

## Chapter 1

“Do you have any idea what you Five Bandits have done?”

He spat “Five Bandits” like we were common criminals.

Bella rolled her eyes. “For the fourth time, it’s Band Its. Not bandits.”

“That’s right,” Sophia said. “Real bandits haven’t mastered 12 different scales and arpeggios like the proud sectional leaders of the Walt Whitman Warriors.”

“Um,” Bella jutted her thumb towards Kiram. “Kiram isn’t section leader.”

“It was totally rigged!” Kiram protested.

Kingsley looked ready to choke on his own tongue.

“I DON’T REMEMBER ANYONE ASKING YOU TO SPEAK!” The Tampa cop’s nose was inches from Bella’s face, a clear attempt to intimidate the smirk off it.

(He’d have a better chance of intimidating the wrinkles off an angry rhino’s ass.)

I scratched at a large fleck of dried yellow slime that somehow managed to land on the side of my face and dry there.

The five of us looked like complete losers, like the last kids picked for a gym class basketball team.

(That is, if IB students had gym class. Fortunately we don’t. I think they’re afraid we’ll trip and injure ourselves.)

We had no band uniforms, so we were sitting in the Tampa police station in black shiny shorts, our band shirts printed with our show’s name, “The Underdogs” (a complete understatement), black socks pulled to our knees and our black Dinkles (which are marching band shoes—the nerd offspring of wild jungle mating between a pair of banker’s dress shoes and beat up sneakers. Kind of ironic, actually. Florida high school band kids are made to wear them, Kingsley swears, because Dinkles help them keep their vows of sexual abstinence.).

I decided to switch to mouth breathing. We all stank like a sweaty, egg-salad gym fart.

Everyone who had been sitting in the football stadium probably did.

Kiram gagged on a laugh.

“AND WHAT DO YOU FIND SO FUNNY?” The sergeant’s red nose was now pulsating in front of Kiram’s face, which immediately turned to stone.

The cop’s voice fell to a disturbingly calm tone. “We’ve called all your parents.” (For the first time he looked happy.) “And they are all on their way.”

I could see Pop’s eyebrows in my head now. He would definitely not be laughing. Perhaps I could start with, “But, Pop, Bella and I nearly died.”

It would be the God’s honest truth.

How could Kiram be laughing? A felony conviction would destroy whatever scholarship he had lined up from MIT. As for me getting into Princeton? That probably just went up in a cloud of dust. Twenty years from now, I'd be rolling out fondant for wedding cakes for all the wealthy Roosevelt graduates whose high school we'd just leveled.

"I HAVE SEEN HURRICANES DO LESS DAMAGE IN THE FLORIDA PANHANDLE!" screamed the cop again. "DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'VE EVEN DONE?"

It suddenly clicked for me. It was probably *his* police cruiser that had been parked next to the Roosevelt principal's BMW in front of the school.

Which were both now pancaked into 18-inch tall rectangles of metal and plastic.

The officer jammed some paper and a pen in front of all of our laps, stopping in front of Kingsley, who is, without a doubt, the worst driver in the world. "And how do you think *your father* is going to react?"

Kingsley emitted a high-pitched squeak.

"You're going to each carefully write out a detailed explanation about just how all this happened," the sergeant said.

I looked down at my hand.

I was going to need a lot more paper.

Sophia cleared her throat. "Sir? Do you want our confessions written in first or third person?"

"What?"

"In other words, would you prefer it third person limited or from an omniscient narrator point of view?"

The sergeant's face exploded. "DO YOU KNOW HOW MUCH THIS IS GOING TO COST TO FIX?"

Bella slid forward, looking me straight in the face with her freakishly green eyes. "I'd say at least ninety-seven thousand birthday cakes."

My four best friends at Walt Whitman High School exploded with laughter. Kiram actually shot snot out of his nose.

"Bella," I growled. "For once in your life, just shut up."

## Chapter 2

Whenever I get into trouble, my pop holds up a hand and glares out from under his bushy eyebrows. “Why not just begin at the beginning, Anthony?”

So here goes.

The setting of my story is mysterious and exotic South Tampa.

Which, truth be told, is actually too flat and too covered in concrete to be very mysterious. And, to be perfectly honest, the most exotic things in South Tampa are the palm trees.

And the fact that all the town’s businessmen get really drunk and parade through downtown dressed as pirates every January.

But my English teacher, Miss Puccini (no relation to the Italian composer), always says to begin with a good hook.

Buckle your seatbelts.

This is a story about revenge, which, Bella says, is best served up cold.

Which means it should be calculated. It should be brilliant. And it should completely catch its victims off guard.

