

THE
LINES
WE
CROSS

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MICHAEL

I know two things for a fact.

My parents are good people.

And ever since I can remember, they've been angry about almost everything.

I scan the area and see my dad, draped in the Australian flag, talking to Li Chee, who's wearing a flag top hat and holding up a *Turn Back the Boats* banner. I negotiate my way through the crowd of people and flags on our side, ignoring the boos and taunts coming from the counterprotest.

"Hey, Michael!" Dad pats me on the back. His forehead is glistening with sweat. "Really happy you made it."

"It could be your big moment. I don't want to miss it."

"Appreciate it, mate." He takes a deep breath, wipes his forehead with the back of his hand, and looks around

nervously. “Geez, it’s hot under this. What do you think? Reckon the media will come?”

It’s hard to tell. The numbers on our side of the protest are growing but they’re still small compared to the other mob. It’s also hot. Really hot. One of those days where the heat is so oppressive you feel like meat being chargrilled on a hot plate. But then Kahn and Andrew arrive, and Dad’s mood lifts.

Kahn’s carrying a spade in one hand and a sign in the other: *Start Calling a Spade a Spade: Islam = Terror*. Andrew’s dressed as a Spartan guard, carrying a shield and sign that says: *Democracy Started in Greece: Protect Our Democracy*.

Dad’s thrilled. Personally, he’s not one for stunts, but he has an instinct for what will grab the media’s attention. If somebody else is willing to wear spandex for the cause, he’s not going to say no.

Andrew asks me to take photos so he can tweet them to news outlets. Kahn, Andrew, and some of the others pose for the shots, and then Andrew works his social media magic.

Dad and I are taking a selfie to send to Mum and Nathan, who are in Melbourne for an air show, when a guy with a grotesquely muscled body bulldozes his way through our crowd and steps up close to us. He’s carrying a couple of signs in one hand, snapping photos of the crowd with his smartphone with the other. I haven’t seen him before. He’s not so

much steroid-pumped nightclub bouncer as ex-commando-who-visits-war-zones-in-his-spare-time kind of guy.

"Hey, Alan," he says sternly, nodding at Dad.

The testosterone force field around this guy is so strong I feel like I might grow a full-length beard just taking in his vibes.

"G'day, John," Dad says. "Thanks for coming, mate."

"Wouldn't miss it," he barks, then snaps a photo of Dad for his Facebook page. John looks me up and down. "Where's your sign?" He doesn't give me a chance to reply but instead hands me one of his (*No to Sharia Law*), raises his eyebrow (there's only one), and looks grimly at the opposing crowd.

"Fucking bleeding-heart terrorist-loving freedom-hating traitors."

"Does that come in a bumper sticker?" Dad asks with a laugh. He discreetly nudges my foot with his shoe and I struggle not to laugh.

"It's not a joke," John says gruffly. "You should know that, Alan."

"I know, mate," Dad says good-naturedly, patting him on the back. "I'm just pulling your leg."

"They should shut the hell up and respect the fact they have free speech in this country."

"No one's saying they shouldn't protest," Dad says. "That's the beauty of this great country of ours, John. That they can be here, same as we can. The irony is that they don't

appreciate that we're fighting to make sure this democracy of ours doesn't change."

John flashes a look of contempt at the mob of counterprotesters. They've escalated the shouts of abuse. John walks off to join some of the more vocal ones on our side and starts chanting at the top of his lungs.

I give Dad a look. "He's a bit . . . deranged?"

"Nah. He just looks tougher than he is. He's Andrew's good mate." Suddenly Dad's face breaks out into a grin. "Michael! Look!"

I glance in the direction he's motioning and, noticing a reporter and cameraman, smile.

"Your mum's press release must have worked." He runs his fingers through his thinning hair and readjusts the flag. "How do I look?"

"Like the leader of a new political organization," I say proudly. "Who's sweltering under that thing. Don't forget it's all about the sound bites. *Aussie Values aims to represent the silent majority* blah blah. The kind of thing you and Mum were practicing last night."

"We have about fifty members," Dad says with a smile. "In a population of twenty-three million, I wouldn't say that really constitutes a majority." He leans in close to me and winks conspiratorially. "But nobody needs to know that, hey, mate?"

The chants of the other protestors are getting louder. Rick,

from our side, starts up a chant in reply. Game on. The atmosphere is electric, and people are fired up on both sides. I can see Dad across the crowd, a camera in his face as he talks to a journalist. He glances at me and I grin.

And then I see her.

Her eyes. I've never seen eyes like hers before. What color are they? Hazel and green and flecks of autumn and bits of emerald and I'm standing holding my sign and there she is, standing steps away, near the cop, holding hers (*It's Not Illegal to Seek Asylum*), and all I can think about is how the hell I'm going to take my eyes off her.

Her hair is jet-black, hanging loose down her back, and I think hair that gorgeous has no business being on *someone like her*. She's wearing jeans and a plain white T-shirt. She's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen and it stupidly, inexplicably, throws me.

There's a girl standing next to her, shouting at the top of her lungs, waving her sign in the air with all the energy of a kid flying her first kite. She elbows the beauty, prompting her to laugh and raise her sign higher.

On my side I can hear people's chants rising: "*Stop the Boats!*" "*No to Queue Jumpers!*" "*Islam is Fascism!*" But my voice isn't working.

Suddenly John's beside me. He nudges me in the side and scoffs, "They're a disgrace, aren't they?"

I manage a grunt. John grimaces and motions to my sign,

which I've inadvertently lowered. I quickly hold it up, smile meekly at him, and wonder what the girl's name is.

"So it was a success?" I ask Dad on our way home.

Dad smacks the steering wheel with both hands and lets out a cheer. "Michael, it was *brilliant!* I'll be on the news tonight—well, *maybe*, they said they couldn't guarantee, and only for half a minute, but it's still something . . ."

"It would help your organization out if it runs. Did you tell Mum?"

"She couldn't talk. She texted though."

"They having fun?"

Dad chuckles. "You kidding? They've sent about fifty photos already. Nathan's in heaven."

He turns to face me as we stop at a traffic light. "Hungry?"

"Ravenous."

"Joe's shop at the Village closes tomorrow. You up for some fish and chips? A chiko roll?"

"Sounds good."

He changes lanes, makes the yellow light, and turns left.

"Could be the last chiko roll this area ever sees, Michael. The way the place is going, some trendy café will open serving free-range organic duck on a bed of foraged mushrooms."

I chuckle. "Dad. Wow. That was kind of meme-worthy. I'm impressed."

“Your mum and I were over at Joe’s the other night. Twenty years he’s been there, Michael. Poor guy’s taking it badly.”

“Where’s he going to go?”

“Go? That’s it, Michael. He has to retire now. People like Joe don’t start over. He’s priced out of the area now. He’ll take his fiberglass shark that’s been up on that wall since the seventies, hang it in his lounge room at home, and get a subscription to Netflix.”

We turn into the parking lot behind the local shops and Dad parks the car. He turns off the ignition, faces me, and looks me in the eye. “That’s why we’re fighting, Michael. For people like Joe.”

“Let’s go get our last chiko roll then.”

“For Joe,” Dad says.