WINNER OF THE MATILDA PRIZE
HALF my LUCK
SAMERA KAMALEDDINE

HALF my LUCK

SAMERA KAMALEDDINE

Angus&Robertson
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

Angus&Robertson
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*, Australia

HarperCollins*Publishers*
Australia • Brazil • Canada • France • Germany • Holland • Hungary
India • Italy • Japan • Mexico • New Zealand • Poland • Spain • Sweden
Switzerland • United Kingdom • United States of America

First published in Australia in 2021
by HarperCollins*Publishers* Australia Pty Limited
ABN 36 009 913 517
harpercollins.com.au

Copyright © Samera Kamaleddine 2021

The right of Samera Kamaleddine to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the *Copyright Amendment (Moral Rights) Act 2000*.

This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced, copied, scanned, stored in a retrieval system, recorded, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 978 1 4607 6022 2 (paperback)
ISBN 978 1 4607 1361 7 (ebook)

Cover design and illustration by George Saad
Cover image: Girl by shutterstock.com
Author photograph by Nikki Malvar / Heist Creative
Typeset in Sabon LT Std by Kirby Jones
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group
The papers used by HarperCollins in the manufacture of this book are a natural, recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable plantation forests. The fibre source and manufacturing processes meet recognised international environmental standards, and carry certification.

For Gracie – may you always know
where you belong

LAYLA

CHAPTER 1

Tayta had just finished explaining it to me for the three thousandth time. How I came to be cursed. My grandmother swears it was her cousin's first wife; she even saw her put the evil eye on me. Apparently, Tayta's cousin's first wife was reproductively challenged and crazy-jealous that another baby was being born into the family. Tayta blames my mother. She says she'll never forgive Mum for allowing visitors into our home during the first twelve months of my life – a critical time for evil-eye cursing, apparently.

'She should keep you away from everybody for more than one year!' she exclaims in her thick accent, waving one wrinkled hand over her sweaty forehead while she expertly stirs a pot full of bubbling red sauce with the other. 'I tell my cousin, I tell him she was no good! But, look what happens.'

I'm reared into a life of unluckiness, that's what happens. Perpetually destined to be the girl who stacks it in front of hot guys, who only ever gets the weirdos sitting next to her on the bus, and who is forced to spend her Tuesday arvos helping her grandmother do housework. Even in the summer holidays.

'The chairs, Layla! Up, up!' Tayta takes a break from her story to yell at me and wipe away her upper-lip glisten with a tea towel. I'd almost forgotten I had a mop in hand, but Tayta never forgets to order me to lift the chairs off the tiles and onto the dining table so I can 'clean the floor good like good Lebanese girl'. Her selective memory allows her to forget that I'm only *half* Lebanese. Consequently, I usually end up doing a half-good job of mopping her floors.

'Your mother, she is good?' she continues when we both know she's not really concerned about the wellbeing of my mother – the woman who divorced her favourite son. There'd be ceasefire all over the Middle East before that ever happened.

I nod, but she doesn't turn around to see. As I watch her fuss in the kitchen, bouncing between the hot stove, a mortar and pestle and a chopping board splattered with green beans, I so badly want her to keep bringing up the evil eye. Lately, it's all I've been thinking about.

*

'What are you thinking about?'

'Nothing,' I lie.

I escape Tayta's Spray-n'-Wiped clutches with exactly two and a half hours of worthy sunlight to spare, and a beach towel waiting for me on the busy sandbank of the river. A brown, hard-packed sandbank with tufts of grass surrounding the short perimeter. A lame excuse for a beach that I'm pretty sure is not fit for swimming in, but it's all we've got around here.

'Tell me. Or I'll tell my dad to tell *your* dad that you were talking to those dodgy-as guys who hang around the YMCA,' Cousin Sufia threatens, lying on her side and adjusting her big (huge) boobs that are spilling out of her red triangle bikini top. She might be three hours older than me, but she's not the boss of me. One day I'll even tell her that she's not as gangster as she reckons she is. 'Whatever. Ricky P is on his way to pick me up, so I don't have enough time to listen, anyway.'