And apparently it should end with the complete destruction of a rival high school and you sitting in a police station.

But back to the beginning.

My cast of characters?

I’d like to claim I’m the ringleader but I’m too intimidated by Pop’s eyebrows to ring-lead anything too earth-shattering.

That would be Bella. She’s really to blame for it all.

Isabella Maria Delgado, the one and only daughter of Carmen Delgado, the one and only proprietor of Tropical Hair and Nails, right across from the Sam’s Club on Ballast Point Boulevard. Mrs. Delgado, whose shop is filled with signs proclaiming her Boricua pride, moved with her older sister to Tampa from San Juan, Puerto Rico back when she was in ninth grade. (She tells us this nearly every week.) Bella’s mom still speaks with an accent, wears the reddest lipstick in Florida, stuffs herself into the tightest, loudest clothing you’ve ever seen and totters around her salon in high heels nearly as tall as the Beer Can Building downtown. Mrs. Delgado makes Kiram sweat just standing next to her (and Kiram stands next to Mrs. Delgado a lot, despite Bella thinking this is really creepy.)

Bella is section leader of the clarinets, which makes sense because, when this whole thing began three years ago, she pretty much looked just like one. Her hair is the blackest you’ve ever seen and she was as thin as a reed. Bella is either perfectly quiet or perfectly loud (there’s never

much in between). My mom says she doesn't completely trust Bella because she doesn't smile enough. But I think, like a lot of people, mama is just intimidated by Bella, who can come across as fierce as her green eyes.

If you're like us, you're probably wondering about Bella's dad. At one point or another, everyone wonders about Bella's dad. (Bella's mom's eyes are dark brown. And all of Bella's cousins – there are about four hundred of them all around Tampa – have brown eyes too.) Once, back in sixth grade, when I finally realized I'd never seen Bella's dad anywhere, I worked up the courage to ask.

“Where's your dad, Bella?”

Shrug.

So that afternoon when I stopped by the bakery, I asked my mom, who is always up in everybody's business. “Mama, where's Bella's dad? I've never seen him.”

Another shrug. “One of the Tampa's great mysteries, A.J.” Mama leaned over the counter and swiped my nose with the red buttercream frosting she was plastering on an Elmo cake. “Why don't you ask Bella and let your mama know?”

So I asked Sophia, Bella's best friend. Sophia flapped her hands like a duck and her eyes grew as wide as her shiny purple swim goggles. “Bella doesn't know and don't ask her! Last Thursday Kyle Kavouklis kept asking her and she finally punched him so hard he threw up his ham sandwich.”

So I left mama to figure out Bella's paternity for herself.

Then there is Sophia Yoo, who, until our arrest, was anxiously waiting for Mr. Dave Davis, our school principal, to tell her she would be giving the valedictorian's speech at graduation.

Sophia is always staring at you like you're some puzzle that needs unpuzzling, particularly as it relates to your nonexistent love life. She says she wants to be the world's greatest psychologist, which just proves she's crazy.

Sophia's first instrument is the piano, but that's a little awkward to play in marching band, so she plays the flute, on which she's also got mad talent.

But Sophia is so crazy that she's also on Whitman's swim team and even won the 100 butterfly at states last year. She rolls out of bed every morning at five o'clock just to get in her practice laps and fix up all the swim team members with each other before breakfast.

Which gives Sophia bigger biceps than Kiram has. (The swimming, not the match-making.)

You may wonder how she accomplishes all this.

Sophia's parents, Joon-ho and Mi-kyung Yoo, are the strictest parents in all of North America. They own the Chinese restaurant in the strip mall at the intersection of Dale Mabry and Brandy. The one with Maneki Neko, the shiny gold Good Luck Cat, which sits on their countertop constantly waving at the door.

Only they're not Chinese. They're from South Korea.

“If they're Korean, why do they make Chinese food?” Kiram always asks.

“Have you been to China, Kiram?”

“Is it near Iran?”

“My parents don't really make Chinese food, Kiram. Americans just think it's Chinese food. No one in China eats that stuff.”

But Sophia's parents make really good non-Chinese Chinese food.

We stop at General Pao's Garden after every home game because Sophia has to check in so they know she's not out robbing banks or talking to boys (Other than me, Kingsley and Kiram of the Teeny Biceps. The Yoos apparently don't find us very threatening.).

And every time we show up, Kingsley tries to steal the gold cat from the counter and put it on our table.

"Don't touch Maneki Neko!" Sophia lectures. "He's waving in wealth and fortune."

