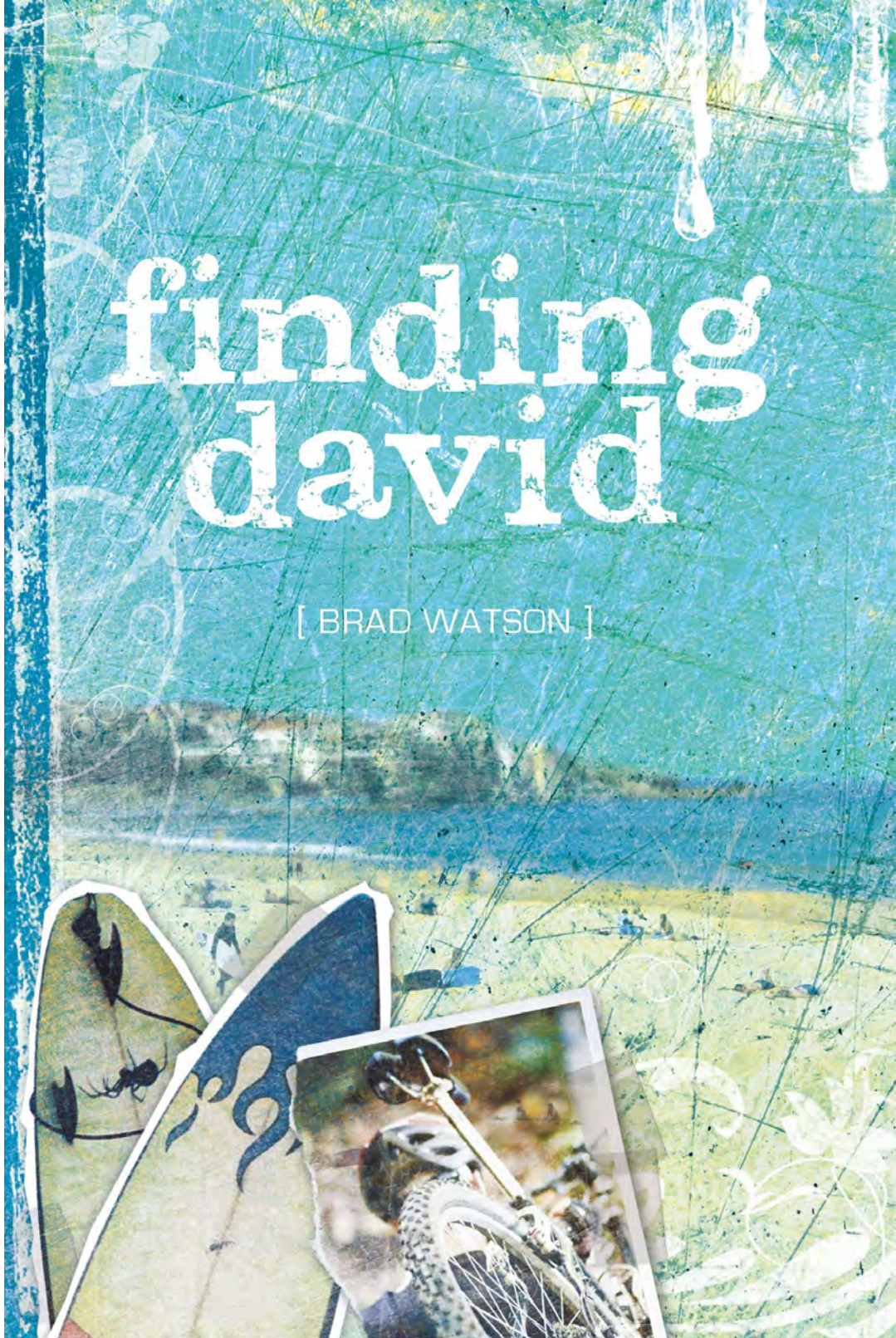


finding david

[BRAD WATSON]



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new boy

As soon as he got on the bus, David knew the students at the back were talking about him! He could feel their eyes on his face as he moved down the aisle, looking for a place to sit. One of them laughed as he found an empty seat. He slumped down on the worn vinyl with a sigh of relief. David wondered what they were saying.

“Hey, new boy,” one of the girls called out. David pretended not to hear and stared out the window as the bus began to move. *Maybe she’s talking to someone else*, he thought hopefully.