Sufia has a secret boyfriend that no one in the family knows about. He's a DJ and everyone has to call him Ricky P. Even Sufia.

'Plus, I've been sweating it out here all day waiting for you.' She's glaring at me. 'And it's been *seriously* hot.'

‘I was at Tayta’s, you knew that.’ But Sufia rolls her eyes and tells me I’m ‘soft’ for doing whatever my dad tells me to do. I argue that I don’t have an overwhelming amount of choice when he has a scary dad voice and I’m just a cursed sixteen-year-old.

‘Yeah, well, I told my parents there was no way I’d be doing dishes for our grandmother these holidays. Get her a dishwasher, I said. I’ve got a life.’

She’s right … it’s next-level sweltering. While Sufia rants about ‘stupid forced duties’ and ‘being a good Lebanese girl’ (which, for the record, no one has ever called her), my sweat mo is building. I look around at the day’s remaining beachgoers and catch sunburnt faces (girls from school who reckon foundation is legit sun protection), a couple of wannabe fishermen (trying to also catch the attention of the sunburnt faces) and a whole sandbank of people who probably didn’t spend half the day scrubbing their grandmother’s house.

Sprawled like a starfish. The pedestal fan is whirring. My sheets feel like they need to be wrung out because there is … So. Much. Sweat. Noah’s playing with his remote-control car on the other side of the wall (more whirring). And it’s annoying because a) I feel like I’m never going to get to sleep tonight or any night for the rest of my life, and b) he’s fourteen

years old. I would argue that that's way too old to be playing with remote-control cars.

Mum had a go at me when I said as much at dinner. I should be more concerned about 'this heatwave they said we're going to have' and how much sun exposure my 'fair' skin is getting down at Lame Beach, she'd said.

I don't have fair skin. By most accounts, my skin would be described as olive. Like my dad's, like Sufia's, even like Tayta's. But I think sometimes Mum likes to forget that there are other ingredients mixed into us. Noah didn't get her light hair or milky complexion, either, and she once told me that she just wanted one of her kids to look like they came from her side. *Her side*. Like a team. Two opposing teams in a battle against each other. Mum versus Dad. Tayta versus everyone who isn't related to us. Me versus Noah ('cause he's not cursed with sleepless nights).

His car stacks it and a bunch of books tumble from his shelf to the floor. Instead of picking them up, I hear him shuffle towards his bed and sink into his sheets because he knows Mum'll put them away for him in the morning.

I get up to check that I've packed my sunscreen for tomorrow.

*

‘Shouldn’t you be at Ramadan right now?’ Carina Campbell stares at me blankly, as though perhaps it’s going around in her mind that if I was indeed participating in a month of fasting, I would most likely not be lining up for a sausage roll at the Lame Beach kiosk right now.

Or perhaps not.

‘Uh, no. That was like, two months ago. And anyway —’

‘Oh, right, I just thought I saw … I wasn’t like, being racist …’

It isn’t the first time Carina has uttered that sentence. As the student most likely to be school captain next year, she makes it her business to get up in everybody else’s business. Whether that’s intercepting notes between girls she’s not even friends with in English class, keeping track of all our period cycles … or asking me why my mum is blonde when I ‘look so ethnic’.

I’m not the only ‘ethnic’ person Carina has ever seen in her life. About 268 of my family members also live in the area alongside people who look like her. So I don’t know why she makes a big deal.

‘Hey, Carina, could you lend me a dollar?’ Speaking of blondes. Imogen Meyer swivels around from her place ahead of us in the queue, while Carina pokes her nose in and around her monogrammed

pouch, searching for a coin. Imogen doesn't look my way. Because that's what she does. Unlike Carina, who needs to be in your face, Imogen pretends you don't have one.

The transaction is over, Imogen and Carina return to their rightful place on the sandbank with the rest of the Suck-ups, and finally, life in the kiosk line gets back to some level of normalcy. Until I'm at the very front of the line.

And oh.

Who …?

What …?

I can't even …

'Yep, what can I get you?'

He pretty much has the hottest blue eyes I've ever seen.

'Er, are you still thinking about what you want?'

And actual (hot) biceps.

