanted to make videos of slime explosions." Hassan loved slime explosions, but I wasn't surprised that Noah didn't feel the same way. "No one wanted to do anything serious, like researching the wildlife of Madagascar or the evolution of axolotls. So I stopped."

"What's an axle otter?"

"Axolotl." Noah's face lit up. "They're a type of salamander. They're critically endangered, and they only live in lakes in Mexico, and they exhibit *neoteny*, which means that they never metamorphose, even though they're amphibians, and they can regenerate limbs, and..."

Noah used lots of words that I didn't know, but it didn't really matter. Talking to Noah was like watching a wildlife programme. As we walked around the playground, he told me about sifakas, which shriek from the jungle canopy, and elephant birds, which are

now extinct, and then about aye-eyes.

"Aye-eyes are a type of nocturnal lemur, and they have a long, thin middle finger for clawing insects out of small holes, and some people think that aye-eyes bring bad luck, but they don't; they're just shy, gentle creatures."

"I think that you'd be an aye-eye," I told Noah.

"And you'd be a sifaka, showing off to the whole jungle."

"Hmm." I realised that I was twiddling my hair again, and stopped.

"You would, though. You're a really good singer. I think you should be a singer when you grow up. I'd buy your songs."

"Maybe," I replied, but I wasn't so sure any more. I felt an ache as I thought of the choir, who were practising for the leavers' assembly without me. "What about you? What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Noah tucked his hands back into his pockets and looked up as a crow flew overhead. "There was a famous

conservationist called Gerald Durrell, who spent his life helping endangered species. I'd like to be like Gerald Durrell." As Noah spoke, I realised that he had been talking for ages and hadn't stuttered once. Perhaps it wasn't explaining things that he found tricky. Perhaps it was just doing it in front of everyone.

"That sounds perfect for you," I said.

Noah scuffed his feet. "It all depends on how I do in my exams, though, doesn't it?"

"What?" I didn't get it; Noah was top in every subject. "Noah, you've got nothing to worry about."

"But yesterday's English test was impossible." Noah looked really worried. His pale face went paler and his eyes were red around the edges. "I didn't get that poem at all."

I shivered, but it wasn't just the blustery wind. If Noah was worried about his exams, what hope was there for someone like me?

## Chapter 8: "Man up."

To think about while reading:

- 1 What is Dad's job?
- 2 Find a phrase which tells you that Ash was crying.
- 3 How does Ash get on with his next test?



## Chapter 8: "Man up."

After reading the chapter:

- 1 What do you think of the phrase 'man up'?
- 2 How do Ash's feelings about Mr Rivers change?
- 3 In what way was Dad 'having a bad day'?
- 4 Summarise Dad's advice about Ash's worries.
- 5 What other advice would you give Ash or someone in a similar situation?



## Chapter Eight

### “Man up.”

By the time playtime was over, I had forgotten all about choir. I walked inside with Noah. He was telling me about different types of octopus:

“...like the mimic octopus, which pretends to be an eel or a stingray so that it doesn’t get eaten...”

We walked past the supply cupboard and the staff

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toilets, towards our classroom. Without warning, Mr Rivers stepped out of the music room like a secret agent stepping from a dark alley.

“Ash?” he said. He wasn’t smiling or pulling silly faces today. “In here, please.”

Noah gave me a nervous look – maybe it was meant to be sympathetic – and scampered off. Mr Rivers held the door open, and I followed him inside.

“You weren’t at choir today,” Mr Rivers said, perching on his desk. “How come?”

I stood and twiddled my hair. I knew that I was doing it, but I decided that there was no point in stopping.

“Ash? Is something going on?”

I thought of the alien maggot in my brain, eating things up and making me act weirdly. I couldn’t explain that to Mr Rivers. So I just twiddled my hair.

“Look, Ash, I need to know if you’re serious about being in the leavers’ assembly.”

“What?” I stared. I knew that I looked like a dazed

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rabbit, but I didn’t care. “Yes! Of course.”

“Really? Because people who are serious turn up to choir rehearsals.”

“I am! I want to be in it. Please.” I’d gone to choir every week of my school life, except today. I’d been imagining what I would sing in the leavers’ assembly since I was seven. I couldn’t leave Morton without performing in front of everyone one last time – without proving that *Robin Hood: Superstar!* was just a weird moment, or possibly the result of alien brain maggots.

“Be here next week, then.”

