



listen, **LAYLA**

The inspiring new story from award-winning social activist

**YASSMIN
ABDEL-MAGIED**





Chapter 1

‘*The full moon rose over us,*’ Layla sang, while she carefully joined two pieces of metal together in the broiling, cramped welding bay. The air was hot and humid, not even the whisper of a breeze disturbing the still summer afternoon.

‘*Min thaniiiiii yatil wadaaaaa –*’ She continued the famous *nasheed* in Arabic, the poem filling in the silence of the workshop. She loved metalwork, and welding while singing was icing on the cake, even if she was totally out of tune. Layla placed the finishing touches on the aluminium bracket, beaming under her welding mask. *Perfecto!*

‘*And we owe it to show thankfulness,*’ Layla warbled loudly as she burst out of the welding bay, a hijabi Ned Kelly. She dramatically flung her hands up to the ceiling and started skipping around the work benches, the space transformed into her very own private mosh pit. Soon, the skips became a twirl. *Round and round and round we go!* Layla hummed as she spun, the thick burgundy skirt of her school uniform billowing out around her. For a moment, the fourteen-year-old Australian student was a Sufi whirling dervish from Sudan, the country of her birth. ‘*Where the –*’

A gruff voice interrupted her. ‘Layla? Is that you?’

Layla stopped. *Uh-oh.*

‘Layla, what are you doing?’

It was Mr Gilvarry, her tech teacher. His balding head shone with sweat, his bushy red beard pointing every which way. Mr G was usually quite a jolly man, but right now his face did not look jolly at all.

‘Layla, why are you still here? You should really be on your way home.’

‘Oh, oops! Sorry, sir.’ Layla looked at the clock, which read 3.10 p.m. *Janey Mack!* She had completely lost track of time. ‘I was just working on the aluminium bracket for our entry into the global Grand Designs Tourismo,’ she explained.

Mr Gilvarry raised his eyebrows, sighed, then nodded. ‘I figured as much. It’s great to see you putting so much effort into the international GDT competition, Layla, but –’

‘Yeh, of course, sir, how could I not?’ Layla interrupted. ‘We’re the national champions now, and we’re going to Germany! Not to mention the Special International Invention Tour.’

From the moment she had heard about it, Layla knew that going on the first-ever Special International Invention Tour would be her dream come true. The winning student goes on a trip around the world to meet inventors in Paris, Addis Ababa and Beijing! It was Layla’s adventuring and invention dreams all in one neat package. Mr Gilvarry was going to select the best student from the GDT team to go, and Layla had become a

bit obsessed with trying to win the spot. Needless to say, it was A. BIG. DEAL.

‘Yes, yes, yes. All of that is very exciting, Layla, don’t get me wrong,’ Mr Gilvarry replied. ‘But it *is* the last day of school for the year, and I’d like to go home now, please. Do you mind packing up so we can both get back to our families?’ The tired teacher looked pointedly at the door.

Layla chuckled. ‘Yes, yes, yes,’ she said, mimicking Gilvarry’s voice. ‘I’ll get everything sorted right now.’

Gilvarry looked relieved. ‘Good. I’ll wait here. And remember to check your email for the latest competition news, OK?’

Layla nodded, though she wasn’t fully paying attention to what Gilvarry was saying. She was pretty excited about the global GDT, but the idea of the SIIT was just *too delicious*! As she got lost in the fantasy of travelling the world, a drop of sweat trickled from her forehead down to her lips. *Mate, it’s so hot! Mmm, perfect weather for ice cream.*

‘Ahem, Layla?’ Gilvarry cleared his throat impatiently, startling Layla out of her daydream.

‘Oh, yup. Sir, yes, sir!’

Walking out of the tech building and across the oval, Layla reflected on the eventful year she’d had at her new school. Who would have guessed she’d be here? She brushed her hijab back as she made her way through the basketball courts. And to think it all could have gone so horribly wrong after she got suspended.

Layla’s train of thought was interrupted as two boys ambushed her from behind, bounding around her and whooping loudly. She’d been hit by the hurricane of her best friends at Mary Maxmillion Grammar School – Ethan and Seb.

‘Yeahhhhh, sah-sah-SUMMER!’ yelled Seb, his voice breaking slightly as he jumped into the air, then landed lithely on his feet before falling into step with Layla. ‘Where were you, Laylz? We looked everywhere.’ Seb’s dark brown hair, floppy as always, covered his

eyes. He shook his head to see properly, flicking Layla with drops of sweat.

