

Published in the UK by Scholastic, 2024  
1 London Bridge, London, SE1 9BG  
Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate,  
Glasnevin, Dublin, D11 HP5F

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ISBN 978 07023 3852 6

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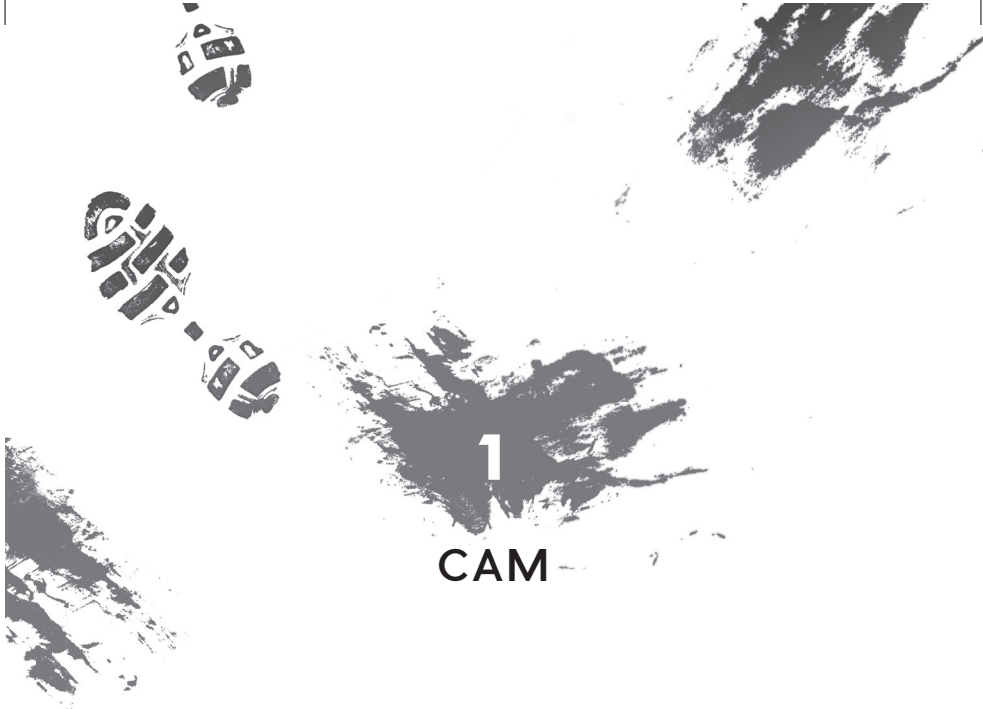
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# 1 CAM

“Oh, Cam! Hold up!”

Mom’s voice echoes across the entire front school yard. Well, it feels like it at least. Suddenly everyone’s eyes are now on me. Sanera High is always watching and waiting for someone’s parent to embarrass them. Even if it is just with a simple greeting.

I close the car door behind me and shoot Mom a less-than-impressed smile. Immediately I feel bad and morph it into a more appreciative one. “Yeah?”

“Don’t forget I’m away on that work trip tonight,” she says, half hanging out of the window, unaware her white blouse is scarily close to some dirt on the car door. “It’ll only be the night. But do you want me to call Jonesy’s mom and see if you can stay—”

“No,” I say quickly. Jonesy wouldn’t appreciate anyone

calling his house. That, I know for certain. His mom has a lot going on right now and he's embarrassed by it. "It's fine. I'll ask him in literally five minutes."

Mom stares back at me for a moment. Contemplating. Questioning. Before quickly moving on. She doesn't have time to probe too deeply into my life – not since my dad died and she became the sole breadwinner. Next thing, she's holding up my track bag with raised brows. "Forget something?"

I chuckle slightly. "Thank you," I say, leaning in through the open window, careful to avoid the dirt. *Man, we should really clean this thing.*

"Let me know what you decide to do, please."

"I will."

"And don't forget to eat—"

"Mom!" I bite. Not maliciously, but to interrupt her before I'm late to class. Otherwise, we'll be here all morning. She always feels guilty before she goes away – I don't know why. It's not her fault that it's just us. There's going to be times when I'm home alone. I've gotten used to it now. Well, I've had to.