“The thing is,” I began to babble, suddenly desperate to explain, “I was about to come to choir, but when I was outside the door I heard Janelle say something, and –”

“Ashraf,” said Mr Rivers. He stood and walked to the classroom door. I tripped after him. “Man up. Even if you’re having a difficult time with your friends, you still need to be present. Got it?”

I looked into the stern eyes of the man who had been my hero for years. “Yes, Mr Rivers,” I said. At that, he

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“Man up.”

shut the door with a snap.

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That afternoon, Dad picked me up after his early shift at the hospital.

“How was your day?” he asked as we drove home. It seems to be a rule that parents have to ask this question, even though every day is pretty much the same.

“Usual.”

“Usual. What does that mean?”

There was no way that I was telling Dad about missing choir and getting in trouble with Mr Rivers. “Spellings. Wrestling with Hassan. I hung out with Noah at lunch. That was cool –”

But Dad had stopped listening. “Wrestling?” His eyes went wide and I could see that he was getting ready to tell me off. Dad hates violence of any sort, even if it’s not real, like on TV. I think that it’s because he’s an A&E nurse, dealing with emergencies and fending off angry relatives.

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"Not proper wrestling, Dad." Sometimes, parents don't get it. "We just act out the moves. We don't actually hit each other."

"I should hope not."

"Anyway, Hassan says that the sort of wrestling that he likes is more like performance art."

"Hassan said that?" Dad parked the car outside our house. As we traipsed into the kitchen, I could see that Dad was thinking about saying something else, so I decided to change the subject.

"Dad, I can't work out what song to sing for the leavers' assembly." I swung my backpack off onto the kitchen floor and helped myself to a chewy fruit bar.

"Oh, you're singing something?" Dad asked, putting on the kettle.

"Of course!" I plonked myself in a dining chair.

"I just wondered. After the play." Dad frowned at his crossword, which lay on the table. It looked as if he hadn't started it.

"I still want to sing, Dad." I felt like a part of me was coming loose and people were forgetting about me. I was Ash, the singer. Even Noah knew that about me. I had to sing in that assembly.

"How about that song you like? About, erm, changing the world through the power of music?"

"Which one?" I should have known that it was useless to ask Dad. He only likes old stuff.

"By the band you like. Sparkle Party."

"Glitter Riot."

"That's it." Dad picked up his paper and sighed. "I am completely stuck on this crossword. *Mexican amphibian*, seven letters. I don't even know any Mexican amphibians."

"I think that Janelle and that lot have already bagsied all the best Glitter Riot songs." I chewed the last of my fruit bar. "Wait! Is it an axle otter... no, an axolotl? Your Mexican amphibian? Noah told me all about them today."

"Brilliant!" said Dad, picking up his pen. But he didn't

write anything. "Er... you don't happen to know how to spell that, do you?"

I didn't.

Dad sighed. "I don't get it," he said, looking the spelling up on his phone. "Usually, I can solve the crossword in about an hour. I've been staring at this one for ages."

"I guess we all have bad days." I pulled my bag open and fished out my homework. We'd done another maths test, and Miss Underbridge wanted us to have a go at any questions that we'd missed ("Remember, the more you practise, the stronger your brain gets," she'd said). It seemed like my alien maggot was making my brain weaker, not stronger. On this test, my score had gone down again, to 23. Just looking at the paper made me feel a bit woozy.

I opened the first page, but the questions looked like a jumble of meaningless symbols, so I closed it again. "Do you ever feel like you've got an alien maggot in your brain?" I asked Dad, quietly enough that he might not hear.

"What? A maggot?" Dad looked at me like I was from another planet.

"Well... erm..." I could hear the words that I wanted to say but they just wouldn't come out. "Like, I couldn't do the school play, and that's stupid, because I love doing plays..."

Dad nodded.

"And at Janelle's party I was acting really weirdly and I don't know why. I told people that I had an alien maggot in my brain and I started doing an alien dance. It was like I couldn't stop myself." Now that I'd started talking, suddenly, it all wanted to come out. "Janelle hasn't talked to me since and now, I think that it might be true about the maggot, because my test scores are going down every week, as if everything that I know is being eaten away. And our exams are soon, and I think I'm going to fail them." I squeezed my eyes shut to stop them from tingling and tried not to think about how I wanted to throw up.