‘Ew!’ Layla laughed, pushing Seb good-naturedly away from her.

‘Oh, you like it, do you?’ Seb teased, then leaned in and whipped his hair back and forth even more vigorously, showering Layla’s cream blouse with salty water.

‘You’re so gross,’ sniggered Ethan, the neatest of the group. Even now, with his red hair darkened by the sweat of a Brisbane summer, he was somehow calm, collected and put-together.

‘Ha, whatever,’ Seb retorted, reaching over to muss his friend’s carefully styled curls. Ethan yelped as he ducked to get out of the way.

‘Still upset, are we?’ Layla ribbed cheekily. Seb had been jealous when, a few weeks ago, the school had chosen prim and proper Ethan for the cover of next year’s MMGS brochure.

Seb scoffed, deflecting the jibe. ‘It’s not like I care anyway.’

Ethan and Layla glanced at each other. Seb clearly, definitely cared!

‘They shoulda at least had you on the front, right, Laylz? You got way higher marks in class,’ Seb said, trying to shift the focus away from himself.

Layla scowled at her floppy-haired friend, whose nose crinkled in confusion.

‘What, you think cos you got suspended on your first week of school . . .’ he started.

‘For headbutting the chairman’s son,’ Layla added.

‘Oh yeh, I guess that might make a difference. But still . . .’

Layla rolled her eyes, and Ethan stepped in to save her the explanation. ‘Seb, c’mon. As if Chairman Cox is gonna let a Muslim girl with a headscarf and everything be on the front of the school brochure.’

Seb’s eyes widened as it dawned on him. ‘Ooooh, yeh, righto. He really doesn’t like you, does he?’

Layla smirked as they made their way towards the front gate of the school. ‘I don’t think he likes any Muslims. Anyway, it’s his loss. Who wouldn’t want some lush Layla goodness in their lives, you know what I mean?’ The teen chuckled to herself as she adjusted the straps of her heavy backpack. ‘Forget

Cox with a headful of rocks. I was at the workshop, doing some final touches on the GDT idea that I'm working on. Aluminium welding is so tricky, but I'm pretty good now.' She grinned, but before she could continue to wax lyrical about her workshop antics Ethan changed the subject.

'I can't believe it's the end of Year Eight.' Ethan sighed, as the three friends meandered through the school campus. There was glitter and confetti all over the concrete path, the aftermath of the various celebrations that had happened during the day. The festive spirit and the green rolling hills of the expansive school grounds made it feel like they were in a magical world instead of a school campus at the centre of Brisbane City.

'I know. It's wild, dude,' Seb replied.

'Oi, you're not listening to me at all!' Layla protested, upset at being ignored. It felt like her friends tuned out anything to do with metalwork and welding.

'Nah, we were, L. It's just you talk about the GDT *all the time*. Like, you're actually obsessed. Didn't anything else happen this year?' Seb asked.

'Um, yeh, it's been a *huge* year,' Layla replied, mildly annoyed her friends weren't as excited about inventions as she was. She started to list all the things that had happened. 'Well, I started at this fancy new school and left the Islamic School of Brisbane behind . . .'

Then Ethan jumped in, poking fun at his friend. 'Seb's voice finally broke,' he teased.

'Ethan declared his love for me,' Seb shot right back, laughing, while Ethan rolled his eyes and scoffed.

'Just because I like boys, doesn't mean I like *you*,' he retorted.

Layla continued on her own train of thought. 'I helped the Grand Designs Turismo team win the national competition, discovered my new life mission of becoming a world-class inventor and, most importantly, I have two new best friends!' She beamed at Ethan and Seb, a toothy grin on her face.

'Aw, you're so mushy sometimes, Laylz,' Seb teased, though his appreciative smile contradicted his words.

He loves it!

Ethan piped up again. 'And you got a nemesis.'

‘A neme-who?’ Seb wrinkled his nose at Ethan and Layla tilted her head questioningly.

‘A nemesis. Like, Layla’s sworn enemy, you know?’

‘You mean Peter?’ Seb asked. He turned to Layla. ‘Are you two still enemies? I thought you had to work with him to win the GDT national championship?’

Layla kissed her teeth. It was complicated. ‘I dunno. I mean, we’re not technically enemies, cos I still have to work with him in the team for the international championship, but we’re definitely not *friends*, you know?’ She sighed deeply. *Astaghfirullah. Why is stuff with the Coxes so difficult?* ‘We’re not *frenemies*, and *enemiends* doesn’t quite have the right ring to it, so I guess . . .’