“Hey you. New boy. I’m talking to you!” Her voice was louder this time and he turned reluctantly to face a dark-haired girl. She was good looking, wore translucent pink lip gloss, and looked to David like she might be 14 or 15. Beside her was a tanned, muscular guy who was definitely older. One of his arms was draped possessively over her shoulders.

“What’s your name?” she asked impatiently.

“David,” he replied uncomfortably. Then, trying to sound confident, he asked, “What’s yours?”

The girls near her giggled when she ignored his question and whispered something he didn’t hear. “Where do you live?” she asked, looking more at her friends than at him.

David wondered how bad her timing could be and wished the bus was going faster. “Just there,” he said, pointing reluctantly at an older-style, brick house. The grass needed mowing, there were more weeds than plants in the garden and dozens of cardboard boxes still lay around from unpacking. He was embarrassed because it wasn’t as neat as the other houses on the street. Compared to David’s previous home, it was small and shabby but it would have to do.

“Nice,” the girl said sarcastically, a look of disdain on her face. “Very classy, isn’t it, Anthony?”

“Get a life, Kim,” replied the guy beside her. “I wouldn’t live in that shack if you paid me!”

“What a dump!” She spoke softly but it was loud enough that David and the others could hear.

“Yeah,” said one of her friends. “Our letterbox probably cost more than that.”

“My dog’s kennel is bigger,” someone else added.

By now almost everyone in the last three rows was laughing at him, and David wished he could shrink into his seat and disappear. As a new student, he had expected some sort of hassling but had not thought it would begin so soon or come from a girl. And he had not expected to be singled out because of the house. But other than complaining to the bus driver, there was nothing he could do.

David was surprised when a blonde-haired girl across the aisle turned around and interrupted. “Stop being such a cow, Kimberly!” she said impatiently. “Just because everyone isn’t rich like you doesn’t mean you’re better!”

Kimberly’s attention instantly moved away from David. Her eyes flashed angrily, glittering with lightning strikes. David thought at that moment that she was attractive but in a dark way, like a storm that was beautiful and dangerous at the same time.

“Shut up, Jo,” Kimberly snarled. “Who asked for your opinion anyway?”

“Not you,” the blonde girl snapped.

“Then stay out of it,” Kimberly shot back. “No-one cares what you think anyway.”

“You snobs are only interested in your own opinions,” the girl opposite David said loudly, her cheeks reddening. “You just sit up there in the back seat like you own the whole world or

something. Get a life!”

“Ooooh, that’s so nasty, Joanne!” Kimberly replied, with half the bus now listening. “Tell me, when are you starting that see-food diet? You know, see food and eat it? Oh, I’m sorry,” she continued sarcastically. “You’ve tried that already!”

The back row burst into a barrage of laughter and giggling. The bus leaned heavily to the left and lurched out of a bend in the road.

“Good one,” Anthony said.

David studied the girl opposite. *She isn’t as thin as that Kimberly girl*, David thought, *but she doesn’t look fat either. It’s pretty harsh.*

“You lot are so stuck up,” Joanne continued, ignoring the insult. “At least I don’t stick my fingers down my throat every day or starve myself. Stop being such try-hards.”

“Check this out, everyone,” Kimberly replied scornfully. “She’s telling me to give up! She should give up eating so much!”

Kimberly’s friends were still laughing as the bus slowed down outside the school and David noticed her boyfriend was enjoying it all.

“Fat chicks should walk more,” Anthony said, pulling Kimberly close.

David wondered if he should try to defend her. *Hey*, he thought to himself. *I didn’t ask for help. I don’t even know her, so why should I feel bad? But I probably should say something.*

“Thanks,” David mumbled when the bus stopped and everyone got up to leave. He was standing right behind Joanne and bumped into her back when everyone crowded toward the door. The top of her head was at the same level as his chin.

“Don’t worry about them,” she replied, half turning as she slung her schoolbag over her shoulder. “They’re not worth it! And hey, welcome to Dixon High. Apart from those snobs, it’s a pretty good school.”

“Great,” David said, noticing she had blue eyes and a cute nose.

“I’m Jo,” she said as they shuffled forward and stepped off the bus. “Is this really your first day?”

“Yep. I’m David.”

“Do you know where you’re going? I could show you around if you wanted.”

“No, thanks,” David replied without thinking. “I’ve got a map. Anyway, I have to find my little sister.”

“Alright, see you later.”

