

# 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.

## Chapter 2

'Phew, thank goodness we were able to solve Neville's riddle rhymes and restore the protocols of the National Anthem,' sighed Aiden.

'Yep, and that poor official was so grateful that we helped to get the games started on time. He didn't lose his job, but it was close!' replied Laleh. 'Where do you think Neville has gone now?'

Laleh and Aiden thought for a few minutes, remembering back to what the numbat had said at the talent show tryouts.

'Well, he must be planning something big if the last stunt is anything to go by,' Aiden stated. 'At least he left

us another clue. Read it again, Laleh.'

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

'Hmm, check the masts ... boats have masts! Could he have gone to the harbour? Or flying high, maybe he took a plane?' suggested Aiden.

'Perhaps,' replied Laleh. 'But don't forget that the first puzzle was to do with the Australian National Anthem so I'm thinking this one must have something to do with an official place.'

Laleh pondered the words Neville left in the clue. Check the masts. Boats definitely had masts, but something told her this wasn't quite right as the next line didn't add up. They won't be flying high. 'Boats don't fly in the sky ...' she thought.

Suddenly it came to her. In excitement, she yelled, 'Aiden, what has a mast and flies in the sky?'

'I dunno, a boat-plane?' Aiden laughed.

'It's a FLAG. Think about it, flags are attached to the masts on boats and when they're raised, they fly proudly in the wind,' said Laleh in triumph. 'The closet flagpoles are just down the road at the naval base. Let's go and check them out.'

'Couldn't it be somewhere else though, like Parliament House?' Aiden asked. 'How do we know which official building Neville went to?'

'I just remembered ... I saw on the news last night that the navy base are flying their flags at half-mast today for a special ceremony,' Laleh said, taking off at a run. Neville's rhyme said to check the masts ... so he must be at the naval base!'

Laleh raced down the hill, with Aiden following on his skateboard. They soon arrived at the base and sure enough, standing pride of place at the front of the main building, stood the flagpoles.

'Take a look, Aiden,' exclaimed Laleh. 'The Australian Flag, the Australian Aboriginal Flag, and the Torres Strait Islander Flag are all half-mast but the other flags

are flying high at the top of their poles.'

'Yep and look at the flags, I'm sure they aren't right. I can't put my finger on it but they don't seem to be how I remember them.' Aiden replied. 'Didn't Neville's clue say something about mastering his rhyme so the protocols apply? Do you think that means he has tampered with them in some way?'

'That would be just like him,' agreed Laleh. 'Let's take a closer look at each one.'

Reaching the base of the poles, Aiden noticed a note.

'Look Laleh, Neville has left us more rhyming riddle clues.'

#### CLUE 7

*Something isn't right, is there a tear or rip?  
Restore dignity and honour, that's my tip.*

#### CLUE 8

*Let's talk size, large or small?  
Should one be bigger? You make the call.*

**CLUE 9**

*Topsy turvey, which way around?  
Solve it fast, and turn that frown upside down.*

**CLUE 10**

*Emblems here, emblems there.  
As long as they're included, can they be anywhere?*

**CLUE 11**

*Where to find me next ...  
Letters and parcels, so much mail.  
Catch me quickly, or the posties will fail.*

'You're right Aiden,' said Laleh. 'I think Neville has tampered with the protocols of the three flags. If we solve these riddles, we should be able to work out what has changed and let the authorities at the naval base know.'

'Yikes, we better be quick though Laleh, look at all the journalists gathering in the car park,' yelled Aiden. 'There must be a big press conference happening soon. If they spot the issues with the flags, they're bound to

report it and give Neville the attention he wants.'

'Okay, let's do it!' Laleh replied.

'Go Team AL!' Aiden whooped.

'Team AL?' Laleh questioned, her eyebrows raised.

'Well ...' replied Aiden, with a cheeky grin. 'I figure we need a partnership name, now that we are officially on the case.'

'Agreed,' Laleh laughed. 'But perhaps we can think of something a little more creative.'



### Chapter 3

'That Neville is so naughty! I can't believe all the tampering he did to the flags at the naval base.' Aiden said, exasperated.

'He really is a nuisance, messing up all the protocols to get the media's attention,' agreed Laleh. 'I can't believe the navy official had to cut the flag Neville tampered with into small unrecognisable pieces and place it in a sealed bag before binning it. Who would have thought there was a flag disposal protocol as well?'

'I know, and what a waste of a perfectly good Aussie flag. Neville has a lot to answer for!' Aiden said, looking annoyed.

'At least we stopped his attempt to get his name in the spotlight for the second time,' responded Laleh. 'Now we just have to solve his final clue and work out where he is now. I'll read it again ...'

