



CHAPTER 1

July



Tahier nudges me with his shoulder. “They don’t know what they’re missing.”

Rolling my eyes, I say, “Ja, they could have been sitting here for the last ten minutes, waiting for the movie to start.” I turn to him. “What we watching again?”

“Grumpy Old Men.”

Sinking back, I feed myself popcorn from the box I’ve wedged between my crossed legs on the seat. I look up in time to see him toss a piece at me. It bops against my bottom lip and disappears on the floor. We giggle loudly.

Shifting his popcorn to the empty seat next to him, he settles back. He’s adamant about not eating his until the movie starts. I think it’s ridiculous. How can he resist?

“You’re probably gonna be a grumpy old man when you’re older.” I deliberately eat more popcorn, hiding my grin.

His eyebrows go up. “Me? Nog nooit.” Offended, he asks, “Why am I nogals gonna be grumpy?”

I shrug one shoulder. “You’re already grumpy.”

He changes the subject instead of arguing. “I called them all last night to ask if they were coming and they all said yes.”



“Looks like it’s only us who took it seriously.” I continue eating under his disapproving gaze.

“Wasn’t this Gadija’s idea?”

“Yes.” I nod. “She insisted we celebrate becoming friends because of the play.”

Last year Tauhier, Sufyaan, Fuad, Amierah, Gadija and I were picked to be in a District Six school play by our Standard Seven Afrikaans teachers. They needed fluent speakers for the play and, shame, we were the best they could find. We started spending a lot of time together rehearsing, so I suppose our friendship was inevitable.

Making friends is difficult for me, but Tauhier and I clicked immediately. It was so easy to talk to him that I soema phoned him after school one day.

He told me he couldn’t talk because he was watching *Duck Tales*. He didn’t make up something or pretend he didn’t like a kids’ show. It was honest. I knew I could trust him then. Trust is a big thing for me.

Since then, we tell each other everything. I know he likes me. It’s part of the reason I don’t want to lead him on. But he understands I can’t help how I don’t feel, and he doesn’t push.

“You and Gadija met in primary school mos, né?”

“Ja, she’s my oldest friend.”

“Ja, but she’s not your best friend.” He smiles smugly.

I ignore him, remembering how we met. “I ran into a wall and had a big knop on my forehead. All the kids made fun out of me. Gadija was the only one who came to ask me if I was okay.” I smile slightly. “She’d come find me every day during break.”

“That’s kinda sweet.”

In a quiet voice I say, “Gadija made school bearable.”

Primary school was mostly boys making fun of me or trying to touch my chest because I was one of the first girls to wear



a bra. The girls said mean things too. That's why my uniform is oversized tops and jeans to hide my 'assets'.

"You have to thank her." I poke him in the shoulder.

"And why must I nogals do that?"

"It's 'cause of her I came to Yaqeen Academy."

His brow furrows. "What, did she force you?"

"No, man, don't be dof. She told me she was going there for high school and when my daddy asked where I wanted to go, I could only remember the name of the school she said."

"Ah, I see. I shall be grateful to Gadija for putting us in the same place so you can get the bestest best friend in the whole world."

"Excuse me, *I'm* the best friend in the whole world." I tilt my head, hiding my smile.

"Ha. You picked me to be friends with. So I win."

He's right. He's the only person I've initiated a friendship with. Biting my lips, I fiddle with my popcorn instead of admitting it out loud, but he knows.

The room is thrown into darkness when the lights go out, signalling the start of the movie. He places his popcorn on his lap and starts eating. Raising his slushy from the cup holder, he takes a sip and sinks back into chair.

Leaning in, I ask, "Lekker comfy?"

"Ja. You can lay your head on my shoulder if you wanna be lekker comfy too?"

He's not trying to be romantic. Tauhier is lanky tall, but I'm short. Everyone is vrek tall compared to me. If I lean back, my head hits a groove in the seat and it's ongemaklik. Usually I lean forward or get a booster seat but Maynard Mall movies don't have any.

