

The bully behind the screen

COMPREHENSION
CRUSHER

Narrative

Growing up in a small town had resulted in Joshua and his peers following similar paths: they attended the same schools, clubs and events. They were a united pack. What would happen if one individual stepped off that path... chose a new, uncharted route... alone?

"Oh, this one's for you," Mr Harris declared. "Looks official! Not been paying your bills?" he jested, handing an envelope to his eldest son. Joshua – who rarely received post – studied it suspiciously. "Don't worry, it won't bite!" his dad chuckled, urging Joshua to open the letter.

"It's from Lynchton Cricket Club. They want me to try out for the team on Saturday!" he gushed.

"Wow! That's terrific, lad!" his dad beamed. "Good for you!"

Joshua fired the news into every group chat he belonged to. Immediately, notifications exploded across his screen, feeding his teenage hunger for likes, emojis and positive comments. Blinded by the tsunami of praise, Joshua failed to notice that one contact was ominously silent: the captain of the school cricket team, Laila.

The following day, a spotlight lit his path; he revelled in its flattering glow and enjoyed the pleasant numbness caused by repeated pats on the back. His phone pinged: **Watch out! Yr head won't fit through the door soon! Joke!!** It didn't feel particularly funny.

At after-school practice, Joshua was determined to tweak his technique before the big day. Nothing appeared strange until the coach instructed Laila to umpire a game whilst he oversaw the juniors. From then on, questionable calls pursued him like a pack of hungry wolves. Whichever role he took – batting or fielding – Laila criticised his play. Inevitably, his team lost.

Online that evening, Joshua – as he readily expected – was the target of light-hearted banter: **Sure the letter was 4 U?!. Bro, yr losing yr touch!.. Washed yr hands in butter, did ya?!** However, amongst these, spiteful comments began to creep in. Were they calling him a cheat? Joshua tried to shrug it off, but the words still stung.

On Saturday afternoon, Hazel and Archie were waiting for Joshua as the car pulled into his driveway.

"So... how'd it go?" Archie asked. Joshua's euphoric grin said it all: he had secured a prestigious place in their town's team.

"Congrats, mate!" Hazel cheered as she ran to hug him. Joshua grinned, squeezing his friend tightly. None of them knew how much their friendship would soon be tested.



The bullying started with snide remarks, but it quickly snowballed. New groups were formed: Joshua was invited, then removed without a word. Humiliating memes and doctored photos of him flooded the internet. Hidden behind glass and pixels, Laila loaded her comments with poison and fired them, one after another.

Joshua grew quiet and pulled away from his friends. Anxiety hung over him like a storm cloud and the heavy shadows under his eyes deepened each day. His grades plummeted. Like iron shackles, Joshua dragged around a constant fear of what his phone would display next, but the urge to look always won. Each notification felt like a trap, luring him into a viper's lair.

Of course, his parents and true friends noticed. At first, they put his out-of-character behaviour down to stress from juggling schoolwork and training. Joshua always had an excuse ready, but their worry soon sharpened when he quit the school cricket team.

"What'd you do that for?" Archie asked. "You live for the sport!"

Hazel saw the worry in Joshua's desperate eyes. "Leave it, Arch!" she hissed. Being careful not to widen the gap between them, she asked, "What's up? I can see you're embarrassed... no judgement!" They walked in silence for a while. Slowly, the gap narrowed and Joshua slipped his unlocked phone into her hand, his gaze fixed on the ground.

Clay's office was crammed with people: him, the deputy headteacher and Joshua's chosen trusted adult who was overseeing proceedings; two sets of parents, distraught for contrasting reasons; and a pair of crestfallen teenagers. Printouts of a plethora of incriminating screenshots littered his desk. The air was heavy with a cocktail of emotions: regret, anger, disappointment, fear and sorrow.

"Speak up!" barked Laila's mortified mum, her cheeks flushed a furious shade of crimson. "And look at Joshua!" she ordered.

Laila, who had already been stripped of her captaincy and faced an onslaught of parental punishments, admitted that she'd been pricked by a thorn of jealousy and made a clumsy but heartfelt apology.

"W-what c-can I do to make it up to you?" she continued, scraping her thumbnail against her red-raw fingers.

Solemnly, Joshua turned, met her desperate gaze and delivered his simple plea: "Never... ever... do this to anyone again!"