

THE FIGHT

BY SARAH PENWARDEN



“Hey, Heath!” Calvin says. He uses a rugby pass to throw me a piece of balled-up paper. Calvin loves league. He plays it every weekend, then spends most of Monday morning reliving the game. He describes it in great detail to anyone who’ll listen. Today, it’s me. I’m sitting across from him in maths.

Mrs Gibson is at her desk, glasses on, marking last week’s test. I’m pretty sure I aced it.

“Calvin ...,” she says in warning, just quietly – but she also gives him a look.

Robbie sniggers, and Calvin makes a face back.

Robbie shouldn’t have laughed. I can feel the change in atmosphere. It’s like a hot day with thunderclouds on the way.

There’s a short silence, then scuffling noises as Calvin and Robbie begin to kick each other under the table. Calvin flicks Robbie’s ear. “Ow! Get off!” he yells.

Mrs Gibson looks up, about to say something to calm things down, but it’s too late.

Robbie mutters a few words under his breath, and Calvin’s up like a shot, scraping back his chair. I think I can guess what Robbie said. Calvin has that face – the one that says he’s lost it. His eyebrows are drawn together. His arms are up, he’s moving, he’s seconds away from following through.

“Leave the room, Calvin,” Mrs Gibson says. “Now!”

Calvin swears – just loud enough to be heard – and storms out.

Robbie sits there. He’s slightly shocked by the close call but trying not to show it. The rest of us do a good job of pretending to be invisible. There’s total silence as we go back to our work.



At interval, we're sitting on the benches outside Mr Matthews's room. Kai is demonstrating a kick-boxing move, and then I hear banging on the window: Mr Matthews. He's looking across the playground to where a pack of kids has gathered by the gum trees. In the middle of them, I catch a glimpse of Robbie and Calvin.

There's shouting and yelling, and more kids appear. Mr Matthews bursts from his room and runs towards the group. "Hey! Stop that!" he yells.

The crowd parts to let Mr Matthews through, and there's Calvin, jerking around, trying to land some punches. Robbie keeps ducking out of the way, looking more mad than scared. He's eyeing Calvin up, like he's not so sure he wants this to end just yet.

"Enough!" Mr Matthews grabs Calvin and holds his arms. Calvin starts yelling abuse at Robbie, saying he'll sort him later. Robbie stands there taking it, chin up, until his friends pull him away.

Mr Matthews walks Calvin to Mrs Langi's office. He's asked me to come, too. I help Calvin sometimes, try to calm him down. Doesn't always work.

Calvin scuffs his shoes, wipes quickly at his eyes. He knows he's on his last warning. He's been stood down before. Each time, Mrs Langi calls in his parents; Calvin promises to try harder. He knows he's not supposed to fight, but sometimes he gets so mad – then nothing can stop him.



We plonk ourselves outside Mrs Langi's office while Mr Matthews goes in to talk. Calvin hangs his head, studying the stains on his sneakers. Kids stare as they walk past. It's a weird kind of fame – and not worth anything. This is going to turn out bad.

Mrs Langi comes out and looks at both of us, hard, like I've done something wrong, too. She points Calvin into her office, closing the door behind her. I hear raised voices. Then Mr Matthews comes out and sits down beside me with a sigh.

"Calvin won't get kicked out of school, will he, sir?"

"Well, that depends," Mr Matthews says. "It's up to Mrs Langi – and the school board."

"But she doesn't know the full story."

Mr Matthews looks at me. "And what is the full story, Heath?"

"Robbie's been hassling Calvin about his mum," I say. "Robbie saw her coming out of their house. She was wearing pyjamas even though it was the afternoon. Robbie says she was drunk, and –"

"OK, OK," Mr Matthews says. He runs his hand through his hair.

"Calvin hates it. He's ashamed."

"I'd say you're right, Heath."

Mr Matthews looks at me thoughtfully for a moment, like I'm a book he's trying to read. "I'll make sure Mrs Langi knows," he says.

I'm thinking about Calvin and about Robbie as I walk home. The sky has been getting darker and darker, and it finally starts to rain. Small drops at first, but they get bigger fast. Once I've left the shelter of the shops, I start to run, putting on a final burst of speed as I turn into our street.

Mum's sitting in the lounge in her dressing gown. Her hair's not combed. There are dark circles under her eyes. Probably she's just woken up. She hasn't slept that well, not since my dad moved to Perth. "Come here, love," she says. "I've missed you today."

Mum puts her arms round me, and I hug her back, tight.



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by Sarah Penwarden

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