

# **PLAY THE GAME**

**THE HOOP CON**

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**SCHOLASTIC INC.**

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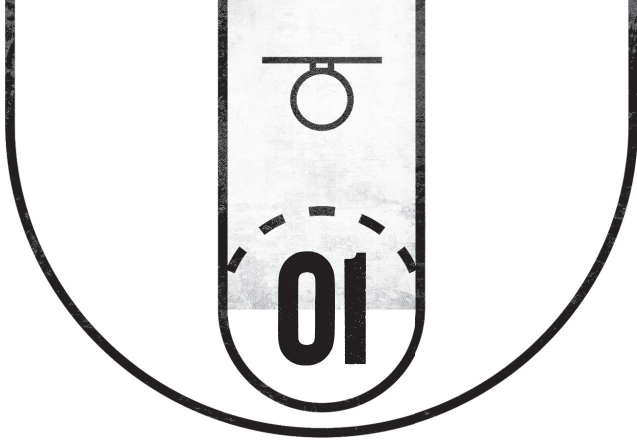
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## **SPICE BROTHERS**

“Raam! Check this out.”

My open locker door bangs me square in the forehead as I turn to hear a loud, familiar voice roaring through the crowd, yelling my name through the hallway.

The sharp pain stings, and I feel I’m concussed—or, at least, my skull must be cracked open like an egg. A second later, the internal buzzing subsides, and Cake barrels through a group of students, pointing his cell phone at me.

“Watch,” he says, pressing the phone into my face. He shouldn’t have a phone in the open. We aren’t allowed to use them at school outside of emergencies. Mine’s in my bag.

Cake breathes heavily, and his eyes bulge. Sweat drips from his faux-hawk Sonic hairdo. Since kindergarten, he’s been

my best friend, and I've never seen him this worked up.

It's the last day of sixth grade, and I should be throwing away a year's worth of junk. All our lockers must be cleaned out before the end of the day. The inside of mine resembles one of those hoarder houses on reality TV. If Mom or Dad could see how messy it is, they'd ground me for life.

I get distracted by Reena Kapadia taking selfies with her best friends across the hall. I'll miss her sitting behind me in World Cultures, where she'd occasionally tap my shoulder to borrow a pencil. My fingers begin to tingle as I rub the back of my neck.

"Stop gawking," Cake says, folding his arms across his chest. "This is more important."

Reluctantly, I grab the phone from him.

"Watch the video," he demands. The dude is all business.

I hit the play button.

Though it's loud in the open-air hallway with everyone celebrating their freedom from school, I can hear dramatic background music playing through the phone speaker. The screen has tricked-out filters and graphics like I'm watching a summer blockbuster trailer. A ball bounces, and a plume of smoke fills the screen. The face of my favorite player, Aron

Hardaway, appears, and a message shows up like a *Star Wars* crawl.

## **BREAKING NEWS:**

### **Aron Hardaway appearing at Hoop Con**

The video swipes to Hardaway. He smiles as he talks to the camera.

“I’m excited to be a guest at Hoop Con this June. I’m looking forward to hanging out with all the kids and, most importantly, everyone having fun and shooting hoops. Sign up soon and get a chance to meet me.”

And then, it cuts out with a link to the website.

I slowly turn to Cake, who waggles his eyebrows.

“Is this a joke?” I ask, stunned. “Wasn’t he in Europe shooting a movie?”

“Nope,” he confirms. “And I just got my passes to Hoop Con.”

“No way,” I say.

“One of my dad’s patients hooked it up,” he says proudly.

Of course, both of Cake’s parents are doctors.

“You gotta get yours, man.”

“Dude, I’m trying. The last time I checked, they were sold

out, and some of the ticket sites were selling them at five hundred dollars a pop.”

“Talk to your parents again,” Cake says. He puts his phone into his pocket.

“I have,” I say, gritting my teeth.

Hoop Con is a five-day basketball extravaganza at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando. It’s the Comic-Con for ballers: the ultimate immersive, interactive experience with thirteen different basketball-related activities, including dunk contests, shooting competitions, live games, autograph and photograph sessions, exhibits, brand activations, and an e-sports lounge. They are hosting camps so kids have the opportunity to brush up on their skills. There was already a robust list of current and former players, and now that Aron will be there, I must figure out how I’d get to go.

Half the students at school wear #33 Hardaway Orlando Magic jerseys, including me. Let’s be clear. There is no more prominent name in the game today. Aron Hardaway has been in the league for only two years, and he’s won the dunk and three-point contest and made the All-Star Game each season. He can do it all. Shoot, defend, dish the rock, and hit the glass. He’s also

the size of Giannis with Kyrie's handles and Steph's range. I even have a Slam of Da Month poster of him in my locker next to the little silver Krishna statue Mom gave me for good luck.

He had the dopest sneaker line ever. Each release is a huge event. We signed up for his last pair, Sky Hardaway Slam High District 13s, but missed getting them. Aron has endorsement deals with everyone from auto insurance to crypto to sports drinks, where he showcases his trademark grin. He even has a martial arts video game where you battle all sorts of demons, goblins, and zombies for interdimensional domination.

I once saw Aron at a gas station when he peeled out in his souped-up Ferrari. It was the most incredible car I'd ever seen.