Dad gazed seriously at me for a moment. Then, he nodded. "Well, Ash, there's no such thing as alien brain maggots." He put down his pen. "But it sounds like you've got a lot on your mind."

I nodded. "It's like everything is going wrong all of a sudden."

Dad tapped his pen on the table. "Is that true? Or is it just that you're worried that everything will go wrong, so you find ways to get out of it?"

That felt like a punch to the guts. How could Dad think that I wanted to make a fool of myself and fail my exams?

"Look," he went on, "imagine you're play-wrestling with Hassan." I had no idea where he was going with this. "Hassan raises his fist and tells you, 'I'm going to punch you.'"

"Dad, we don't actually –"

"No, let me finish. That's what Hassan says, but he doesn't mean it. He's just playing. His fist is real, he really says he's going to punch you, but he's not telling the truth. The worries that you're feeling at the moment are a bit like that."

I stared at my dad for a minute, wondering if we were both aliens. "I don't get it."

"Your emotions are real, like the raised fist and the threat. Because they're real, it is totally fine to feel scared and upset." Dad gave me a hard look, so I could

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test results at the end of the year, and instead of a high number, it will have a slightly lower number. But you're still you. You're still Ash: a brilliant singer and a fabulous performer, with friends who love him and who always tries his best. You're still my bright boy who does well at school, but just happened to have a bad day on the day of exams. And we all have bad days." Dad waved his crossword, which still only had one word filled out.

My chin wobbled and my eyes leaked. Without asking, Dad handed me a tissue from his pocket.

"And I wish that you and Hassan would find something to do other than wrestling," he added, unrolling the paper again and taking the lid off his pen.

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tell that this part was important. "But that doesn't mean that those emotions are telling you the truth. Sometimes, you have to use your head to work out what's true and what isn't."

"Like knowing that Hassan isn't really going to punch me?"

"Exactly." Dad rolled up his paper and brandished it about as he spoke. "Take your exams. In your exams, you'll be asked some tough questions, including some that you won't know the answer to. That's scary, and it's okay to feel scared. But when your fear tells you that you're going to fail just because you get a few questions wrong, you don't have to believe it."

"But I might fail," I told him. My chin was wobbling and my eyes weren't just tingling, they were fizzing. "It might happen."

"So, what happens if you fail?" asked Dad. I opened my mouth to reply, but I found that I didn't know the answer. Dad has a way of asking questions like that.

After a moment, I said, "I'm a failure?"

"No. If you fail, you get a piece of paper with your

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## Chapter Nine

"Here we go again."

The next Wednesday, I stood in front of the closed music room door, shaking.

I hadn't meant to start shaking. I'd planned how lunchtime would go before I even got to school. I would march inside, smile at Janelle and say 'Hi' (even though she still wasn't talking to me), then walk right up to Mr Rivers and tell him the song that I wanted to sing for the leavers' assembly. The song was 'Under

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## Chapter 9: "Here we go again."

To think about while reading:

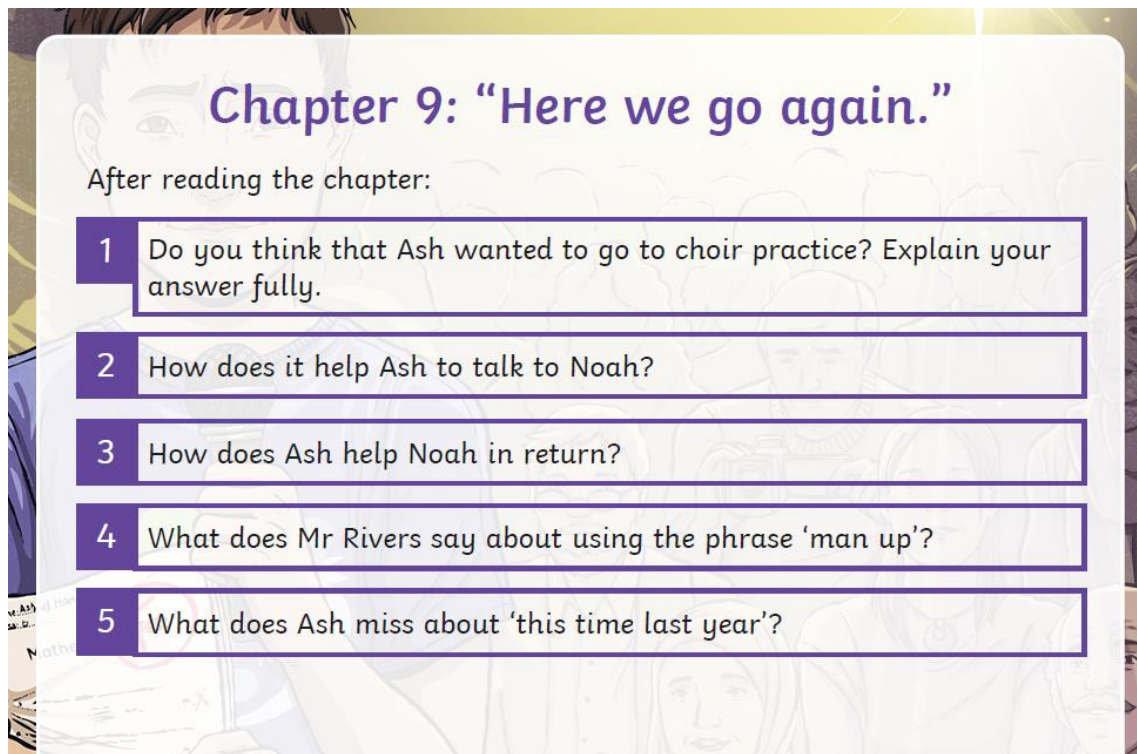
- 1 What song does Ash want to sing for leavers' assembly and why?
- 2 What dreams do Noah and Ash describe?
- 3 Predict who says 'here we go again' and check to see if you are correct.



