

**THE
CLIMB**

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Chapter 1



'Hey Zephyra,' someone whispered behind her. She knew without turning around that it was Noah.

'What?' She turned slightly in her chair, still keeping her eyes on the whiteboard. Their English teacher was a hard nut and didn't appreciate chatting.

'Put your hand like this,' Noah said, demonstrating by holding his left elbow with his right hand.

She frowned, but complied. He looked at her chest and nodded.

Zephyra wanted to ask him what he was on about, but just then Ms Hardnut turned around and she quickly copied the last few sentences from the board. She had to wait ten minutes to have her curiosity satisfied when they were divided up in pairs.

'What was that about?' she asked Noah.

'I was doing the sag test,' Noah said.

Felicia, who was sitting behind them, looked horrified. She hunched in and tried to hide her boobs.

'What's the sag test?' Zephyra asked.

'It's where you check how far a girl's boobs are sagging and yours aren't sagging at all.' Noah looked at her chest and sighed wistfully.

If it was anyone else staring at her chest, she'd be creeped out, but this was Noah. They'd been best friends since year 7. He was like the younger brother she had never had.

'You're sick.' Zephyra smacked him in the chest. 'How would you like it if I wanted to measure if your nut sack was drooping?'

He leaned back in the chair and spread his legs. 'Measure away.'

'No thanks.' She looked away from his groin and flicked her hair. 'I don't want to see that. It's disgusting.'

'You're going to see one eventually,' Noah said, and closed his legs.

'No, I won't. I've seen enough.'

'Really? When did you see one?' he demanded.

At their first meeting during year 7 camp, he'd asked her out in a roundabout way. The teachers had devised a cunning plan to ensure students remained sleeping in their cabins at night. Every night after dinner, they took students for a one hour trek on the unsealed country streets until their feet ached from the gravelly road and their thigh muscles twitched. Getting into bed was a relief.

On their second night out, Noah broke away from his posse and stepped in beside Zephyra. Noah was tall and gangly like a bean pole, looming over a head taller than her, and he'd shortened his strides to match hers. Her friend picked up on his signal and sped up, leaving them to walk alone. After five minutes of small talk, he'd finally worked up the courage to pose his question.

'If a guy liked you and wanted to ask you out, would you say yes?'

'Even if a guy liked me, and I liked the guy who was asking me, I would say no because I'm not ready for a boyfriend,' she'd said.

'When are you going to be ready?' Noah had asked.

Since starting high school, it had seemed all everyone did was pair up and make out at lunchtime. It was like they were desperate to hurtle through this rite of passage of having their first boyfriend/girlfriend, so she wasn't surprised by the question.

'Maybe in year 10,' she'd said. She'd thought a lot on the subject. In the end she decided being 16 years old was a good age to have your first boyfriend. She wasn't eager to jump into her first relationship. While she'd had crushes, all of them were on boys who were older than her. Boys her age all seemed slightly gross and unkempt.

'Okay,' Noah had said, and returned to his posse.

After returning from camp, they drifted into friendship because they were in the same home group and both were outcasts. Noah was always slightly on the outside from the boys in his group; most of them viewed his height as a threat, and he drifted between hanging around with Zephyra and playing downball with year 10 boys. She didn't make many friends. She was a bookworm who enjoyed her character's inner lives more than those of her peers.

Once the possibility of an attraction or a relationship was off the table, they could become friends with none of the usual boy/girl pheromones interfering. Since then they'd never returned to the subject of us as a couple, but lately things were becoming weird.

'So when did you see a dick?' Noah demanded, bringing her back to the present.

'Shhh,' she hissed, looking around.

Felicia gave them another glare, but no one else seemed to have heard him.

'I watched that doco the other night,' she told Noah. 'You know the one about the guy and his sexual identity?' There had been a documentary on SBS that the entire school was buzzing about. This guy talked all about his sexual adventures. For the finale, he set up the camera and jumped out in front of it, stark naked, his flaccid penis wobbling about. She started laughing as she remembered. 'It was so hysterical the way it just wobbled there.' She looked up, expecting to see a smile on Noah's face, but he was dead serious.

'That's what happens,' Noah said. 'Dicks move about.'

'No, they don't,' she said. She'd read romance novels for years and all the penises mentioned were turgid.

'Yes, they do. They move. They're just like boobs. Soft and pliable.'

She looked at him, not sure whether he was having her on.

'What would you do if your boyfriend's dick did that?' he demanded, offended. 'Would you laugh at him?'

'I won't be having sex until I'm married,' she said.

Noah greeted her statement with stunned silence. 'What? You won't? Why not?' he finally demanded when his voice returned.

'Because I want to be in love and know that it's for real,' she said. 'He's going to be the only one.'

An unexpected gift that romance novels delivered was her resolve to remain a virgin until marriage. All the

heroines in her romance novels were virgins and while the heroes might dally with women of easy virtue, he would only marry a woman who was 'pure.'

