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H U D A

A N D

M E



A bold plan, a stolen credit card and
a trip halfway around the world



*For my mama and baba. For my boys.
Love you forever.
Little Pigeon, you were my backbone.*



The Airport

She's sitting in the airport lounge, fiddling with our tickets. I can tell she's excited because she has a little smile on her face and she keeps glancing at her pink digital watch. I can't believe we're doing this. I can't believe we're running away from home. Well, we're not really running away. We'll come back. We're running to our parents. On the other side of the world. We're getting out of Melbourne, because it all became too much. At least for Huda. And I'm an idiot for agreeing to go with her. But I need to make sure she doesn't do anything stupid, or get herself into some kind of mess.

We'll be dead meat if we're caught before we reach Lebanon. We'll be in trouble with Aunt Amel, with our

principal and with the police. Not to mention what Mum and Dad will do if they find out before we can explain. Thinking about it now makes me nervous. I check the time on my watch. Fifteen minutes until boarding.

Huda's looking at the red tag around her neck, trying to read the words. I can see her lips moving as she sounds out the letters.

'Akeal,' she calls to me, more loudly than she needs to. She's sitting with her legs crossed on the fancy purple couch opposite me, like she's watching telly at home. Her school backpack is on the floor next to her, half open. Two dolls' heads poke out. I told her not to pack any toys. 'What's un-accompeed minor mean?'

Un-accompeed. I want to tell her it means someone who goes to pee without help.

'It means you don't have an adult with you,' I say, shaking my head.

She looks at me with her black eyes and smiles. A naughty smile. She knows her plan is going perfectly. Huda might not be the smartest kid in her class, but I don't know any other nine-year-old who would steal a credit card and convince an airline to let her fly to the other side of the world.

As I sigh at my little sister, the announcement is made: 'All children travelling on flight XFL60 to Lebanon, please board at the gate now.'

Huda grins. She grabs her bag and zips it shut. Then she pulls her crumpled plane ticket from her pocket and tries to smooth the creases from it. She looks at me, still smiling. I want to stick my fingers in her dimples and see how deep they'll go.

'Are you ready, brother?'

In a way, she says the word *brother* to tease me, but I know she's also reminding me that I have to stay with her because she's two years younger than me.

'I guess so. Let's see if they actually let us on this plane.'

Huda doesn't wait for me while I pull my own plane ticket out of my pocket. In the flash of an eye, she's in the queue with the other kids waiting to board. The problem is, all those kids are with their parents. You might even think Huda was part of someone's family, the way she's standing there looking around with such excitement on that round, chubby face.

I catch up to her and she whispers in my ear, 'Almost there, Akeal, almost there.' She giggles, but I feel like wetting myself.

The queue moves slowly. Tickets are scanned, passports double-checked, and then, one by one, families disappear behind the glass doors to get onto the plane. I notice two security guards standing a few metres away, and my fingers clench around the straps of my backpack.

I want to spew. My back is sweaty and my singlet clings to my skin. We're going to be arrested, I know it.

'You look green, Akeal,' says Huda. She's scrunching up her face like she's grossed out by me. 'If you keep breathing like that, you're gonna faint. I'm too small to pick you up off the floor.'

I want to tell her we're going to one of those jails for children. The ones where we only get to see our parents once a month, and where we have to shovel horse poo for eight hours a day and eat homebrand cornflakes with no sugar every single day for breakfast. Instead, I stare at the patterned tiles on the floor and swallow hard.

Huda's still looking at me in disgust as we get to the front of the line and I finally pull my gaze from the floor. I see a woman smiling at us. She's wearing bright-red lipstick and has a hanky tied around her neck.

'Ah, unaccompanied minors. Boarding passes, please.' I can see now that she's fake-smiling. She has a little smear of red lipstick on her front tooth.

'Here you go, miss,' says Huda, handing over her ticket. She grabs mine from my sweaty palm and passes it over too.

Red Tooth analyses our boarding passes. Her eyes narrow. She doesn't scan our tickets.

Huda shoots me a look and purses her lips together. Her left cheek twitches.

'Passports, please.'

Huda nods and hands them to the woman quickly. Red Tooth opens my passport to the photo page, looks at my picture, and then looks at me. She turns to Huda, opens her passport, looks at her too, then raises her eyebrows.

This is all my fault. I wish I stopped Huda from taking Aunt Amel's credit card. I wish I stopped her from booking the tickets on the internet. I should've known better. I knew we'd get caught.

'Step to the side, please, children,' says Red Tooth. She's not smiling anymore. She gestures to the security guards to come over. They stand on either side of us.