She sighs. "OK, fine. Say hello to Jonesy and Amber from me... Love you."

I smile, grab my bag and head towards the front entrance. I hear music nearby. My eyes scan the area and find some kids with a boom box, inconspicuously smoking something they probably shouldn't be on school grounds.

But hey, I don't judge. It'll probably be legal someday. It's not for me though – I need a clean head for track.

I find myself bobbing my head to “You Get What You Give” when I finally hear the familiar jumpy exhaust of Mom's car pull away. Or, rather, Dad's car. Even after being fixed, her car still makes that dreadful noise. It doesn't exactly fit with her job as a hotshot marketing executive. But no, she won't get a new one. *Too many memories*, she always says.

I know what she means. And I feel exactly the same. Mom has Dad's old car. And I have his old *old* car. They'll be with us until they're heaps of unmoving junk on wheels.

Once the rumbles distance themselves, I waste no time in peeling off my track jacket. Mom loves me wearing it – me, not so much. I enjoy track and all, and I know I'm good, but I don't feel the need to boast about it everywhere I go like the other *jocks* – Kenny and Brad and the other footballers. Track is relatively normal. High school football is another beast entirely.

But that's Sanera High for you. It's a lot. Why a small town like this has such a ridiculously large school is beyond me. Sure, it's the *only* school in Sanera, but there's not a whole lot of kids either.

The red-brick exterior and blocky design remind me of every school in the movies. Like a prison but with more windows.

I head inside the main hall, where everyone is clustered

into their cliques. Jocks, cheerleaders, geeks, stoners, athletes, all the stereotypes. On paper, I'd fit in with the jocks, but in reality ... no. I'll stick with people who don't revolve their entire personality around the sport they compete in.

My best friends, Amber and Jonesy.

I look around for our homeroom. We've been back at school for a month or so and I still struggle to find it. It's a maze in here. Every room, hallway, turning, passage — they look the same. Then the bell rings ... and suddenly all hell breaks loose.

The pleasant music from the boom box quickly cuts off and I'm pushed aside in the flurry of people. My back hits the wall and I take cover by the lockers.

Thankfully, it doesn't take too long for the human traffic to die down and I make a run for it. I'm already late. One minute it's a wall of noise, and the next you could probably hear a pin drop.

I run through the halls, stressed now, when—

“You should be in homeroom,” a high-pitched yet masculine voice calls out to me, stopping me in my tracks. I stumble and almost fall but catch myself before I face-plant. Slowly, I turn to the origin of the voice to find Mr Graham ... my homeroom teacher. A stern expression is on his face, accompanied by crossed arms. Teacher code for “less than impressed”.

*So should you*, I want to say, but instead settle on

something a little less accusatory. It's not like Mr Graham to be *so* strict. "Just on my way there now."

A grin breaks across his face. "Cam, I'm kidding."

"Sorry?"

"You're late by sixty seconds, don't worry. If you're late, then so am I!"

I force out a laugh. Mr Graham thinks he's hilarious; the rest of us disagree. But that's Mr Graham for you. He means well. I follow him to class in silence as he chatters on about how bad the finale was of some Tudors documentary he watched last night, my eyes fixed on the back of his grey-and-brown tweed suit until we reach the room. Mr Graham teaches history and totally dresses the part.

"It was completely historically inaccurate," he finishes, flinging open the door. "Factually all over the place—" He coughs, loud and uncontrollably, which quickly fades into a low clearing of his throat. "Apologies, my allergies are awful this time of the year..."

I spot Amber and Jonesy across the room and wave.

"Sorry I'm late, class," Mr Graham announces, as I slip past him. "I trust you're all preparing for the day ahead and not taking advantage of my absence." He frowns at Kesia Bates on the front row who's casually knitting a scarf even though we live in California. She puts her needles down.

I find my way to the back left corner, squeezing through the filled desks to where Jonesy and Amber are huddled. Jonesy has his usual dark grey hoodie hanging off his slim

build, and his brown curls perfectly frame his similarly coloured eyes. Amber, on the other hand, is decked out to the nines. She's had her braids done since yesterday. They now crest halfway down her back and are interspersed with red and brown. The pop of colour matches the red of her jacket.

"Nice of you to finally show up," Amber comments.