'Okay,' he said. 'What about your husband? Would you laugh at your husband like that?' He returned to the topic that had started this conversation, the dangling penis.

'I don't know.' She shrugged.

'I thought you were going to have a boyfriend in year 10?' Noah asked.

'Not anymore. I'm going to wait for my husband.'

'But how can you be sure that he's the one for you if you don't have sex before marriage?'

'I'll know,' she said.

She'd watched her mother's romantic misadventures and didn't see that there was anything to be gained by having sex before marriage. All of Mum's boyfriends seemed to change for the worst once she had sex with them. It was like once they realised she was in too deep and they could show their true nature. Zephyra would not let that happen. If a man loved her enough to wait for marriage, that meant he loved her for more than just sex.

Noah looked perplexed. Miss Hardnut called for attention.

'But do you expect your husband to be a virgin?' he whispered.

She shook her head. In all the romance novels, the hero wildly sowed his oats with different girls, and then when he met the heroine he settled for her, happy to be in a monogamous relationship for the rest of his life.

'I think a guy needs to experiment,' she said.

'Oh good,' Noah said. 'Anyway, it's probably best if one of you knows what to do in the bedroom.'

She gave him a dirty look. He turned to the board with a smirk.

Chapter 2



NOAH

After school, Noah waited by the gate for Zephyra. She saw him and smiled. They stepped in together, their routine as they lived close to each other.

They reached the milk bar. 'I'm going to buy a chocolate milk,' she said.

Noah nodded and waited outside, leaning on the wall. He was zoning out, living out his favourite fantasy where Zephyra realised they were meant to be together and they were kissing each other, her body pressed against his, when he saw Aaron Fenech and his gang approaching. Noah straightened from the wall, wiping the goofy smile off his face.

Fenech had it in for him since year 7 and took every chance to make his life hell.

'How's the game?' Noah asked Kenneth, a fellow student from his class.

Kenneth nodded and smiled, before noticing Fenech eyeballing him.

‘What’s it to you?’ Fenech demanded, thrusting his chest toward Noah.

‘Just asking,’ Noah said, his mouth forming into an awkward smile.

‘What did you say?’ Fenech demanded. ‘I didn’t hear you.’ He held up his hand to his ear.

Fenech was short, barely reaching Noah’s nipples, and most of his mates were about his height. He seemed to find it an offence that Noah had started high school nearly at his full height of 190 centimetres.

Noah bowed his back and bent his knees, so that his head was closer to Fenech’s. ‘Just asking!’ he repeated.

‘That’s right.’ Fenech put his hand on Noah’s neck. ‘Bloody giraffe.’ He pushed Noah, who stepped back. Fenech nodded at Kenneth, who elbowed Noah as he passed.

Noah hunched his shoulders and took it. He hated this part, where they descended into a mob mentality. They pushed him around like a fuse ball, before Fenech was satisfied he’d made his point and headed off.

‘See you later, Jones,’ Fenech called out of over his shoulder.

Kenneth met Noah’s eyes, shaking his head sadly as he passed by. Noah knew he thought he should fight back, after all, they were like Oompa Loompas, but Kenneth wasn’t the one stuck in this gangly body that made him a target. Noah had been taller than everyone else his whole life and all he’d ever wanted was to blend in and be one of the boys. If he fought and lost, it would never be the end of it.

Zephyra exited the milk bar. Noah watched the way she carefully inserted the straw into her chocolate milk. She

stepped in beside him and said nothing as he straightened his shirt. He knew she saw, and scalding shame filled him. He hated that she saw him being a chickenshit. Everyone told him he should man up and smash the bastards. That would teach them a lesson. He fantasised about it every night before bed. The way he would smash Aaron Fenech's face. He was much taller than him, but Fenech was all muscle. He was on the footy team and was built like a tank. On the field, he didn't budge. Noah knew he didn't stand a chance against him. Fenech knew it too. The way he smirked at him, it was like he could read his mind. It wasn't just about tormenting him; it was knowing that he was full of rage, but couldn't do anything about it.

'See you tomorrow,' Zephyra said when she reached her street.

'See you,' Noah said.

Zephyra looked at him and hesitated. He knew she was debating whether to say something about the boys. *Please don't say anything*, he begged inside. He didn't want to see pity on her face.

'Mr Brent is organising a cycling fundraiser,' she said. 'I'm thinking of joining.'

'You are?' Noah said, keeping it cool.

He'd seen the flyers around the school. There were going to be training sessions twice a week riding bikes long distance, building up to a week of riding around the Murray River in male and female tours as a fundraiser for the food bank.

'What about you?' she asked.

His heart sped up as he thought about a week long camp with the two of them together. Anything could happen.

'I might do it too.'

She smiled and nodded.

He watched her walk away, allowing himself a minute to admire her curvy form. She was his dream girl with her hour-glass figure, dark wavy hair and brown eyes. He had to fight not to stare at her and could only steal glances when she was securely away from him. She turned to look over her shoulder and he waved, forcing his gaze away as he continued walking.

