

CHAPTER 1

'GAH, this skirt is the *worst*.' Layla muttered to herself as she studied the mirror on the back of her wooden bedroom door. Biting her lip, she tucked the cream shirt into her maroon skirt, untucked it, then tucked it back in again, weighing up which option was less ridiculous. OMG! Nothing was working. How was she supposed to make any friends at this new school when the uniform made her look like a nun? Layla squinted at her reflection, her bushy black eyebrows furrowing together. She wasn't even like one of those dope singing nuns from that movie *Sister Act 2*.

No, in this uniform she looked like a mean old lady who'd realised marrying God meant there was nobody around to help do the dishes.

'*Oh, happy day . . .*' Layla started humming, distracting herself with the thought of the famous gospel tune. The thirteen-year-old loved singing, even though her older brother, Ozzie, always said she sounded like a choking chimpanzee. *He doesn't appreciate my talent!* Layla giggled to herself.

Deciding to go with the shirt tucked in, she turned her attention to the next challenge: her headscarf. It was a shiny polyester maroon piece, made to match the burgundy skirt of the school uniform. The sheer polyester was lined with a slightly darker ribbon, giving it a formal look. Layla styled it in the traditional Sudanese way: the rectangle scarf wrapped around her head, covering her braids, ears and neck and leaving her face neatly framed by a smooth oval. The scarf was secured into place using a couple of maroon pins, newly and brightly bejewelled. Layla loved jewellery making and she had been undeniably the best bejeweller in her class last year, but that was at her old school. She wondered what the

kids she would meet on her first day of Year 8 would think of her work with scarf pins.

Feeling good about the situation, Layla stepped back to suss out her handiwork in the reflection.

Hmm. Not quite!

The short teenager scowled. Despite what she thought was foolproof wrapping, a couple of tight black curls had escaped from underneath the scarf, ruining the whole formal-and-neat vibe. Tugging, Layla tried to adjust the hijab, but the silky material slipped back over her braids, exposing her entire hairline. Her afro hair was rarely ever well behaved and today was no exception.

OMG! HAIR! C'mon! Today is an important day! She mentally scolded the rebellious curls. *Stay put and behave, hay?* Talking to her hair always worked. Layla pulled the scarf forward to cover her hairline again. Patting her head, then brushing her hands down the front of her shirt, Layla smiled inwardly. *You got this!* she told herself, and almost completely believed it.

'Layla! Where are you? We are going to be late!'

Baba yelled at her from downstairs. Judging by the clattering, her dad was in the kitchen cleaning up after breakfast. Layla hoped he'd packed

something delicious for her lunch. She was going to need all the energy she could get. Today was special because it was the first day of school after the summer break. *Deep breath*, Layla told herself in the voice of an 80s aerobics instructor. *Breathe in and out. In and out. You got this, gurl!* The Sudanese teenager was nervous because today wasn't just *any* first day of school. It was the first day of her *new school*. And that wasn't the only reason her dark brown knees were quivering under her pleated maroon skirt. Layla was starting at a fancy new school on the other side of town, where she didn't know a single soul.