When they spot us, Mr. and Mrs. Yoo get all excited, stuff us into chairs and then stuff us full of egg rolls and lo mein, which they give us for free because we haven't kidnapped Sophia or sold her drugs.

The Yoos seem very friendly, but they don't speak any English. So as far as any of us know, they could be standing by our table, confessing in Korean that they are actually serial killers who keep their victims' bodies in their walk-in cooler. Meanwhile we just smile, slurp our noodles and nod a lot. And after speaking for ten straight minutes, the Yoos go back to their body-filled walk-in cooler and we ask Sophia, "What did they say?"

"They said hello."

"That's it?"

Big sigh. "And to be good girls and boys."

So you can imagine the Yoos' surprise when their daughter Sophia, valedictorian flute player and state swimming champion, called them from lockup.

That night at the police station, Kiram of the Miniscule Biceps leaned over. "You know what this means?" he hissed. "No more free egg rolls."

"Is that what you're worried about?"

Kiram Bokhari is probably my best friend.

How to describe him?

If there's one phrase that best describes Kiram, it's this:

Desperately eager.

Kiram is desperately eager to be everyone's friend.

Kiram is desperately eager to be the funniest, most popular guy in the senior class (which pretty much insures that he's not.)

Most important, Kiram is desperately eager to get a girlfriend.

Despite's Sophia's efforts in this department, Kiram is desperately batting a big fat zero. Which actually surprises Sophia.

"Your whole girlfriend issue is very perplexing," she tells Kiram each Friday at General Pao's. "Because, from my entirely objective point of view, you're at least a solid eight."

This makes Kiram of the Microscopic Biceps bury his face in his greasy, egg-roll hands.

"Maybe it's the band uniform," offers Sophia. "When you put a marching band uniform on a guy, it just squeezes all the testosterone out of him."

Bella shakes an egg roll in agreement. "Especially ones with capes."

Did I mention Whitman High School's band uniforms actually have capes?

I decide to interrupt before someone brings up the big feather on my drum major's shako (that's what they call band hats). "But that doesn't happen to Kingsley," I protest. "All the girls still love Kingsley."

"That's right," Kingsley says. "Nothing can squeeze the testosterone out of Kingsley Harris."

Bella snorts. "Except when Queensley Harris starts talking about herself in the third person."

Sophia giggles.

Kiram peeks out from his hands. “If I don’t get a girlfriend, do you know what that means?”

“It means you will be sad and lonely when you’re old,” Bella says.

“It means my parents will force me to marry my second cousin.”

Kingsley scoffs. “Is that even legal here?”

“We live in Florida,” Bella points out.

Kiram is so desperately eager to avoid the thought of marrying a family member, his voice cracks. “Have you guys seen my second cousin?” His whole body quakes with a heeby-jeeby shiver. “Oh! My! Gahd!”

Like Sophia’s parents, Kiram’s parents are pretty old school. Farzad and Farideh Bokhari are originally from Iran. His dad is also just pretty old – in his sixties. He was actually a brain surgeon in Tehran, Iran’s capital, until after the revolution there, when some guys threw him in jail for not being religious enough. They even tortured him so badly that he can’t move his left arm anymore. Once he moved to the U.S., his Iranian medical license meant nothing here. Now Dr. Bokhari drives a taxi, carrying all the tourists who fly into Tampa International out to the beach hotels. Kiram’s mom works at one of them, supervising the housekeeping staff. The Bokharis completely live for Kiram, their only child. And Kiram’s not kidding when he says his parents will arrange his marriage. When his mom isn’t making his bed, she pretty much arranges his whole life.

Except for picking his instrument. I was actually there for that fight.

“I am not playing the flute!” he actually shouted at her.

I had never seen Kiram raise his voice at his parents, so I hid in his room. (He’s usually desperately eager to please them.)

But throwing that fit somehow worked. Kiram now plays the trombone. Out of sheer relief, Kiram eagerly throws his arms around the seven other trombone players at every game. “We’re the boners!” he shouts.

“You’re the boneheads!” Kingsley shouts back.

That would be Kingsley Harris, who at six-foot, four and two hundred and thirty pounds should probably be playing *on* the football field instead of *in* the football stands. Kingsley can put away a bowl of lo mein the size of Tampa Bay faster than the Tampa Bay Bucs could collectively run the hundred-yard dash.

Big surprise: Kingsley plays the tuba.

In fact, Kingsley is the only person in the entire nation who actually struggles to fit inside a marching tuba (it’s actually called a sousaphone). When he’s on the field playing, Kingsley looks like he’s losing a fight with a brass anaconda.