'What's wrong, miss?' Huda asks. I know she's trying to sound bubbly. It's the voice she uses just before she bursts into tears.

'Standard protocol, dear. We need to call your parents to make sure you're okay to fly.'

'Oh, you don't need to do that, miss. They're the ones who booked us these tickets. Because they miss us so much.'

'Yes, little girl. But we need to make sure just one last time that your parents have given permission for you to travel today.'

Huda bites her lip. Her dimples are gone.

My stomach cramps. I can feel puke in my throat. My sister looks at me. Her lips are turned down and her eyes are watery.

We're dead.



Party's Over

The disaster all started a week ago. It was Mr Kostiki's birthday, and everything seemed normal enough. Huda spent the day with Mr Kostiki, looking at his coin collection and eating tinned sardines, and then came home to help Mum bake his birthday cake. Mum and Dad don't celebrate birthdays, but they think Mr Kostiki is a nice old man, and he's also Huda's best friend, so they didn't want him to be alone on his special day.

Mr Kostiki came for dinner, and after our first course, he asked my eldest brother Omar to put on some special Polish music in his honour. He then rather unexpectedly jumped onto the big coffee table in the middle of our family room and showed all us seven kids how to Polish dance.

‘What you really need to do, children, is to bend the knees nice and tight, then spring up like you’re a jack-in-the-box!’ Mr Kostiki shouted. Then he bobbed all the way down until he was almost squatting on the table and jumped back up.

I’d never seen him move that fast. This was also the first time I’d ever seen Mr Kostiki belly laugh. Usually he only chuckles softly at Huda’s weird ideas or jokes about chickens.

Omar used Mum’s phone to find a clip of traditional Polish dancers, where all the men wore cool belts and held long axes. The women in the video wore flowery dresses and had red bows in their hair. Huda pretended to be like them, twirling around the coffee table. She looked as if she was in her own world, probably imagining she was in Poland a hundred years ago.

Omar held up the phone so Huda could copy the dancers. He might be seventeen and look almost like a grown-up, with wispy man-hair on his face, but I know he likes to spend time with us – even though he says we’re annoying.

My big sister Kholoud grabbed Mr Kostiki a long wooden spoon from the kitchen drawer, so he could pretend it was an axe to dance with. This made him even happier and gave him even more energy to spring about on the tabletop.

Kholoud stood by the couch, clapping along to the Polish tune, her fluoro-yellow nail polish and silver nose-stud sparkling under the lampshade. I knew she was too embarrassed to dance with us – she'd be thinking about what her friends in Year 10 would say – but I grabbed her hand and copied Mr Kostiki's moves anyway. Kholoud rolled her eyes at me and flopped her arms along as I hopped around her.

Mum and Dad watched from the kitchen, laughing. Mum was finishing the last of the icing on Mr Kostiki's cake and Dad was putting three mugs of coffee, two red and one brown, on Mum's favourite serving tray – the brass one with the olden-day swirly Arabic patterns. I can trace my fingers over those patterns for hours and forever be surprised by how tricky but perfect the design is. Dad carried the tray over into the family room but realised he had nowhere to put it, with dancing kids everywhere and Mr Kostiki puffing away on the coffee table.

I thought Dad might start dancing with us too, until the twins started grabbing at his legs while they did their own strange disco floor routine around him. Dad struggled to keep the tray balanced and the steaming coffee from spilling all over them.

Suha and Layla never seem to notice when there's danger. They don't look the same, but they're like exact copies of each other on the inside. They both read at

least three novels a week and score equal highest marks in their classes for every test. They're only a year and a half older than me, but they think me and Huda are 'undeveloped'.

I know that because I heard them tell Mum once. But I also remember what Mum said back to them in a low voice as I eavesdropped from the next room: *Girls, you mark my words, Huda and Akeal have a bond like no one else in the family. One day we're all going see how, together, they're unstoppable.*

Mum finished icing the cake and added some rainbow candles. I didn't think there were more than ten and wondered if Mr Kostiki would be offended. Mum stood at the kitchen bench beaming at us all, like she was watching the very end of a movie – the best part, where all the characters have got everything they wanted and their lives are going to be wonderful.

If we only knew.

Mum swept over to baby Raheed in his walker, his rosy cheeks brighter than normal as he slapped his hands together to the music, a bit of baby drool running down his chin onto his super-cute jumpsuit. As Mum pulled him up towards her, his little feet caught on the walker seat, and he wriggled his chubby legs until he was free and in Mum's arms. The music finished and the room went quiet, except for our giggles.

