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FIGHT BACK

A. M. DASSU

Lisa smiled as she sat down near the door. She smiled at me just like she used to. What was going on?

I glared at Sukhi as she put down her backpack and pulled out her pencil case. She grabbed my exercise book and wrote: *PEACE OFFERING* on the back page.

Whatever she meant, I was not impressed. I think my face said it all.

Sukhi whispered, “Let’s talk after lesson, yeah?”

Mr Wilkinson stood in front of the whiteboard. “You’ve worked hard on your end-of-year assessments, so I thought we could have a free lesson. You can decide what we discuss.”

Jayden’s hand shot right up. Mr Wilkinson ignored him and nodded at Leon, who said, “I wanna talk about the police brutality protests happening in America.”

We need to talk about what’s happening at home in the UK first, I thought.

“OK,” said Mr Wilkinson. “What else?” His blue eyes scanned all of us.

“I want to talk about friendship,” said Lisa, her flushed cheeks more visible than usual because her hair was covered and off her face.

Both Sukhi and I glanced at her and then at each other.

“OK, Lisa... Anyone else?” He wrote the suggestions on the white board. A few more hands went up.

I raised my hand slowly. I had to speak up. That blog had said that's what made a difference. So it was time.

"Yes, Aaliyah?" Mr Wilkinson pointed his pen at me.

"I want to talk about identity and freedom of expression ... maybe even hate crimes?"

A murmur went around the class. I felt all sixty eyes on me as I focused on Mr Wilkinson.

Leon chimed in, "Yeah, I think that's a good one."

Wait, was someone actually agreeing with me?

"Yeah, me too," added Sukhi.

I glanced over at Lisa, who nodded and said, "Me too."

Then Sami, who sat next to me, and another kid, and another.

Feifei put her hand up. "I hate it when people ask me if I'm from China. Why can't I be both British and Chinese?" She swept her short black hair to one side of her face.

She was right. People asked where my parents were from, and when I told them England, they always seemed surprised and asked where my grandparents were from. As if that was the most important thing about *me*.

Sami put his hand up slowly and then straightened it as if he'd found his confidence. "I hate that people look down on me because I had to leave my country.

They assume I lived in a desert tent with camels. As if I've never used a computer or played with anything other than dirt." His eyes were fixed on Mr Wilkinson's face. I think he was nervous. "I think focusing on what is different about us divides us, and we need to change that by looking at what we have in common."

He was right. Even though he'd been here a week, I'd never heard him speak. I was really surprised by how well-spoken he was. He sounded American and not like I'd assumed he would. *I* was one of those judgemental people he was talking about. I bit my lip, feeling bad.

Leon Abbott said, "I hate the way some people look at me and my big brother when we walk into a shop. They stiffen up and you can see that they think we're gonna cause trouble." He eyed Jayden and added, "I'm proud to be Black and I love my 'fro – I don't care what people think of it – I don't go around telling people how to wear their natural hair, do I?" He gave the cutest grin, showing off his dimples. "It's not my fault I wear it so good."

There was a ripple of laughter. Leon always knew how to lighten the mood when we were discussing a heavy subject.

Suddenly, I felt supported. As if I wasn't alone. Maybe other people were affected by hate crime at school, but I

hadn't thought about them until today because I was so focused on what was happening to me.

"Anyone else want to share how their identity is challenged or how they're not allowed to express themselves?" Mr Wilkinson scanned the room, and when Lisa raised her hand, he nodded at her.

"Ummm, I'm not challenged—" she began.

Jayden cut in. "You are mentally, with that thing on yer head!"

"Jayden!" Mr Wilkinson barked. "Last warning. Lisa, please continue. You won't be interrupted." His eyes were firmly planted on Jayden.

Lisa's cheeks were almost fuchsia pink. "Uhhh ... as I was saying, no one challenges my identity, and I'm free to wear what I want, but my best friend ... errr ... Aaliyah ... she can't, and it's so not fair, which is why I'm wearing this scarf. To support her."

My skin tingled. What was she doing? I wasn't going to fall for her tricks. She probably had a plan with Darren.

I caught Sukhi smiling at me from the side. I stared at my nails.

"Umm..." Jonah put his hand up. "I know I don't look it, but I am different. I'm Jewish and some people hate to hear that. People are still antisemitic, and with everything on the news right now, I can't wear my kippah

outside of my house. I only put it on once I'm in the car, near the synagogue. I don't feel safe to say I'm Jewish."

I couldn't help staring at him. So *he* was like *me*. He couldn't wear his symbol of religion because he was scared he'd get attacked. Maybe I wasn't the only one struggling to express my identity. I'd have to talk to him at lunch. I'd never spoken to him about anything other than homework before, but maybe I could approach him by first asking him to speak to the student council about raising money for Jo and the other Ratcliffe students affected by the bombing.

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Sukhi hooked her arm through mine as we stepped into the corridor after the bell went, Lisa walked next to her. "We're going to the toilets," she said, a twinkle in her eye.

The corridor was flooded with kids and their backpacks. I felt sick. I didn't know what their game was, but I didn't need more problems to worry about right now. I'd dealt with Lisa emotionally – accepted that she hated me. I didn't need to go through it all over again or for her to pretend she was still my best friend.

"I don't need the toilet," I said.

Sukhi rolled her eyes. "Ali, please will you just listen? We need to talk. ALL of us."