‘Nemesis,’ Seb and Ethan said at the same time. Layla considered it. ‘I suppose so. Two new best friends and a nemesis. Not bad for a year’s work.’ Layla smiled. ‘Pretty cool I did it all by myself!’

At that, Ethan shared a look with Seb.

‘Anyway, who’s picking us up today?’ Layla asked, missing her friends’ silent jibes.

Since they all lived within cycling distance of each other, their parents had started pooling school pick-ups. Every day, all three friends would pile into the back of one of their family cars, take over the car stereo and loudly sing along to music the whole way home.

Ethan turned to his friends. ‘I think it’s either you or Seb’s,’ he said, his even voice not quite masking the slight undercurrent of sadness in his tone.

‘Oh, Eth, your parents still fighting?’ Layla asked, her voice soft with concern.

Ethan paused then nodded stiffly. His parents had recently divorced, and although he had been holding it together so well, Layla knew it was taking a toll on her friend.

‘You’ve gotta remember, it’s not your fault, E. It’s got nothing to do with you coming out, all right?’ Layla squeezed Ethan’s shoulder in reassurance.

Seb chimed in. ‘Yeh, mate. Listen to Laylz. She’s got wisdom —’ he hesitated, consulting his phone — ‘or whatever. Anyway, I think it’s my mum today.’

‘Damn!’ Layla exclaimed, and then quickly covered her mouth in embarrassment as Seb widened his eyes in mock offence. Layla backtracked. ‘Sorry! Seb, I love your mum, but I really wanted to get an ice cream. And you know that’s kinda my dad’s thing.’

Seb raised his eyebrows, not quite believing Layla’s excuse.

‘I’m serious. I’ve been dreaming about ice cream all arvo.’

Seb rolled his eyes and sighed, wordlessly accepting Layla’s explanation. It was a boiling hot day, after all. Then, looking at the throng of people around them, he threw out a challenge. ‘Race you to the car park!’ he yelled, taking off without a second glance.

‘Hey!’ Layla and Ethan shouted simultaneously, laughing.

Seb had sprinted ahead, his bag half open, earphones spilling out of his pockets on to the ground, socks falling down to his ankles. The boy was a mess, but rapidly gathering speed. ‘Last one to the car park has to do a dare!’ he yelled from afar, turning his head as he ran.

‘C’mon, Layla,’ said Ethan, breaking into a jog.

‘It’s too hot for this,’ she grumbled, but she too picked up the pace.

Layla and Ethan soon caught up with Seb and the three friends ran after and beside each other, weaving in and out of kids and parents, jumping over flowerbeds and startling a few cute puppies along the way. Layla felt like she was gliding on air. There was a tailwind behind her, pushing her onward and upward, and her hijab felt like a cape, marking her out as a superhero. She was ready to take on the world and all it had to offer. Was she Ms Marvel? Carmen Sandiego? The Queen of Sheba?

None of those.

As she sidestepped a toddler and vaulted over the car-park fence, her skirt unfurled and snapped back like a handheld fan over the metal divider. She wasn’t a copy of another hero. She was her own. *I am Layla Kareem Abdel-Hafiz Hussein, the greatest Sudanese Australian inventor the world has ever seen. And if they don’t know my name yet, they soon will.* Inshallah!

I am Layla Kareem Abdel-Hafiz Hussein, the greatest Sudanese Australian inventor the world has ever seen. And if they don't know my name yet, they soon will. *Inshallah!*

School's out for the summer! And Layla's going to spend it getting her inventions ready for the grand design competition. But when her grandmother falls ill and her family must rush to Sudan to be with her, Layla feels like she's being pulled in many different directions.

Family, friends, home, inventions – there's a lot to navigate. With big protests looming in Sudan, could Layla save the day with her revolutionary ideas?

Exploring the diaspora experience, *Listen, Layla* is an own voices novel for young readers bursting with passion, humour and truth.

PRAISE FOR *YOU MUST BE LAYLA*

'This warm, humorous account of a larger-than-life Sudanese girl navigating a posh Australian school is an engaging read' *Guardian*

'Fresh funny and empowering' *BookTrust*

'A one-of-a-kind bundle of comedy and compassion' *LoveReading*

'A tonic, and a terrific debut ... underneath its buoyant humour is a timely wisdom about finding friends in an alien culture' *New Statesman*

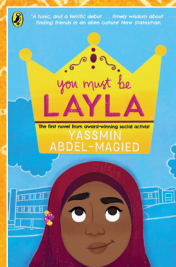
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