## Chapter 9: "Here we go again."

After reading the chapter:

- 1 Do you think that Ash wanted to go to choir practice? Explain your answer fully.
- 2 How does it help Ash to talk to Noah?
- 3 How does Ash help Noah in return?
- 4 What does Mr Rivers say about using the phrase 'man up'?
- 5 What does Ash miss about 'this time last year'?



test results at the end of the year, and instead of a high number, it will have a slightly lower number. But you're still you. You're still Ash: a brilliant singer and a fabulous performer, with friends who love him and who always tries his best. You're still my bright boy who does well at school, but just happened to have a bad day on the day of exams. And we all have bad days." Dad waved his crossword, which still only had one word filled out.

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the Lights' by Glitter Riot, and it was exactly the right choice. If you don't know it, the chorus goes like this:

*It doesn't matter what I think or how I feel,  
It's only when I'm under the lights that I'm real.*

The song is all about being on stage. It's as if Brick Canady, the lead singer, is right inside my head, singing my thoughts.

There was only one problem. Just as Miss Underbridge let us go for lunch, I heard Janelle telling Berry that she'd decided what song she was going to sing.

"When I thought about it, there was only one choice," Janelle had said. "'Under the Lights'. It's so obvious."

"So obvious," Berry agreed.

So now, all of my plans had shrivelled up like an old party balloon.

As I stood outside the music room, shaking, I could hear everyone in choir gossiping and showing off. Then, Mr Rivers clapped his hands for quiet, and they started to warm up.

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"NEEEEEOOOOoooooEEEEEOOOOW!"

What if I went inside now and Mr Rivers told me off for being late? What if I asked to sing 'Under the Lights' and everyone laughed at me? What if Mr Rivers said that I couldn't be in the leavers' assembly at all?

I knew that the longer I waited, the less I would want to go in, and yet each moment passed and I just stood there.

As the warm-up was finishing, Miss Underbridge came out of the staffroom holding a slice of cake. "Ash? What are you doing in the corridor?"

I sort of jerked, like a really bad shake. Without even bothering to answer, I dashed through the door to the playground. Before it slammed shut, I glanced over my shoulder, just in time to see Miss Underbridge tap on the music room door. Praying that she was only going inside to give Mr Rivers some cake, I ran off to my usual hiding place under the big tree in the corner.

Noah was already there. When he saw me, he smiled. "I thought that you'd be at choir."

"I'm meant to be." I twiddled my hair a few times,

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breathing in and out, in and out. I was still picturing choir in my head, imagining everyone pointing and laughing at me. "I just... everything is... hard at the moment."

I don't think I'd have said that to anyone except Noah. Janelle would have laughed it off. Hassan would have looked awkward and then asked me to wrestle. It was partly because Noah's a quiet and listening sort of person, and partly because Noah was a brand new friend. He didn't expect me to be a certain way.