'… or should I just serve someone else?'

I thought I'd ordered two sausage rolls, a bottle of Diet Coke and a Snickers, but maybe not, given I've ended up back at our spot with …

'Cheese-and-tomato sandwiches?!' Maddy squishes her petite nose, peering into one of three white paper bags that I've just plonked in the centre of our overlapping towels. 'Did they run out of like, everything that was good?' She bites into one of the

sandwiches, despite the outburst, adding, 'I guess Diet Coke and Snickers isn't that healthy a lunch, anyway.'

It's kind of the worst lunch ever. But Maddy manages to scoff this daily diet and still look like a goddess. I wonder if her arteries are as pretty with the same golden, wavy locks.

George, on the other hand, is way less you've-ruined-my-lunch-and-life about the situation. Just as I'm about to super-casually ask if anyone knows who the guy working in the kiosk is, she comes out with, 'Your cousin's over there,' pointing half a sandwich at the Cedar Army, who are congregated under a towering red-gum tree, just near the river's edge. You can really only hang out there if you're Lebanese. And if you *are* hanging out there, you know you're well protected, because no one wants to bother them in case they start a riot.

'Oh, *God*, now she's coming over here. Good one, George.' Maddy isn't a massive fan of Sufia's, and when Sufia starts bellowing, 'Cuzzzzz!' across the sandbank, attracting the attention of every other beachgoer, I get it. It's embarrassing. But Sufia never cares who's looking at her.

'What's doing?' She's standing over us in a metallic-gold one-piece with the sides cut out. It's a bit much against a backdrop of murky river water.

‘Did your mum make those sandwiches?’ she asks, when I know what she really means is: ‘They are the most Aussie sandwiches I’ve ever seen.’ My nervous system is glad she doesn’t actually say that.

If I want a lift home later, she says, Ricky P will be here at four. I agree to the lift, even though Mum’ll lose it when she sees (and hears) me getting dropped off in Phantom1. After saying ‘enjoy your day’ to ‘Madeline and Georgia’, because she knows how much they love being called by their full names, Sufia strides off.

She slots back into the Cedar Army with zero effort. Some guy with super-tight black curls welcomes her return with a muscly arm around her shoulders, and she’s already belly-laughing with them about something.

I hope it’s not the cheese-and-tomato sandwiches.

Sufia and Ricky P are making out against Phantom1, his electric-blue Subaru WRX with an engine that sounds like a thousand lawnmowers having sex. The number plate is Phantom1, obviously; however, it’s for no obvious reason other than that’s what was available the day Ricky P registered it.

I’m supposed to be in the car, being driven home, but due to the aforementioned make-out session I’m waiting about two metres away – out of earshot of

Sufia and Ricky P's slurping, but within earshot of Imogen and Carina discussing the new kiosk guy.

'You're a perv,' is rebutted with, 'I'm a perv? You're the one who asked him his whole life story.' His whole life story? I'm listening …

'Where's he from again? Some country town?'

'Bega?'

'Yeah, that's it. Sucks to be him, having to work in a *kiosk* for the whole holidays. Even if your uncle *is* the boss.'

'Sucks to be his girlfriend. He says she's cool with it, but I'd be so pissed if Kyle was working on a beach with heaps of hot girls for weeks.'

It's highly likely Carina is only referring to her own group of friends when she says 'heaps of hot girls', but I don't even care about the insult right now.

He has a girlfriend.

Girlfriend.

Half my luck.

Mum totally lost it when she saw (and heard) Phantom1 flying down the driveway. There was all kinds of, 'That car can wake people up!' (it was four-thirty in the afternoon) and 'Does it even have seatbelts?' (oh, man, does it have seatbelts; Ricky P has had it kitted out with bright yellow racing harnesses like he's on Mount Panorama or

something). But mostly it was all about, 'I don't like you hanging around that Sufia.'

'That Sufia is my cousin, Mum. I can't really do much about it.'

Still red-faced and flapping her hands while I'm unpacking my sand-filled beach bag in the laundry (because Mum hates sand on the floorboards more than she hates missing Pilates), she says, 'Well, she's from *that* family, isn't she? You never know what she tells them. Or what she gets up to, either. But I bet it's not good. Layla, I'm telling you, she's a troublemaker.'

