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Inside the classroom the students were getting out their pens and paper. Mr Popov had insisted that April tie Pumpkin up outside. She didn't have a leash, so she'd had to make an improvised one out of shoe laces. Not her own, of course; she'd forced Fin to give her his.

'Today we learn about interval training,' said Mr Popov. 'Everyone get out your cockroaches.'

All the other students started rifling through their bags, pulling out shoeboxes, jam jars and Tupperware containers.

'Did he say cockroaches?' asked April.

Fin just shrugged. He was as baffled as her.

'Today you will develop a program to increase the cardiovascular capability of your cockroaches,' said Mr Popov.

The goody-two-shoes pigtail girl put her hand up.

'Yes, what is it, Matilda?' asked Mr Popov.

'The new kids don't have cockroaches,' said Matilda.

Everyone looked at Fin and April.

‘What?’ demanded Mr Popov. ‘No uniforms, no pens and now no cockroaches!’

‘Come on!’ exclaimed April. ‘You can’t have expected us to know we needed cockroaches.’

‘But the race is this Saturday,’ said Matilda.

The other students started muttering to themselves.

‘We’re not entering the race,’ said Fin.

There were several gasps of shock.

Mr Popov sighed. ‘Fine, you sit at the back. Observe what everyone else is doing. Just no getting in the way.’

‘Aren’t we supposed to be learning about *our* physical education, not the physical education of cockroaches?’ asked April.

‘It’s analogous,’ said Mr Popov. ‘You apply what you learn training cockroaches to your own training.’

‘I’m pretty sure this is not in the standardised curriculum,’ said April.

‘Well, it’s in my curriculum!’ yelled Mr Popov. ‘Go to the back of the class.’

April and Fin watched as the other students broke up into small groups and started running their

cockroaches through short exercises. It was all very peculiar. One group encouraged a cockroach to run up the tube of a vacuum cleaner by luring it with a piece of old toast. Another put their cockroach in a clear plastic hamster ball then rolled it around on the floor. And yet another group had a tiny cockroach-sized treadmill made out of a hand-cranked kitchen whisk.

‘They’re all barmy,’ muttered April.

‘Nutty as fruitcakes,’ agreed Fin. ‘But please stop telling them that. We’re never going to make any friends if you’re not nice to people.’

‘I don’t want to be friends with a bunch of cockroach lovers,’ said April. ‘I don’t see why we can’t go home to the city.’

‘Because we’d be killed or kidnapped by Kolektiv agents,’ stated Fin.

‘Sounds less painful than sitting here watching this,’ grumbled April.

At their old school there is no way the students would have cared about cockroach racing. They were all too busy being carted around a myriad of after-school activities. And if there was ever any free time between the yoga, Brazilian jiu-jitsu and macramé lessons, they would have spent it staring at an electronic

device, playing a game or bullying somebody on social media (the most bloodthirsty computer game of all). There is no way they would have spent a split second looking for, catching or training an insect. Let alone a disgusting great big brown one.

After half an hour of experimenting, Mr Popov called his class to order. ‘Right, we test your work. Bring your cockroaches to the front.’

Mr Popov rolled out a round mat that was two metres in diameter. Then he produced a large dish with a handle.

‘Is that the lid of a wok?’ asked April.

‘Duh,’ said Matilda. ‘It’s a replica of the official cockroach race ceremonial shield. We’re trying to copy race conditions.’

‘All competitors under the shield,’ said Mr Popov. He raised one edge and the students tucked their roaches underneath. ‘All right, on the count of three. One . . . two . . . THREE!’

He whipped back the lid, revealing ten cockroaches. None of them moved. The students all stared at their roaches intently.

‘I can see why everyone finds this such an exciting sport,’ said April sarcastically.

‘Shhh,’ said several people around her.

‘We’re all just standing here, staring at insects,’ said April. ‘Why should I “shush”?’

She looked around. Everyone was watching the cockroaches. Some people seemed to be praying, others rocked anxiously and Matilda fiddled nervously with her hand.

‘You’ll spook the cockroaches,’ whispered Darren.

‘Puh-lease,’ said April, but she was soon interrupted. A cockroach had started to move.

‘They’re off!’ cried Darren.

The rest of the class started screaming too, cries of ‘Come on!’, ‘You can do it!’ and ‘Run, please run!’ echoed around the room.

It was all over in about two seconds. One cockroach made a start, paused, then at lightning speed scurried straight for the outer ring.

‘She did it!’ exclaimed Matilda, swooping forward and snatching up her roach. She fumbled it into a Tupperware container so quickly she momentarily got her sleeve caught in the lid. ‘My Bertha was the fastest!’

‘Congratulations,’ said Mr Popov.

April snorted. ‘Don’t congratulate her,’ she said. ‘She just cheated.’

‘How dare you!’ exclaimed Matilda.

‘I dare because I’m one hundred per cent correct,’ said April. ‘You cheated.’

‘April, please don’t do this,’ said Fin.

‘That cockroach isn’t the one that crossed the line,’ said April, pointing to the roach scurrying about inside the Tupperware. ‘Matilda swapped it out. I saw her. She has another one up hersleeve.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ said Mr Popov. ‘This is just a class exercise. There’s no motive to cheat.’

‘There is if you want to practise cheating for the big race on Saturday,’ argued April.

People were starting to look less contemptuously at April and more contemptuously at Matilda now.

‘She’s making it up!’ accused Matilda. ‘She’s new and she’s got no friends. She’s got no proof.’

‘But the proof is right there, up your sleeve,’ said April. ‘The original cockroach must still be in there. I saw you hide something up your cuff.’

‘I did not,’ said Matilda.

‘We’ll soonsee,’ said April. Andwiththat, she finally got to do something physical in physical education. She leapt on Matilda. All the other students stepped out of the way so April had no trouble getting hold of

her. Matilda tried to fight her off, but April had a firm grip on her cuff. Eventually both girls pulled so hard, the entire sleeve tore off in April's hands.

'What have we got here?' said April, looking inside. 'Aha!' She pulled out a small plastic tube, the type vitamin tablets come in, and removed the lid. 'A cosy little bedroom for a cockroach.'

April shook it out. The cockroach and a small push-button fell into her hand.

'Hey, that's not a normal cockroach,' said Darren.

'Everything's abnormal here in Currawong,' said April.

'No, there's something not right about it,' said Animesh, a stocky boy whose cockroach had come second in the race.

'Give me a look,' said Fin. He picked up the cockroach. 'It's not a cockroach at all!' he cried. 'It's a robot!'

There were gasps from the rest of the class.

'Look,' said Fin. 'You can see the metal hinges on the legs. And right there is the cover for the battery.'

'And that button is the remote control she used to operate it,' said April.

Matilda burst into tears. 'I'm so sorry. I just really wanted to win.'

‘We all want to win,’ said Animesh witheringly.

‘But my dad won, and his dad won, and his mum won, and her cousin won,’ wailed Matilda. ‘There’s so much pressure to maintain the family tradition.’

‘What, were they all cheats too?’ asked April.

‘I can’t be the first person in my family to lose the Cockroach Races since Great-Uncle Waldo,’ wailed Matilda. ‘He’s eighty-one and he’s never lived it down. It’s haunted him his whole life.’

‘That’s enough,’ snapped Mr Popov. Just then the bell rang, it was the end of class. ‘Go on. Get out, all of you. I hope you learned something.’

‘I didn’t learn much,’ said April. ‘But to be fair, I learned more than I usually do in PE.’