"Hi," I say as I take my seat in front of Jonesy. My gaze meets his. "Hi, bro."

Jonesy smiles and I'm sure his cheeks redden slightly. "Hey." His words crack slightly as he speaks. It makes my chest pang. Why, I'm not quite ready to think about yet.

I move on. Quickly. "Mom had a million instructions before she left on her trip. You know how she gets. So, did I miss anything?"

"I heard there's a new girl starting." Amber always has the news. Where she gets this news, I don't know. I think she has a third eye or something.

"There's never new people," I reply.

"I was new," Amber replies.

I blink. "Five years ago."

She sighs. "Whatever. It'll be nice to have somebody new around. I'm bored of seeing the same people all the time."

"Wow, love you too," Jonesy says. "Wait – *it'll be nice to have somebody new around?*" He juts his head forward. "You mean, we're going to take her in?"

Amber laughs. “I’m not proposing that we adopt her, but I know how scary it can be starting a new school. In Sanera. *And* in senior year? That’s rough. Let’s just see what she’s like, OK? If she’s nice, there’s no harm in showing her around.”

She’s right. But it’ll be strange integrating someone into the gang after it being us three for so long. Sure, we have our own friends outside the group and all, but our gang is different. It’s like a little family.

“You’re right,” I finally chime in and turn to Jonesy. “Right, Jones?”

Jonesy looks at me, then Amber, reluctant and reserved. When it comes to people, he’s not as forward as us. Seems shy, but once you get to know him – a whole new person.

He groans before ultimately giving in. “Well, it’s not like I can say no.”

Amber bares her pearly teeth and tugs at his sleeve excitedly. “I wonder what she’ll be like. Wait, let’s guess her name – Rachel.” There’s a certainty to her tone, like she already knows. But then again, that’s Amber. So confident in everything that she does. Fearless.

Jonesy thinks and scratches his temple. “Veronica.”

She turns to me. I “uhm” for a second before settling on “Daphne”.

Amber scoffs. “She’s a teenager, not a middle-ager.”

“You asked us to guess!”



The door creaks open, interrupting my words.

Everyone's head shoots towards the noise. It's a sea of blonde and brown and at the end of it: the new girl, a deer in headlights. Can you blame her, facing sixty eyes?

"Miss Allen!" Mr Graham says, attempting to save her. He rises from his desk and ushers her into the room. "Welcome to Sanera but more specifically 21A. As you can see, we're all delighted to meet a new student! We don't get many!"

There's a pause in which Mr Graham waits for the girl to respond. When she just stares, he carries on. "I trust you have your schedule for the week?"

She nods.

"Then you know that I am also your history teacher. It's lovely to meet you." Silence. Mr Graham adjusts his gaze elsewhere. "Would anyone care to show Miss Allen around today?"

"I'll do it," Clive Loomis mumbles under his breath, and we all roll our eyes.

He's a creep. When I say Sanera has its stereotypes ... it's true, even down to the douchebags. There's a few of them. I'm unsure if I can count them on two hands. But everything leads back to that football team. Figures.

"We will," Amber calls out. Her kind expression seems to work because the new girl looks grateful.

"Excellent," Mr Graham says. "Please show our new

student a warm Sanera High welcome!” He raises his hands into the air in some celebratory ... pose. It doesn’t quite work with the tweed.

No one says anything, but you have to give him points for trying. The new girl should feel lucky it isn’t Miss Phelps introducing her. Or, even worse, Mrs Strode.

“Hi,” the girl offers as she approaches. Timid. “I’m Buffy.”

“Darn,” is the first thing I think to say.

Buffy’s eyes widen. “Sorry?”

“Oh. No, we were trying to guess your name before you got here.”

Amber chuckles. “Safe to say we were all way off. I don’t think any of us expected a vampire slayer in our class.”

“Well, I’ve never heard *that* before,” Buffy sarcastically replies. She’s blonde, and pretty too. A dimple appears in her cheek, teasing at a smile. “Where shall I—”

“Here,” Amber says, removing her jacket from the seat in front. “I’m Amber.”

“Cam.”

Jonesy raises his hand. “Jonesy.”

Amber scoots in her chair until she’s sitting close to Buffy. “So, how do you like Sanera so far?”