‘Put on another one, old boy!’ Mr Kostiki shouted to Omar, even though Omar was standing right beside him. Mr Kostiki’s face was red and he was panting. He was smiling but frowning at the same time, almost like he was in pain. He grabbed Omar’s shoulder to stop himself from falling off the table.

‘How about some cake now, Jozef?’ said Mum.

‘Very well, very well.’ Mr Kostiki sounded annoyed but took Omar’s hands and climbed off the coffee table, then slumped onto the couch. Huda jumped to sit next to him and started touching the silky cravat under his neck while they waited for the cake.

When Mr Kostiki first moved next door, me and Huda would stare at him from the window. We didn’t know why he was always wearing colourful silky tissue things in his shirt collar. Huda guessed it was so he could quickly wipe his nose without having to use his hands. But after Huda became friends with him, he told her they’re called cravats and he wears them to look important.

Mr Kostiki brushed Huda’s hand away. ‘Aghh, leave it, little Huda. I’ll give you one to play with tomorrow.’

Dad placed the brass tray on the coffee table, among some new shoeprints, and handed the brown mug to Mr Kostiki.

‘Ahh, my special mug,’ said Mr Kostiki. ‘Half a teaspoon of sugar?’

Dad nodded.

Mum passed baby Raheed over to Suha and went to get the cake. Suha muttered something under her breath about babies taking years to grow up, and Layla nodded in knowing agreement. Mum placed the big green cake next to the brass tray and Mr Kostiki took one last sip of coffee, sat up straight, and put his hands in his lap. This was his moment and he knew it.

Huda was practically shaking with excitement, the smile on her face even bigger than Mr Kostiki's. I turned off the lamp so the candles could sparkle in the dark.



After we'd all had our cake, and Suha and Layla had made us cups of mint tea, Mum said there was something she needed to tell us. I think Mr Kostiki had dozed off because his eyes were closed, even though he was still sitting upright with his plate on his lap.

She bit her lip and looked around the room at each of us. 'Kids, we're going to Lebanon.'

I couldn't believe my ears. *Finally*, we were going to meet my parents' parents! And we'd be able to see real-life snow, and the humungous rock sticking out of the ocean that's on all the postcards.

Huda jumped off the couch and fist-pumped the air. I gave her a high-five, and Omar picked Raheed up off

the floor and spun him in the air. Kholoud grinned – I had forgotten she even had teeth. Suha and Layla chuckled and held hands.

Mum and Dad looked at each other, but they didn't seem happy like we were. Dad cleared his throat.

'Ah, what your mum means is *we're* going to Lebanon.' He pointed to himself and then at Mum, then back to himself and then at Mum again. In case we didn't get it, he then said, 'Us. Just the two of us.'

My eyes blinked a few times on their own and I felt my breathing get quicker. It was like my brain was trying to tell the rest of my body what it had just heard.

I glanced around at my brothers and sisters. Raheed pulled his thumb out of his mouth and stared open-mouthed at Omar.

'So... we're staying here? While you go to Lebanon?' I wasn't sure if it was Suha or Layla who'd asked.

'Yes, that's right,' Mum said. She glanced down at her hands, rubbing them together.

At that moment, all us kids jumped up from our seats and cheered. Even Raheed bobbed his cute bum up and down in Omar's arms, drool running like melted ice over Omar's shirt.

No parents. Only us kids. With Mr Kostiki next door. Coco Pops three meals a day. This was even better than a holiday to Lebanon.

Mr Kostiki's eyes jerked open and he jolted up from the couch, looking confused about where he was and what was happening.

This time Mum had to raise her voice. 'Ya wlad! Kids! Sit!' She'd stopped rubbing her hands together but still had that look on her face. 'Your dad and I aren't going for a holiday. We are going because my mum is very sick.'

My heart sank.

'You know we've been saving for years hoping we could all go as a family, but my mum needs me to care for her now. And...'

She looked at Dad, like she was asking him to finish her sentence.

'And Aunt Amel will be babysitting you.' Dad said it quickly, and then his eyes darted to the floor.

We all knew what that meant. The party was over.



About the Author

H. Hayek is the second-youngest of seven children, born to Lebanese-Australian parents. She was born in Adelaide, grew up in Perth and now lives in Melbourne. She struggled with reading and writing through her earliest years at school, but knew from the time she was a little girl that she wanted to work with words. After completing a degree in Mass Communication (Journalism & Public Relations) she went on to graduate with a degree in Teaching. She has worked as a primary school teacher in Melbourne's west and as a journalist. But above all, writing stories involving unique kids, with unique backgrounds, has been her passion. H. Hayek enjoys exploring themes of identity – what it means to be Australian, Muslim and Lebanese. She also enjoys being a little bit mischievous.