Tucking my arm around my popcorn, I drop my head against his shoulder. The screen is clear through the gap in front of me. His arm holds his popcorn box in place, safe on his side of the



seat. Halfway through, I'm awkwardly leaning forward, captivated by what's happening on screen when he gently pulls my head back against his shoulder. I must look uncomfortable. This time his arm rests lightly against the skin of mine.

Out of nowhere, little sparks crackle in the space where he's touching me. A heaviness settles in my tummy and heat spreads everywhere.

He turns to me, concern reflected in his dark green eyes.

"You oraait?"

I can't let him know, so I nod distractedly. The rest of the movie is drowned out by my staggering heartbeat. He continues eating his popcorn, oblivious to my crisis. This crackling changes everything.

I can't explain how we do this, but he often knows what I'm thinking, as if I've said it out loud and I don't want that to happen right now. I attempt to relax my taut muscles.

He frowns at me. "You sure you oraait You're being weird."

For the first time, I want to hide from him. Shaking myself mentally, I clear the new awareness from my throat.

"I haven't eaten yet."

He chastises me with a look. "Let's get a bit after the movie."

His brows furrow some more as he continues to stare. He blinks and turns back to face the screen, chewing his popcorn, his arm still in the same place.

I'm hyper aware of where he is – and where I'm not – because suddenly I want him to hold my hand. Or kiss me.

I realise all the reasons I gave for not liking him are the exact reasons I do.

My eyes snag on his hand holding his popcorn box. His fingers are making dents in the box from squeezing it so tightly. My breath hitches as I drag my eyes slowly to his face. Before I can ask him what's wrong, he catapults a question into the space between us.



“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” He’s a little breathless, a bit vulnerable, as his eyes remain glued to the movie screen.

Mine are riveted to his face, taking in the tightness around his lips, the flare of his nostrils as he tries catching air.

I’m trying to hold on to my thoughts, but they are fluttering butterflies. The only thought that resurfaces is that he’s my best friend. What if we act on this crackling and it doesn’t work, or we have terrible fights, break up and can’t be friends any more? The thought of losing my best friend helps me make up my mind.

“It could never work between us.” My whisper carries false confidence. I hold onto the thought that it’s not worth the risk but my ears are perked for him to say we should try. He doesn’t say it, though.

“Ja, ja, you’re right.” He’s not going to push.

For the remaining third of the movie, I steal quick sideways glances at him, considering all the what-ifs of us being together. I’m torn between wanting more and wanting my best friend. I don’t think I can have both.

As the credits roll, I avert my eyes as we shuffle outside. The shift between us is a flashing siren we’re avoiding. Before he can say anything, his beeper goes off. Clipping it off his belt he reads the message.

“My daddy’s here to pick me up. There’s no time to get dite.”

Our eyes meet as he looks up and the air crackles, catches fire really. Silently, he’s urging me to give this a chance. Silently, I keep repeating that I can’t. He drops his lashes, severing the tacit conversation between us. I watch him clip the beeper back on his belt.

“Do you need a lift home?”

I link my fingers in front of me instead of reaching for him. “No, I’m gonna take the bus home. My ouma asked me to get some stuff at Edgars first.”



Pausing, he draws in a deep breath, ready to say something about what just happened. I plead for him to let it go. Conceding, he lets out a deflated breath.

He gives me a fist bump. "See you on Monday."

Smiling with relief, I look at how our skin contrasts. Despite both our fathers' dark skin, he has his mother's fair complexion and mine is a combination of my parents' tones that looks like strong milk tea, dotted with freckles.

Our steps sync as he walks with me to Edgars. Leaving me at the door with a wave, he veers to the entrance to meet his father. I'm transfixed by his light brown hair as it moves through the crowd before he disappears.

Checking the list in my hand, I start with the towels and wonder if the sheets, pillowcases and vests she wants will be easy to find. Working methodically helps settle my conflicting thoughts. By the time I'm on the Khayelitsha bus, I'm breathing normally, despite the heavy bags in my hands. The people next to me are talking about the new South African multicoloured flag, but their words are like background music as the cinema moment with Tauhier replays in my head.

The closer I get to home, the more I'm convinced that our friendship is not worth the risk.