Buffy shrugs. “I’ve only been here for a few days so I can’t say I hate it—”

“Yet,” I finish.

“Cam!” Amber cries. She turns to Buffy and smiles reassuringly. “He’s kidding.”

“I *am* kidding,” I say, meeting Buffy’s gaze, throwing in a small wink that I’m pretty sure Amber misses. Thankfully. Amber is one of those *good* people. She doesn’t like to talk shit about anyone or anything, even our dullsville hometown. “School is ... school.”

“My mom said this is a good high school. Best in Sanera.”

I snort. “This is the *only* high school in Sanera. You go here or you don’t get anywhere. But I’m guessing you know that already?”

Buffy doesn’t immediately respond, but she doesn’t need to. Obviously, she *didn’t* know that. I wonder why she’s here in Sanera in the first place. It’s not exactly the hotspot destination.

Amber hurries on eagerly. “Cam’s only playing... It’s not bad. It’s like any other high school, really. For every annoying teacher, you get three nice ones.” She nudges Jonesy. “Tell her.”

Jonesy finally pitches in. “There are some decent ones. Mr Graham, for instance. So long as you laugh at his ... attempts at jokes, he’s not bad. Classic nerdy history teacher who also runs the school musicals. Full of tricks.”

Buffy smiles. “I feel like I’m going to get lost every period. My last school was nowhere near as big as this place.”

“I would say you’ll get used to it, but I got lost myself this morning,” I admit.

“Cam is very hopeless though,” Jonesy declares.

“That I can attest to,” Amber adds. “The school is a big ol’ maze but once you know your way around, you’re set. Where did you transfer from?”

“Palatio High in Connecticut.”

Amber’s brows raise. “Oh wow ... not close at all.” Her eyes sweep over Buffy’s outfit. Every single layer of it. “First time in California?”

Buffy looks down at herself. “What, is it obvious?”

For the first time, properly, I take Buffy in and yeah, it’s not the most logical attire for Sanera, or California for that matter. Long-sleeved tee, jeans and a denim jacket. She’ll get it eventually.

“I love your shirt,” she says to Amber. Instinctively, all our eyes go to her yellow tee. It’s bright and bold. Just like Amber.

“Thanks. My mom’s a tailor so this is courtesy of her. What brings you to Sanera, anyway?”

“My mom got a new job she couldn’t pass up, so we moved almost overnight. A fresh start.” Her words seem oddly wooden – rehearsed, almost, I think. But she’s nervous. Maybe she’ll loosen up a bit as the day goes on.

The rest of homeroom goes like that. Mostly small talk, a bit stilted, but it’s still nice. And surprisingly, as the time goes on, it *does* start to feel less awkward. Except to

Jonesy, maybe, who is clearly still reserving judgement. I'm sure he'll express his opinions later though. Who knows? Maybe Amber's right and a new face in the gang would be a good thing.

When the bell finally goes, the whole class stands up at once and I can see Buffy panic again.

"Where's your first class?" Amber asks, her words barely audible over the cacophony of chair scrapes, zippers and teenagers.

Buffy studies her schedule for a long moment, before timidly reciting, "Bio in 45B."

Amber's eyes light up. "We're in the same class! Mrs Strobe."

I see Buffy's posture loosen. "Is she nice?"

"Super chill."

As we file out, I notice Mr Graham is speaking on his brick-sized cell phone. It's old as hell. "Hello, how can I..." His voice tails off. An expression crosses his face that I can only describe as one of absolute shock. "You can't be serious," he murmurs.

I nudge Jonesy and jerk my head towards the teacher. Amber and Buffy are too far ahead to notice, but Jonesy's eyes narrow in curiosity. Mr Graham listens for a moment, then nods, hangs up and slumps back into his chair. Hand on face, he sighs through his fingers. His face is ashen.

He stares blankly into space until he eventually catches us gawking. He promptly sits up and straightens his suit

jacket, forcing a smile. “Come on, guys, off to class. Nothing to see here.”

It’s clear it’s not *nothing*. “Maybe he got dumped,” Jonesy whispers.

I snort. “Mr Graham wears jackets with elbow patches. He doesn’t have a love life,” I whisper back.

We head to first period, and forget all about it.