

THE TALENT QUEST



Prologue

'Come on, we're going to be late!' shouted Aiden. He was on his skateboard and Laleh was running to keep up.

'We have plenty of time. Stop worrying,' she puffed, reaching the town hall.

Laleh and Aiden were convinced they could win the talent show. They had been practising for months and had their routines memorised and flawless. A big producer was running a national competition, and the top finalists from each state would appear on television with the final prize being a one-year contract with a record and dance company. It would be a dream come true for both of them.

'Wow!' Laleh said in astonishment, looking around. There must have been at least 200 kids waiting to audition. The front lawns were crowded with children singing, dancing and getting into costumes with fancy hair and makeup.

'Oh no,' groaned Aiden. 'I told you we should have made costumes and at least got my sister to do something with our hair. We're going to be the only ones without a look that the judges will remember.'

Aiden jumped off his skateboard and they both looked around. It was true, everyone had made an effort to go all out. Sequins, leotards, jazz shoes and a hip hop crew in matching hoodies.

'Look Laleh, even that numbat over there is in costume. He looks awesome in his shades.'

Laleh looked to where Aiden was pointing and sure enough, there was a numbat in dark glasses, darting between the contestants' legs.

'What's he doing?' Laleh asked, watching him run and



hide from kid to kid.

'Hey mate,' called Aiden. 'Isn't this a talent show for humans? What category are you entering?'

The numbat looked over, startled at being spotted.

'My name's not mate, it's Neville!' he said in a slightly posh accent. 'And you're all wasting your time entering this competition. I'm an excellent singer and the most talented songwriter in Australia. Soon, everyone is going to know my name!'

Aiden and Laleh stared at each other, bewildered.

'But, fair's fair mate ... I mean ... Neville,' Aiden replied. 'We've all come here to audition. So I guess we'll have to see if the judges agree with you.'

'Not if I have anything to do with it!' Neville quipped. 'But you two seem confident, and I like that in my competition. I'll make you a deal, I'm setting myself up for some serious media coverage to launch my debut album. Solve the puzzles I leave around town and I'll

think about giving the trophy back. If you're quick about it, I'll even consider letting you join my backup dancer and singer troupe!

'Wait, what..?' Aiden started, but before he could continue Neville had darted up on stage and grabbed the trophy sitting on the podium.

It all happened so quickly, no one else noticed. They were too busy singing, dancing and practising their audition pieces.

'Quick Aiden, after him,' Laleh cried as she ran through the crowds of kids. 'He's getting away. Hurry!'

Chapter 1

Laleh and Aiden chased Neville all the way to the gates of the sports stadium and bumped straight into a flustered looking official.

'Hey, watch where you're going kids!' he yelled, looking frantic.

'Sorry,' gasped Aiden. 'We're looking for a numbat wearing dark glasses. Have you seen him? It's urgent!'

'What do you take me for? A numbat in glasses! I don't have time for this. I've got bigger problems. My boss is going to fire me if I don't figure out who this Neville character is.'

They stared at the man in shock. 'Did you say Neville?' Laleh squeaked.

'Yes, someone has left a note to say they have sabotaged both national anthems for the Australian and Indian cricket teams. We can't start the match until we officially open the game by singing them, but we don't know exactly what's been done. All we have to go on are five clues that were left with the note.'

'We have to solve this puzzle, and fast,' whispered Aiden to Laleh. 'Neville was clear that solving the puzzles would be the only way to get that trophy back in time for the talent competition.'

'Don't worry, we think we can help,' said Laleh to the official. 'We're trying to track down this numbat too. He wants to become known for his notorious acts so he can get reporters to cover the launch of his new album. He thinks by creating havoc, the press will notice him. And in turn, people will want to buy his album.'

'Alright kids, but I'm relying on you to save my job!' he said. 'Here are the clues.'



Laleh and Aiden studied the clues carefully. They looked like song lyrics written in the very messy handwriting of the numbat.

CLUE 1

*Poor sweet Matilda, thought she could dance.
But pipped at the post, Australia advanced!*

CLUE 2

*Which came first, the chicken or the egg?
Check history's page, or you'll get misled!*

CLUE 3

*In their seats, the crowd won't budge.
Sitting or standing, you be the judge!*

CLUE 4

*That's not cricket, that's not polite.
If Australia leads, we'll be here all night!*

CLUE 5

*Young or One, you make the call.
Left to me, I'd change them all!*

CLUE 6

*Next check the masts, they won't be flying high.
Master my rhymes, so the protocols comply.*

'What do you think, Laleh? You're so good at this stuff. You are the songwriter after all,' Aiden cried, admiringly. 'We have to get this solved!'

'Neville's note said that he had sabotaged the ceremonies, so it must have something to do with the protocols of using the Australian National Anthem at an official event,' Laleh explained. 'If only we knew what those protocols were.'

'Already on it!' Aiden said in triumph, showing Laleh his phone. 'Look at this website I've found, it's from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and has heaps of information on the National Anthem. There must be something here that can help us.'

'Okay, let's get cracking. There's not a moment to lose,' Laleh said in excitement.