He felt lighter and full of hope. Maybe this was finally his chance to make a move. Ever since he started high school, she had been his one and only crush. He'd asked her out at a year 7 camp and she'd turned him down, saying she was waiting to have a boyfriend when she was older. At first, he thought she'd been just making up an excuse to reject him, like all the other girls he'd asked out. But he'd noticed on their return that she kept saying no to everyone. She wasn't interested in a boyfriend and so he became content to wait. He figured it was only a matter of time until she wanted someone and they could finally cross over from friends into something more. All he wanted was Zephyra.

He said he'd do the bicycle run, but there was only one problem. He entered the house and threw his backpack in the hallway.

'Dad,' he called out. He walked into the living room. Dad was standing above Mum. Mum was on the couch, her eyes red rimmed, a tissue against her face.

'What is it?' Dad asked.

'I was wondering if I could get a bike,' Noah said, finishing his train of thought as he processed what he was seeing.

'Why?' Dad asked.

Mum got up and left the living room.

'I'm wanting to do a bicycle tour,' Noah said. 'I'd have to train twice a week.'

'Good, good. It's just what I've been telling you. You need to build up some muscles.' Dad punched him on the arm, having to reach up as Noah loomed over him. He sat in the armchair. 'We'll go shopping on the weekend.'

Noah nodded. He went to his bedroom, passing the kitchen on the way. His Mum was standing over the sink, her hands soaking in the hot water. 'Mum,' he called to her.

Mum jerked.

'Are you okay?' Noah asked.

'Of course.' Mum forced a smile. 'It's just stupid hay fever.'

Noah hugged her. He got his height from his mum's side of the family and she was only ten centimetres shorter than him.

She patted his arm, leaving soapy bubbles. 'You're a good boy. Dinner will be ready in a little while. Grab a cupcake.'

Noah kissed her on the head and took a cupcake from the kitchen table. He was walking through the hallway when the phone rang.

He picked it up and said hello. There was silence. He said hello again. Mum appeared from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a tea towel. The person hung up and there was a dial tone in his ear.

'They hung up,' Noah said. Mum's face tightened with pain and she returned to the kitchen.

It was happening again. Noah bent over and unplugged the phone, hiding it so that it looked like the phone was still plugged in. He went to his bedroom. He couldn't

believe that his dad was up to his old tricks. Last time he'd promised he'd never do it again. Noah remembered the shouting matches. He'd even woken during the night and seen Mum packing her bags, while Dad walked around begging her to give him a second chance. Afterward, everything settled down. Mum was cold toward Dad, but he was true to his word, coming home from work on time, bringing Mum flowers or a present. Taking her out to dinner. They even went away for a romantic weekend, leaving Noah and his sister with his grandfather. In the two years since, they were happy, and it was like it had never happened. Until now.

This was how it started last time. With phone calls that kept hanging up, and then a woman turned up on their doorstep to talk to Mum. Telling her she and Dad were in love. That Dad had promised they would be together. That he was unhappy in his marriage. Noah had snuck into his parent's bedroom and watched the woman leave from his parent's window that looked out onto the front. The woman was petite. Only 150 centimetres. She would have reached Dad's chest. Noah could just imagine how they would have fit together and the reason his dad was attracted to her.

Afterward, Noah heard Mum telling his sister, 'Never marry a man shorter than you.'

Noah didn't know what he felt. He was angry at his father for cheating on his mum and causing her pain, but he was also happy when Mum didn't leave. He didn't want to be the boy from the broken family.

He understood something about why his father did what he did. He had seen the same look that Fenech gave him when his dad looked at him. A look of resentment and

anger. He wondered how much of this feeling was behind his father's infidelities.

Noah sat on the bed and put in his headphones as he fired up his game console.

'You there, Zephyra?' he called out.

'Online now,' Zephyra said, as she joined him.

He tuned out the world around him, Zephyra's voice in his headphones soothing him.

About the Author

Amra Pajalić is an award-winning author, an editor and teacher who draws on her Bosnian cultural heritage to write own voices stories for young people, who like her, are searching to mediate their identity and take pride in their diverse culture. Her short story collection *The Cuckoo's Song* (Pishukin Press, 2022) features previously published and prize-winning stories. Her debut novel *The Good Daughter*, was published by Text Publishing in 2009 and won the 2009 Melbourne Prize for Literature's Civic Choice Award and is re-released as *Sabiha's Dilemma* (Pishukin Press, 2022).

Her memoir *Things Nobody Knows But Me* (Transit Lounge, 2019) was shortlisted for the 2020 National Biography Award. She is co-editor of the anthology *Growing up Muslim in Australia* (Allen and Unwin, 2014) which was shortlisted for the 2015 Children's Book Council of the year awards. She works as a high school teacher and is completing a PhD in Creative Writing at La Trobe University.

Amra Pajalić publishes her dark fiction using pen name A. P. Pajalic. She also publishes romance novels under pen name Mae Archer.

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