

Chapter 1

“Complete the quiz on Chapters Six and Seven for tomorrow—no excuses!” comes the squeaky voice of Mr Van Dyk, a biology teacher at Kanonkop High School.

As the bell sirens throughout the building, hundreds of students rush for the gate, tearing off their ties and tugging their shirts loose in celebration of the day’s end. Unlike the other students, Carlos Bloom, a senior at Kanonkop High, slowly makes his way to the main gate. Just as he is about to exit the main entrance, a boy rushes in front of him and grabs him by the neck. Carlos, not finding this funny, stares at his best friend with a distant look in his eyes.

Nick Ripple and Carlos Bloom have been friends since the Bloom family moved to Middelburg, Mpumalanga, from Natal Province over five years ago. Nick, who Carlos nicknamed ‘Pockle’, is chubby, short, and dark-haired—the complete opposite of Carlos.

“What’s wrong with this picture?” Nick says, still gripping Carlos’ neck.

“What picture?”

“A picture of your face,” Nick says with a grin as a camera flashes in his other hand.

“Just a long day, Nick. Mrs Crawford isn’t going easy on us. That old cow,” Carlos mumbles.

Mrs Crawford is head of the Maths and Science Department at the school. She is an elderly woman who makes her living by

pushing her students to the limit—supposedly for their own good. Except most of the students think she'll be better off running Mr Schreiber's cattle farm.

"Oh, one of those days, huh?" Nick asks, but Carlos doesn't reply. The two boys don't live far from each other and often walk each other home from school. As they trudge along, the sun beats down the tarred road, making the journey unbearably hot and uncomfortable. Nick, pushing his bike alongside him, kicks at rocks and barks at the juniors in front of them, which only gets on Carlos' nerves.

Upon reaching Carlos' front yard, Nick gets on his bike and waits for Carlos to say goodbye like he usually does... but nothing.

"Hey, hey, hey! What's this all about? Where's your head at?"

Carlos turns around, slowly shaking his head. "Sorry, mate, very far away."

"I can see that, and I don't like it one bit," Nick says as he begins to paddle away. As usual, he waits until he's almost a block away, then shouts at Carlos, "Tomorrow it is then, champ!"

Carlos turns back to the house and whispers to himself, "Tomorrow it is... Pockle."

Just as he pushes the front door open, Mrs Bloom appears from the lounge with a big smile on her face. "How was your day, my love?" Sophia smacks her son's cheek with a sloppy kiss.

"If I ever come home looking like that on a Thursday afternoon, please shoot me!" a voice cuts in from the stairs.

Carlos turns to his older sister, Elizabeth, who always has something mean to say. "Shut up, Ice Queen!" he snarls.

"Huh, sounds to me like someone's had a bad day," another voice chimes in from the dining room.

Realising who it is, Carlos heads to the dining room and greets his aunt in a flat voice, "Hi, Aunt Cornelia."

"Hey, darling," his aunt responds. Cornelia, Sophia's sister, lives across the street from them. Her husband died a few years ago, and her two children are all she really has left.

"Sandwich, love?" Sophia offers, following Carlos in from the front door.

"No thanks, Mum—too hot. Any juice around?"

Cornelia pours Carlos a glass of juice, and he immediately downs half before pulling out a chair at the table. Three more chairs scrape back as everyone takes a seat around the table.

"So... my dearest little brother," Elizabeth begins, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "what is resting so heavily on your shoulders?"

Carlos looks up from the table and finds all three pairs of eyes on him.

"Mrs Crawford. I *hate* that woman!" he cries.

"Huh, welcome to the club," Elizabeth says in an attempt to comfort her brother. "Luckily, school is a thing of the past for me."

"How's that supposed to make me feel better?" Carlos retorts.

"Enough, you two!" Sophia snaps. "Not one more word from you. If you can't be nice to each other, then don't talk to each other!"

Elizabeth stands up and moves behind Carlos, running her fingers through her brother's hair. In a teasing voice, she leans closer as she watches her mother, "Yes, Mummy." Realising both her mum and brother aren't going to take the bait, she leaves him alone and makes her way upstairs.

"What happened?" Cornelia asks, drawing their attention back to the subject.

"That maths test we took last week—you know, the one Uncle Kyle helped me prepare for?"

"Oh, yes, you guys spent hours on that," Sophia recalls.

"*Thank you!* I couldn't be more prepared than I was, yet I got a lousy 'B!'"

"A 'B'? That's great!" Cornelia chimes in.

"Great? What are you talking about?" Carlos shoots her a look. "I need at least an 'A' to get credit by the second semester."

"Ugh, you lost me," Cornelia says with a shrug.