Mum would always say that about my dad when he'd come home from work late. Or didn't come home at all. So basically, it must mean *everyone* related to him likes making trouble, too.

I'm pretty sure I've dumped every last grain of sand from my day into the laundry sink, but I'm still furiously shaking my bag. After a few moments of silence, with just bag-shaking for noise, Mum finally vacates the doorway. 'Anyway, your father called,' she shouts back, speaking of the king of troublemakers. 'Noah spoke to him. He left a message for you on the kitchen bench.'

Sometimes Dad calls from Dubai, sometimes he calls from Beijing. But always, I miss the call and he leaves the same warning. When I reach the lone scrap of paper beside the hundred-year-old landline

Mum insists we keep, in Noah's ugly boy scrawl are the words: *Be good. Don't talk to boys.*

Imogen Meyer arrives by kayak the next day. Which is basically the limousine of the river world.

'She's such a show-off.' Maddy is slapping sunscreen all over the place. It's in her sideburn hair, eyebrows and nostrils, and I want to tell her about the mess she's made, but George is waving her hands off to the side of Maddy in a 'how funny will it be if we *don't* tell her?' kinda way. 'You live a few houses down and you paddle here just so everyone knows that your family owns a kayak? Seriously, whatever. Is my sunscreen rubbed in?'

George and I nod.

'Maybe it's arms day?' laughs George, grabbing the sunscreen bottle from Maddy's lap and squeezing some of the white stuff onto her own thighs. Not that there's any point. It feels like the UV rays have been turned up a bazillion levels today and there's an SPF slip-'n'-slide party happening on my body.

'Ha,' snorts Maddy.

'Can you imagine being in that family, though?' I'm wondering it in my head for a bit before I say it out loud.

Maddy's the first to react, even sitting up on her towel and whipping her sunnies off for effect. 'Ah,

yes, and it would be *crap*. First of all, you're expected to be perfect and good and get nerd marks all of the time. Because that's what you have to do in posh families. And second of all, *how* boring. The most vanilla sisters in our whole school. I reckon the most exciting thing that ever happens in that house is like, some kind of annual Scrabble tournament where Nan comes over for a roast-beef dinner and the cat gets a fur ball stuck in its throat and has to be rushed to the vet, so it's all called off until next year.'

George is cracking up. 'Wow, that is really specific, but not that boring.'

'I'm just saying,' Maddy adds, 'that who would want to be a rich nerd, anyway?'

That's the thing about Imogen Meyer – she's breaking all the rules about being rich *and* a nerd. Rich kids are supposed to be the cool ones, the popular ones. But the only cool thing about Imogen is the pair of Prada reading glasses she wears in three-unit maths.

'Better than being a poor nerd?' debates George. Like the three of us, she means. We found each other in the 'nerd' classes back in Year Seven, minus the designer glasses.

Poor or rich, nerdy or cool, I'd take respected-in-the-community family any day over my rough-around-the-edges relos. A dad who owns the biggest construction business in southwest Sydney

and a mum who's a cherished member of the local council – plus, a family tree that probably dates back to the First Fleet.

I'd even take boring.

'It is sooooo disgusting and hot. I'm going in for a swim,' Maddy announces, eyeing off the river in all its poo-brown glory.

'Maddy …'

'Yeah?'

'You might want to rub in the sunscreen on your face,' I tell her.

She's already halfway down the sandbank, but gives me two thumbs up in gratitude, then pushes her hands into her cheeks. We watch, behind the ripples of heat suffocating the air, as she throws herself into the water and sends splashes all over some girl trying to float on her back.

They say there are heaps of dumped cars at the bottom of the river, and that's why there's a 'no diving' sign planted on the edge. Not that anyone cares or listens. Right now, there are three guys lining up to swing from the rope-and-tyre combo attached to the heavy tree branch beside the boatshed.

Just as my eyes are about to dart away, Kiosk Guy is heading into the boatshed, lugging a case of soft-drink cans. And I've suddenly got good reason to keep them there.