I grab a basketball from my locker. It needs air, but I spin it in my hands, imagining schooling everyone in my new Sky Hardaway kicks. When Reena passes by in her red dress and tells me to have a great vacation, I barely notice in time to wave.

Cake lunges over and grabs a nutrition bar I was about to throw away among old candy wrappers and scraps of homework.

"The date's expired," I warn him.

"Yeah, six months ago," he says as he rips the wrapper and takes a bite. "Still edible."

Before I can intervene, he eats the whole thing.

“Stale, yet chewy,” he says, initially shaking his head before slowly nodding in acceptance. This guy will eat anything.

The bus ride home is festive, and it’s the last day Cake and I will be stuck in the front seats. The seventh and eighth graders fill the middle and back, but the Moore brothers, Justin and Dustin, are no longer here to torment us. They got suspended for throwing eggs out the window at passing cars, not to mention how often they pegged us with rubber bands and erasers. Now, they’re home on an early vacation. And I won’t have to deal with them again until next year.

Everyone is exuberant; even our bus driver smiles, despite getting paper balls thrown at him—probably happy to be rid of us.

Cake and I live in this large neighborhood called Storybrook West, located a few miles down the road. It’s got a golf course that’s been closed for a year now. Dad says a developer is trying to build condos. He’s still upset because he hasn’t used his new clubs, which gather dust in our garage.

Nobody’s home when I walk in. Mom is still at her new dance studio and Dad’s at some new hotel property where he



handles video marketing. As of late, they've both spent more time away from home.

When I get inside, I notice Mom has left a snack of puris and sugar cookies for me in the kitchen. The dishes pile up in the sink, and Mom's chai cup is half full. I grab a couple of puris and cookies and go into my room, passing by the framed and garlanded photo of Apple Dada, Mom's dad, my late grandfather, who died about a year ago.

If my locker was a mess, my room is worse. I have clothes and shoes everywhere. On my walls hang posters of Aron, Steph, Giannis, Luka, and Jordan, my laundry hoop basket, a court rug on the floor, and a basketball-shaped light on the ceiling. I also have my mini hoop attached to the door on which I practice my dunks. At four foot eight, I still can't touch the net on a regulation rim. I skimmed it with my finger last month. Close, but not yet. On this rim, however, I'm a dunking god.

I check my computer. My other set of grandparents, my dad's parents, are visiting India for the summer, and they emailed me photos from their vacation in Rajasthan. The funny thing is they live ten minutes away from us, but they spend half the year hanging in the motherland. My dad said my grandparents came to America

when they were still teens, so they are making up for years of being homesick. Usually, I'd hang out at their house after school.

Dad grew up in Orlando, and the proximity to family is one of the reasons my parents moved from California when I was two. I was born in Los Angeles, though I don't remember it.

My cousin Trina still lives there. She's the closest thing to a sister that I have. And she's asked me to visit a few times. For some reason, Mom and Dad haven't been back. Not sure why. Trina keeps telling me about these incredible food spots, the basketball, and the weather. LA seems awesome.

I skip the attached photo album and check the Hoop Con website to see if the Aron announcement is authentic. Indeed, his headshot and the news appear on the home page. I quickly go to Ticket Hub to see if any Hoop Con tickets are available. Since Aron's confirmation, they've doubled in price. I must convince my parents I need to go no matter the cost. Even individual day passes are sold out.

I pull my phone out of my bag. Unlike Cake's latest smartphone, mine is three years old, a hand-me-down from my parents. It's cracked, chipping, and flips. I need to get some advice. I hit up Trina. She's a heck of a baller.

**ME: School is ova! You hear Aron's gonna be at Hoop Con?**

**TRINA: DUUUUDE, I still have a week. NO WAY. That's awesome. You going?**

**ME: Passes are like \$500. I asked Mom and Dad about it. They were hesitant. And that's when prices were half that.**

**TRINA: Keep talking to them. Something will work out. How's your game?**

**ME: Good. Mastering that dribble.**

**TRINA: Sweet. I'm still at school :( Message me later.**

**ME: Cool.**

Let me clarify: Trina's not technically my cousin. She's my aunt. Her dad, Mahendra Uncle, and my grandfather, Apple Dada, were brothers. Yeah, it's a little confusing. She and my mom are first cousins. But Trina and I are only two years apart, probably because her dad and my grandfather are twenty years apart. Trina always likes to pull seniority over me and make me address her as Trina Masi when we are around others.

My parents are lukewarm about my basketball obsession. I get solid grades, yet they want me to concentrate on other

academic pursuits like Gujarati classes, coding, and the spelling bee. Dad's not going to be thrilled I got a B plus in Reading.

Cake texts me.

**CAKE: Highlight time?**

**ME: Heck, yeah.**

I pump air into my basketball. The ball loses its bounce after so many mornings and afternoon games at school. The grip has worn down to a nub.

I change into shorts and a T-shirt and my Hardaways. I have a couple of pairs, just not the costly ones.

I hear a ball's *ka-thump* on the backyard sidewalk a few minutes later. Cake lives directly across from me on the eighth hole, which now looks like a jungle of overgrown foliage. His house is three stories, and he's got a sweet game room and a pool. It's twice the size of mine.

Cake's real name is Chirag, but since his sixth birthday, when he ate every variety of cheesecake from Cheesecake Factory like it was a hot-dog eating competition, I've called him Cake. Only his mom calls him Chirag.