"I know exactly what you mean," he said. "Everything is normal, then out of nowhere it's like a... a wave crashes over you, and suddenly, school and exams and everything seem impossible."

I stared. I couldn't stop myself. Here was Noah, the cleverest person that I knew, telling me that he was finding things hard, too. I felt tingles of relief in my fingers and toes. It was so nice not to be the only one.

"I feel more like I'm staggering under the weight of hundreds of rocks," I said, "and I'm going to drop one any minute, and it's going to land on my feet and crush my toes."

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"Exactly," he said, as if that explained everything. "You're a singer, whereas I'm supposed to be clever. Your exams don't make a difference to how good you are at singing. But if I don't do well in my exams... well, I'm not good at anything, am I?"

While he was talking, my mind went back to everything that my Dad had told me last week. Here was my chance to help someone out, the way that Dad had helped me.

"No, it doesn't mean that," I said. "Look, Noah, you know *loads*. Everyone who knows you knows that you're one of the quickest learners in the class."

"I've got really good brain muscles," said Noah, flexing his arm muscles, which really weren't as impressive as the ones in his brain.

"Yeah! Ask anyone. Even if you have a really bad day during exams and somehow forget everything you know" – not that I thought that was going to happen, ever in a million years – "that doesn't mean that you're no good. It's just... a weird blip."

"Like how computers can process quadrillions of bits of information a second, but sometimes they crash?"

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Noah grinned, "Oh yeah, I get that too. Sometimes I get this dream where I have to fetch everyone in Class Six to the hall, but every time I fetch someone new, three people have wandered off."

"I have one where someone throws those bouncy rubber balls all around my living room, and you have to catch them before they break any ornaments."

Noah grinned. We fell silent for a moment, looking out across the playground. Class Five were hogging the football pitch, and the kids from Classes Three and Four were arguing over whose turn it was on the monkey bars. I sighed, thinking how this time last year, my biggest worry was whether to play tag or do wrestling at lunchtime.

"I wish that things were like they used to be," I said. "I wish that we didn't have exams to worry about, and changing schools, and everything."

"I didn't think that you'd be worried about exams," said Noah.

"Me?" I turned to him in shock. "I didn't think that you'd be worried. You're a genius!"

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Noah nodded. "Okay," he said, smiling to himself. "The wave about to smash over me doesn't look so big now."

"You're not carrying quite so many heavy rocks," I agreed. Telling Noah had made me feel better, too.

We wandered out from under the tree. Summer was nearly here. The sun shone brightly, and only a few fluffy clouds were skidding across the sky. I stared up as an aeroplane left a long, neat trail in the blue. For the first time in a while, I felt peaceful.

"So, do you think you'll go back to choir?" Noah asked, and the peaceful feeling evaporated.

"I have to," I muttered. "If I don't, I can't sing a song in the leavers' assembly."

Noah grabbed my arm, suddenly panicked. "Then you should be there now! You can't miss this chance to sing, Ash. It'll be your starring moment."

"I know," I mumbled, but Noah was already dragging me across the playground. "Come on, I'm taking you back there."

"But –"

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At that moment, the bell rang for the end of lunchtime. I tugged my arm free.

"You still have to talk to Mr Rivers," said Noah.

"Noah." I stopped and folded my arms. "I can't. What if he's angry?"

Noah opened his mouth to speak, then stopped himself. Eventually, he just said, "I'll come with you."

Noah led the way into the gloomy corridor towards the music room. As we reached the door, it burst open and everyone from choir streamed out.

"Look who it is!" squealed Tamsin when she saw me. "You missed rehearsal."

"I know," I mumbled.

"Oh, here we go again," said Janelle. "I've got an alien in my brain. That's why I'm so weird. Get real, Ash." Tamsin and Berry laughed, and the three strode off together back to class. My fingers trembled.

"Don't listen to them," whispered Noah. Once the girls were out of sight, he marched me to the music room

that you want to be in the leavers' assembly, and you deserve to be, so it's my job to help you to get there. Now," he said, pulling out a special choir notepad and pen, "let's find a way to make this work."

door and knocked. Mr Rivers opened it at once and Noah cleared his throat. "Ash wants – wants – wants to talk to you."

Mr Rivers looked from Noah to me then back again. "I'm glad to see you, Ash. Come in, have a seat." I followed Mr Rivers inside and sat on a plastic chair. Noah hovered in the doorway, chewing his lip. "Noah, would you tell Miss Underbridge that I'm having a chat with Ash? I won't keep him five minutes."