Kingsley wanted to play football, but his mom died of cancer when he was in eighth grade. That year, Kingsley’s dad, General Goliath Harris, the first African American four-star general ever appointed to lead Central Command at MacDill Air Force Base here in Tampa, nearly wrapped his son in bubble wrap to keep him safe.

“You weren’t given a brain to dash it against the head of some other fool!” General Harris growled. “You’re not playing football, Kingsley. You are joining the band. No child who has ever joined a marching band has ever gotten into serious trouble.”

(General Harris apparently never got around to telling Bella that.)

Yet somehow Kingsley still manages to even make playing the tuba look supremely cool. Kingsley doesn’t merely march off the field after each half time show. He high steps and dances

off it – while all the cheerleaders shriek. (Mr. Holder, our band director, just rolls his eyes and says, “Perhaps next week with a little less exuberance, Mr. Harris.”)

Which explains why, as a sophomore, Kingsley got voted Homecoming King instead of Bryce Howard, the football team captain.

Which explains why, on Homecoming night, Kingsley was driven all over the football field with the Homecoming Queen, Jillian Spence, hanging off General Harris’ Mustang convertible. (Kingsley exuberantly bellowed the school’s fight song on his tuba while the Homecoming Queen blocked her ears).

At least the Homecoming Queen was safer that way. If Kingsley had been behind the wheel, Jillian Spence would have been screaming instead.

Did I mention Kingsley is a terrible driver?

Which brings me to the fifth member of The Five Band Its.

The boring one.

My name is Anthony Joseph Colaruso, but everyone calls me A.J.

Except my pop, who only calls me Anthony.

Here’s why going to Princeton is a big deal: I’d be the first person in my family to go to college.

My great great grandfather migrated from Italy to Tampa in 1915 and opened Colaruso’s Bakery in South Tampa. My father, Salvatore Colaruso, is a fourth generation baker. My family’s entire life is that bakery. Every night my mom and pop come home and Pop shakes flour from his black hair. Even when pricing new stuff, from new cars to trips to Disneyworld, Pop always announces how many birthday cakes he’ll have to make to pay for them.

His first car?

“That Honda cost me nine hundred ninety-five birthday cakes,” he says.

A family trip to Disneyworld for my sister Lilly’s birthday?

“That party set me back seventy-nine whole birthday cakes.”

No one works harder than Pop. He’d do anything for Lilly and me.

Proof?

I met Bella, Kiram, Sophia and Kingsley back in second grade. That year the school district redrew all the school boundaries in South Tampa, putting me in a completely new school. That year the first day of school also fell on my birthday. Knowing it was going to be a tough change, my dad decided to bring a special cake to my class to help me win some new friends. (Everyone in South Tampa knows Pop from the bakery.) I saw him quietly arrive when we were in the middle of math class doing our first word problems.

I remember it clearly. We were working on a problem that made us calculate the cost of two new bikes. I so wanted to impress Pop and my new classmates that I quickly shot up my hand with the answer.

“A.J.?” the teacher called on me. “Can you tell everyone how much the two bikes will cost?”

Deep breath. “Nineteen birthday cakes.”

The class exploded.

To repair the damage, Pop invited Bella, Kiram, Sophia and Kingsley (who were the only four kids that thanked him when he handed them a piece of cake) for a special tour of the bakery. Pop made each of us a special cookie that spelled our names. They immediately thought I was the luckiest kid in town. While we were eating the cookies, I glanced over at Pop and I was

surprised to see him wiping his eyes (Pop usually tears up only at the end of Disney movies.). “Is it because I embarrassed you at school?” I whispered.

“No, Anthony. It’s because you always make your father so proud.”

But since that first day of second grade, whether we’re stopping for pizza or going to the movies, one of The Five Band Its (that’s the groaner of a name Pop slapped on us back in middle school when we all joined the band) always starts in. “Can you believe how expensive this is?” Sophia will say.

“Unbelievable,” Kiram will agree. “It’s at least three birthday cakes!”

But these band geeks are my best friends. And for some reason they all convinced the rest of the Walt Whitman Warriors to elect me drum major at the beginning of our junior year.

So now, instead of playing my trumpet, I climb onto a big platform. And, at least until our band uniforms got destroyed, I conducted the entire marching band wearing white gloves and making karate chopping gestures.

While wearing a ridiculous shako with an enormous feather.

“That’s a pretty feather, A.J.?” Kingsley shouts. “I bet you it cost at least twelve birthday cakes!”

But back to the beginning.

You know the setting. You’ve met the heroic if flawed characters. Now it’s time for the rising action:

In short, my story about revenge begins in October of our sophomore year.

When Bella went out-of-her mind, bat-shit crazy.