*'Letters and parcels, so much mail.  
Catch me quickly, or the posties will fail.'*

'I think this is an obvious one. He must have gone to the post office and plans to do something to stop everyone's mail,' said Aiden.

'Yeah I think you're probably right, but which post office? There is one in almost every suburb. How can we narrow it down?' Laleh moaned. 'We don't have time to visit them all'.

They plonked down on the grass and stared at the clue, both needing to catch their breath after a crazy morning.

'I think it must be a big one, Neville never does anything by halves. If he is going to sabotage the mail then he'll try to do it from the place likely to get the most

attention,' observed Aiden.

'Then it has to be the GPO in the city. The General Post Office. That's the biggest and it also gets loads of visitors every day,' Laleh said, agreeing with Aiden's logic.

'It's only a few blocks from here. We can make it in about ten minutes; five if you had a skateboard,' Aiden teased.

They set off through the streets until they spotted a grand and beautiful old building made of sandstone. Even though the buildings around it were huge, fancy new skyscrapers that went on forever, the GPO had character and it stood out proudly.

Aiden and Laleh didn't need a riddle to work out what the numbat had done this time. Crowds of postal workers stood in front of the building looking concerned.

They were pointing to the large Commonwealth Coat of Arms mounted above the post office doors. Hanging

over the place where the emu normally stood was a large full-colour photograph of Neville. The picture was of him in his shades posing in a way that he probably thought made him look cool.

'What's going on?' Aiden said to a confused-looking worker.

'This nutty numbat has disrespected our Coat of Arms,' the man said. 'Look at it! Not only has he hung this very uncool poster of himself over our emu, he's gone and changed lots of the important parts of the Arms itself. He left a note and some clues. The Coat of Arms is important to us. We just want it fixed.'

'I think that's our cue,' Laleh said, jumping in. 'Don't worry sir, we've stopped his animal antics up to now and we won't let this one get past us! Can you show us the clues?'

#### CLUE 12

*It had 7 points and 14 sides,  
But it's much better now, so which shape hides?*

**CLUE 13**

*My allergies can't cope with trees,  
So I've swapped it out, sorry bees!*

**CLUE 14**

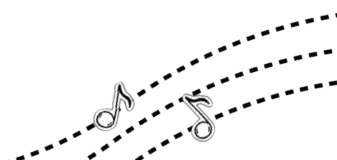
*My family's regalia is so much better,  
What do you think of our matching sweaters?*

**CLUE 15**

*Numbatia has such a delightful ring,  
Let's rename our land, and make me King!*

**CLUE 16**

*Congratulations kids, you solved my clues.  
But hurry back fast, or you'll still lose!*



## Epilogue

'We are really cutting it fine, Laleh,' called Aiden, as he weaved his way out of the crowd. 'It's almost time for our audition.'

'I know!' she panted, out of breath from running. 'We solved those last riddles just in time for the posties to get the mail out today, but if we don't get back in the next ten minutes then the show will be off. You can't have a competition without the trophy!'

Laleh and Aiden raced through the city, arriving on the lawns right back where they started. They searched everywhere for numbat, but couldn't find him – and the trophy was not on the podium.

'What are we going to do?' groaned Aiden. 'I'm sure we answered all of his riddles. The final clue told us to come back here.'

'Well, that was quite the performance,' came a posh voice from behind them. 'Very entertaining. You proved to be worthy opponents, and almost caught up with me a few times.'

They turned around. There stood Neville, holding the trophy under his arm and grinning from ear to ear.

'But you said that if we solved all of the clues, you would return it in time,' Laleh said, panic written all over her face. 'The show is about to start!'

'I'm a numbat of my word young lady,' Neville said, disapprovingly. 'I have every intention of returning this trophy. But first, before you try out for your audition, I want to save you the time and offer you both roles as a backup dancer and singer when my concert tours next month.'

'Um, er ... well ... the thing is ...' choked Aiden, about to

burst into laughter.

‘No thanks, Neville,’ Laleh said firmly. ‘I think we’ve proven today that we can make it on our own!’

‘As you wish,’ he replied, snootily. ‘But you will regret the day you turned down an opportunity with Neville – the World’s Greatest Show Numbat!’

With his parting words and in the blink of an eye, Neville was gone. The trophy reappeared on the podium (in all the chaos, no one had even noticed it was missing), leaving Laleh and Aiden questioning whether the events of their day had even really happened.

But before they could contemplate it, a crackly voice came over the speaker. ‘Team AL, Team AL, calling Team AL to the stage.’

Laleh stared at Aiden in horror. ‘You didn’t,’ she said, looking mortified. ‘I can’t believe you registered us with that stage name.’

Aiden laughed, ‘Aw, come on ... we’ve got this Laleh!’

And the name certainly beats Neville the World’s Greatest Show Numbat’.

They grinned at each other, walked on stage, and the lights dimmed ...