Noah nodded, gave me a thumbs up, and scampered off.

"I'm so sorry, Mr Rivers –" I started, but he put up a hand to stop me.

"No, Ash, I'm sorry." He gave me a long look and sighed a deep sigh. "You've always been so capable of everything that I forgot that even bright, capable people can find themselves struggling, too."

At that, I felt my chin wobbling. Mr Rivers understood! He wasn't angry!

"I shouldn't have told you to 'man up'. Emotions are what make us human, and ignoring them doesn't make you more of a man." Mr Rivers sighed. "I know



## Chapter Ten

"What an overreaction."

Soon after Mr Rivers and I made our plan for the leavers' assembly, exam week arrived and I forgot about singing completely. This was it. The shadow, which for so long had just seemed like a blobby shape on a far horizon, was suddenly here: huge, looming and inevitable.

The first exam was English. That morning, instead of vloggers and puppies, all that anyone could talk about was similes, bullet points and whether or not we'd get marked down for scruffy handwriting.

"I read a whole revision book last night," Noah told me

## Chapter 10: "What an overreaction."

To think about while reading:

- 1 What causes the pain in Ash's head during the exam?
- 2 Who leaves during the exam?
- 3 What was the test about?



## Chapter 10: "What an overreaction."

After reading the chapter:

- 1 How do some children's attitude towards the exams differ? Give examples.
- 2 Find examples that show that Ash was nervous.
- 3 Do you think that anyone was not nervous? Explain your answer.
- 4 What do you think Miss Underbridge said to Janelle?
- 5 What is meant by 'overreaction'? Who or what is it used to refer to in the text?

that you want to be in the leavers' assembly, and you deserve to be, so it's my job to help you to get there. Now," he said, pulling out a special choir notepad and pen, "let's find a way to make this work."



## Chapter Ten

"What an overreaction."

Soon after Mr Rivers and I made our plan for the leavers' assembly, exam week arrived and I forgot about singing completely. This was it. The shadow, which for so long had just seemed like a blobby shape on a far horizon, was suddenly here: huge, looming and inevitable.

The first exam was English. That morning, instead of vloggers and puppies, all that anyone could talk about was similes, bullet points and whether or not we'd get marked down for scruffy handwriting.

"I read a whole revision book last night," Noah told me

as we meandered around the classroom to our seats. "Did you know that you can use a semi-colon to join two independent but related clauses? I'd forgotten."

I just gulped. I could barely remember what a clause was.

As I sat down, Janelle came over to our table. For a moment, I hoped that she wanted to make up and be friends again, but instead, she started chatting to Tamsin and Berry.

"I'm not that bothered," Janelle said breezily. "It's just exams, isn't it?"

All at once, Miss Underbridge bustled in with Mr Tariq, who was helping to invigilate. Once the register was done, she led us into the hall. Hassan took his lucky eraser from his pocket, kissed it (I'm not joking) and put it on the table in front of him. "Strong as The Boulder," he murmured to himself. I wondered what had happened to the lucky eraser that I had made for Janelle.

"Right, Class Six," Miss Underbridge said, handing out test papers. "You've done the learning." Mr Tariq followed behind her with sharp pencils. "You've done

the revision." Miss Underbridge was dressed in her serious, grey dress again and her bobbed hair was extra sharp, like she'd had it cut especially for exam week. "Now, it's time to do the test."

She gave us the usual speech about working in silence and putting our hand up if we needed a new pencil. With every sentence, I felt my belly squirm. My fingers shook on the crisp exam paper in front of me. I wondered if I was going to be sick. Then, before I knew what was happening, everyone opened their papers. The test had started.

First, we had to read a long story about a haunted house, only I couldn't concentrate on the story over the noise in my own head that was telling me to concentrate on the story. Then, there were pages and pages of questions. The first ones weren't too hard, but I kept losing my place. As I flicked back and forth through the paper, my answers smudged and the pages grew ragged.

"You now have thirty minutes left to finish the test," said Miss Underbridge. My fingers felt like rubber and my brain like cotton wool. Thirty minutes? I still had a leaflet about a historical mansion to read, and a ton of questions worth three marks each. I couldn't finish

in time!