David kicked himself mentally as she left him standing on the sidewalk. Then he tried to find Jessica. *Why did you tell her you have a map?* he asked himself. *You dumb idiot. She was offering to show you around! And she was sort of nice . . .*

David scanned the crowd, looking for Jessica but trying at the same time to remember the girl’s name. As he did he overheard Kimberly talking to her boyfriend.

“Come on, Kim,” Anthony said loudly as they walked past. “Let’s get out of here. I can’t wait to get my car tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow!” Kimberly squealed. “Really?”

“For real,” Anthony replied, wrapping his arm tightly around her waist and pulling her close. “My wheels are sooooo cool I’m gunna have to put the heater on, even in summer! Hey, did you ask your dad if I can drive you to school?”

David did not hear her answer. *I hope she’s saying yes*, he thought. *Then I won’t have to see them again.*

Then the crowd cleared and he saw Jessica waiting for him at the other end of the bus bay.

She looked small in her new high-school uniform and he suddenly felt guilty for not wanting to sit next to her on the bus. The way things had gone, he wished now he had been nearer the front.

“Were they teasing you?” she asked.

“Who?” David replied, playing dumb.

“Those guys up the back.”

“Nah,” David said. “It was nothing. There were just some girls having a cat fight.”

Together they walked to the main quadrangle where they were surrounded by two-storey buildings and hundreds of students gathered in small groups. David studied his timetable and map. Jessica did the same.

“Know where to go?” David asked as the bell rang.

“Science block,” Jessica answered, pointing to a large brick building, surrounded by leafy trees.

“You OK?” he asked softly, observing that her hands were trembling and her face was pale.

“Of course I am,” she replied.

“See you later then.”

“Bye.”

David watched as she walked away. *She looks hardly bigger than a primary school kid*, he thought. *For a second, I thought she was going to cry.*

When the second bell rang, David moved nervously toward the maths classrooms. “I wish we didn’t have to come here,” he muttered under his breath as he entered the building. “I knew starting at a new school halfway through the term wasn’t going to be easy.”

deathball

At lunchtime, David was standing uncomfortably in the playground, wondering what to do. Nobody had even said hello to him except the girl on the bus. He didn't know where to wait between classes or on breaks, so he had eventually found a brick wall to lean on and was busy trying to blend in. He watched from the corner of his eye as a group of boys his age passed by, and was surprised to see one separate from the others and head his way.

"Hey, I'm James," the tall, freckled student said confidently. "You're David, right? I saw you in maths."

"Yeah."

"That class was boring, wasn't it?"

"Fully," David replied.

"Everyone hates it!" James continued. "Mr Flynn is the worst teacher in the whole school. He just rambles on and on. Seriously, if I listen to his instructions I just get more confused. I just ignore him and read the instructions in the book. You should do the same."

"Thanks for the tip," David said.

"Hey, do you want to come and play Deathball with us? We're going now."

"Sure," David answered uncertainly as they followed the group and headed toward the oval. "What's . . . umm . . . Deathball?"

"You'll see," James said. "It's like football but with no teams. You just kill whoever gets the ball! It's really fun!"

"Is tackle allowed here?" David asked with surprise.

"Not really," James replied. "But the teachers don't care so we just play it anyway. It's no big deal."

"What are the rules?"

James grinned as he spoke. "There aren't any! Someone just kicks the ball up and whoever wants to die catches it and bolts. Everyone tries to smash the person with the ball and the person with the ball tries not to get crushed. If they get scared they can kick it. It's like a gentleman's rule that after you get rid of the ball you're safe. But sometimes, we just smash you anyway! It's so funny when that happens."

On the oval, David counted more than 80 boys. Some were seniors, and looked menacing. Others were so small David wondered if they were even teenagers yet. There was a sense of excitement as the football was kicked high in the air and the large group scattered. He watched curiously as two students, both about his age, went up for the catch. At the last moment one pulled out, leaving the ball to fall awkwardly into the arms of a skinny redhead with lanky legs. He did not look very strong.

David watched intently as the redhead accelerated across the oval like his life depended on it. The boy's lanky legs pumped hard as a howling pack set off in hot pursuit. David felt like he was watching a pod of killer whales homing in on a seal that knew it was about to get ripped apart.

"Waste him!" someone yelled as the redhead hooted, laughing over his shoulder.

"Get him!" another cried.

"Smash him!"

And they did. Despite dodging this way and that, he hardly made it 40 metres before he was crash-tackled from behind and dragged, yelling and kicking, to the ground. Boys were rushing

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