

Chapter 22: PR Trouble

Me and Fiorenze got to PR at the same time. Steffi turned and smiled in our direction, patting the seat next to him, while Ms Johnson issued both of us with a lateness demerit. Was he smiling at me? He hadn't spoken to me all morning, but maybe he'd gotten over it during first recess? He must have realised I hadn't meant what I'd yelled at him. While I tossed up whether I should sit next to him or not, Fiorenze walked over and slid into the seat, and Steffi kissed her cheek.

"Charlie?" Ms Johnson said. "Do you wish to take a seat? Or would you prefer another demerit?"

"No, Ms Johnson." I melted into a seat at the back. Fiorenze and Steffi held hands and whispered. I couldn't believe it. She'd just told me she didn't like Steffi and there she was all over him. Or at least letting him be all over her. Was she really not enjoying it? It was hard to believe. I couldn't make up my mind which one of them I wanted to smack harder. Fiorenze for looking like she was enjoying herself or Steffi for being such a fickle doxhead torpid New Avalon-hating waste of DNA.

Ms Johnson droned on about the difference between fans and the general public and the different methods of approaching both groups. None of it was anything we hadn't heard a billion times before. Spin, spin, spin.

Naturally she did not cite Steffi and Fiorenze for their kissing, whispering, hand-holding, note passing, or general inattention.

Did Fiorenze really hate her fairy? It had gotten her Steffi and though she'd said she didn't like him, she was acting like she did. It was hard to believe her claims of fairy hatred, watching her sighing like that.

I doubted there was a girl in the room, or in the entire school for that matter, who didn't envy Fiorenze's fairy. Yet she claimed to hate it. Did I believe her? She'd seemed wholly sincere out on the paddock, but looking at her now, well, she evinced no signs of hating her fairy at all.

If what she said was true then there was nothing for it but to feel sorry for her and help her get rid of her fairy. If she was lying then I would hate her with even more of a fiery burning passion than I already did.

Except that I didn't feel at all sorry for her: She had Steffi.

The bell sounded. “Bluey Salazar? Charlie Steele?” I looked up at Ms Johnson’s flinty eyes boring down on me. “Come here.”

She was definitely not radiating happiness. I glanced at Bluey and he widened his eyes. He didn’t know any more than I did.

“Yes, Ms Johnson,” I said, slipping my tablet into my pocket and standing in front of her. Bluey came and stood beside me.

The rest of the class flooded out of the room giving us a wide berth. Fiorenze gave me a sympathetic smile. Steffi didn’t even look at me.

“Your assignments,” Johnson said, looking first at Bluey and then at me, “are mysteriously similar. Do you want to explain to me how that’s possible? In a way that doesn’t leave me with no choice but to send you to the principal?”

“They . . . what now?” spluttered Bluey. “The principal? But I haven’t done anything.”

“I never copied, Ms Johnson.” I turned to Bluey. “We’re not even friends.”

“So if you were friends you would have copied from each other?”

“No! I just meant . . . ”

“I didn’t copy from Steele, Ms Johnson,” Bluey said. “Ours’ honour.”

“Me either,” I said.

“Aren’t your lockers right next to each other?”

“Well, yes,” I said. “But that doesn’t mean—”

“All right then. Who did you both copy from?”

I blushed and Bluey looked down.

“I’m waiting.”

“I found an old press conference,” Bluey said, “and just reworded the questions.”

“Me, too,” I said. “Sula Wannamacker was the captain. It was twenty years back.”

“Yes,” Johnson said. “I was on that team.”

“Oh,” Bluey and me said at the same time.

“Yet your answers are different from hers but very close to each others’. How do you explain that?”

“Oh,” we both said. I looked at Bluey and he looked at me, silently agreeing about the hopelessness of Sula Wannamacker’s answers.

“Read out Question 1 and your answer, Bluey,” Johnson said.

Bluey found it on his tablet and then cleared his throat, “Question 1: Do you intend to remain as captain? Answer: Yes. At the end of the day every loss is the captain’s responsibility. It’s my job to take control of the situation, to ensure that my batters tear apart the bowling, and my bowlers tempt their batters into indiscretions. We failed to seize the initiative or snatch the momentum. But form is temporary and class is permanent. We’ve learned a lot today. My players will rally around and we’ll give our next match 110% effort.” Johnson handed me my assignment. “Now yours.”

I blushed. “Question 1: Do you intend to remain as captain? Answer: Yes. In the end losses are the responsibility of the captain. I should have taken control of the situation, made sure that my batters destroyed the bowling, and my bowlers tempted their batters into indiscretions. We did not seize the initiative or snatch the momentum. It’s good to remember though that form is temporary and class is permanent. My team are all class. They’ve taken away valuable lessons from this test. I’ve learned a lot. My players will pull together and give our next match 110% effort. More than %110.”

“Aside from you being more verbose, Charlie, those were almost identical. How do you explain that?”

“I just wrote the opposite of whatever Sula Wannamaker said.”

“Me too!” Bluey exclaimed. He turned to me. “Wow. That’s eerie.”

“That doesn’t explain the closeness of the language you both used.”

“There are only so many ways you can say things in sports,” Bluey said.

I nodded. “Teams pull together.”

“There’s no ‘I’ in team.”

“No one gets above themselves.”

“They think of the team first.”

Johnson groaned. “That’s what you think PR is? Stringing cliches together?”

Bluey and I looked at each other. Clearly the answer to this question was not supposed to be ‘yes.’ Best not to mention cricketcliches.com.

Johnson’s face hardened, like her eyes and nose and mouth had been carved out of stone. If she smiled her whole face would have crumbled. Not that there was any danger of that.

“What made you think writing the opposite of what Wannamacker said was a good idea?”

“Well,” I said. “Her answers were, um, torpid. Kind of like she’d forgotten the meaning of the word ‘spin.’”

“I know!” Bluey exclaimed, nodding. “She didn’t even remember to say it was all her fault. Or that in the end it all comes down to the captain—”

“That it’s the captain’s job to take full responsibility, because at the end of the day—”

“That’s enough, Charlie. You will both re-do the assignment. You may keep the same questions. You will not simply rewrite Wannamacker’s answers. I want to see creativity and originality from both of you.

“PR is not all spin. The best say things that have never been said before. You have both faulted Sula Wannamacker for being honest. That press conference is famous. It is one of the most extraordinary press conferences in the history of cricket.” She paused and I braced myself for a lecture on the history of cricket. I didn’t dare look at my watch, but it was probably already too late for us to make our next classes on time.

“A demerit each and I want your new assignments on my desk tomorrow morning before first bell. Actual physical paper assignments. Understood?”

We both nodded. I tried to keep the disappointment off my face. When she realised that we truly hadn’t copied I thought we were going to avoid a demerit. But no. And I was going to be late for tennis.

Again. Coach Ntini wasn’t even looking sorrowful this time. He noted my demerit like he expected it. The eight fingers he held up this time were to let me know that I’d just earned myself another game suspension.

I checked my tablet: It was fencing. Why couldn’t it have been tennis?

Stupid malodorous doxhead benighted fairy.