Instead of working faster, I got slower. Sometimes, I forgot what I was writing in the middle of a word, or found myself scribbling my thoughts instead of the answer. For the question, 'How does Tom feel at the end of the story?' I wrote:

*Tom feels like stopping and thinking  
at elephants for donuts.*

I scrubbed the sentence out. I couldn't breathe properly and the words swam in front of me. I had a pain in my head and it took me a minute to realise that it was because I was twiddling my hair so hard. I wanted to just give up. I dropped my forehead onto the table and tried to breathe slowly. The trouble was, the more that I thought about breathing slowly, the faster my breathing got.

"Fifteen minutes to go," said Miss Underbridge, and I heard a sob. At first, I thought that it must be me. But then it was followed by a bang, footsteps and a door slamming into the wall.

I looked up. I wasn't the only one. Almost everyone in the class stared around at the empty chair and the

Just as the test was about to end, Miss Underbridge led Janelle back into the classroom. Janelle's eyes were red and her mouth was a wobbly line, but she looked determined. Janelle took a deep breath and sat down to finish.

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On the playground, all that anyone could talk about was the exam ("I'm pretty sure that 'sinister look' means that he was pulling a pouty face...") or Janelle ("*What an overreaction!*") but it all made me feel like jelly. In the end, I tapped Hassan on the shoulder.

"You wanna wrestle?"

It was nearly the end of break when Janelle stepped outside. I only noticed because Hassan and I were near the benches. Hassan was explaining safe landing techniques from his mixed martial arts class.

"And then you roll," he said, "which is really important..."

Janelle's eyes were still red. She looked over to the tree, where Class Six stood gossiping. Then, she sighed and sat on a bench, tucking her knees in and pulling

abandoned test paper. Everyone, that is, except Noah, whose tongue stuck out of the side of his mouth as he frantically scribbled a paragraph so long that he already had his spare hand in the air, signalling to Mr Tariq that he would need a new piece of paper.

"Janelle?" said Miss Underbridge, and I suddenly realised who was missing. "No need to worry, Class Six," she said. "Keep working quietly for Mr Tariq. I'll just go and check on Janelle."

I caught Hassan's eye and he pulled a face, so I pulled one back. I realised that my breathing was back to normal and my hands weren't shaking so much. It was strange, but knowing that someone else felt as bad as I did somehow made me feel better. I was managing, and if I stuck this out until the end, then I would have done well.

By the end of the test, I had written five more answers, including one of the three-mark ones. I hadn't finished the paper, and I knew that I hadn't done as well as Noah, or even Hassan. But I remembered what my dad had said: when your fear tells you that you're going to fail just because you get a few questions wrong, you don't have to believe it.

her sweatshirt over the top, like she was trying to be as small and wrapped-up as possible.

"...because rolling spreads out the energy so you don't put too much force on one area of the body."

"Hassan, I'll be back in a minute." I didn't know if Janelle would want to talk to me, but I had to try.

"What?"

"Just one minute, okay?"

I crept slowly towards Janelle, like I do with next door's dog. I thought that she might run away if I startled her. "Janelle?"

She looked up sharply. When I saw her face up close, she had tears rolling down her cheeks. Quickly, she sniffed and looked down again. "What?"

"I wondered if you were all right." I twiddled my hair. "I wanted to walk out, too."

"But you didn't." She said it almost like an accusation.

I shrugged and sat next to her on the bench. "I thought

that I was the only one panicking. My brain was mushy and my fingers were wobbly and everyone else looked so calm."

"Same," Janelle whispered into her knees. "Freddy sat on one side, two pages ahead of me, and Noah was on the other side, miles ahead of Freddy. I was going hot then cold then hot again, and I just snapped. There didn't seem any point in going on. I knew I was going to bomb."

"But you did go on. In the end."

"Yeah." She smiled a bit, looking at the bitten ends of her nails. "I did." She nibbled on the edge of her thumb. "Sorry about ignoring you," she said at last. "I was pretty wound up at my party. I just wanted everything to go exactly right."

"That's okay." I mostly meant it. "Did you get my present?"

"The lucky purple eraser?" I nodded. "Yeah. I'll bring it in tomorrow. It was really thoughtful."

We sat together, watching the playground. It felt like every time I stopped to look around, I was another step

further away from Morton School, moving towards a foggy future.

"I have an idea," said Janelle at last. "I promise to stick it out if you will."

"Exams, you mean?"

"Yeah. If you stay to the end, I'll stay too. Deal?"

"Deal!"

Janelle held out her hand, and grinned as I shook it.