



OH  
MAYA  
GODS!

Maz Evans



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*For William and Mouthy Southey.*

*See? Told you I would.*

*You are EPIC.*

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## 1. A Star Isn't Born

It began on a Saturday, as new adventures often do. Vesper didn't have strong feelings about Mondays to Fridays – they were merely paving stones on her path to the weekend. She had no opinion at all about Sundays – although had she known that the next one was destined to change her life for ever, she might have paid it more attention. But Saturdays . . . those were Vesper's undisputed favourites.

Because Saturdays were match days.

This particular Saturday found Vesper in her favourite place, joyfully surging through midfield with a ball at her feet. It wasn't that football was

Vesper's whole life – she reserved at least five minutes a day to think about other things like . . . all her schoolwork. But football made sense – it was the only thing Vesper found easy and the one thing she entirely understood. On the pitch, she knew exactly how to play, who was on her side and what she was supposed to do. In football, she always understood the rules. In life, she rarely understood the game.

Vesper forced herself to concentrate on her run, it needed to be perfect. Normally this wouldn't have been an issue. Normally, the ball was bonded to her feet by some invisible force, exhilarating for her, and exhausting for anyone trying to take it. But today was anything but normal. Today, Vesper knew that somewhere in that crowd, Alisha Carr, former World Cup winner and scout for the national youth team, was watching the game. And Vesper was determined that Alisha would only be watching her.

'Let's focus, team!' yelled a parent Vesper didn't recognize. 'Keep your eye on the ball! This game is won in the details!'

'Come on, team!' she heard her coach, Mr Stepp, shout out. 'Let's score this try!'

Vesper stifled an internal groan as she weighted a perfect pass across the pitch. When she'd started

secondary school, there hadn't been a football team. Vesper had campaigned to create one, but had to settle for the only member of staff willing to train them. Mr Stepp's sole qualification was an enthusiasm for sport – or, as it turned out, an enthusiasm for watching sport on TV. He was totally clueless about football. Thankfully for the team, their captain Vesper was not.

'Oi! Robin!' she shouted to the teammate who had received her ball. 'Keep it moving! Rishmi is wide open on the wing!'

But Robin Snyder ignored her. Like he always did.

'Robin!' she yelled across the pitch again. 'You need to offload, you're going to run into—'

Her sentence – and Robin – were abruptly interrupted by Tom Stone, one of Lakeside Academy's larger defenders. She watched as Robin crumpled to the ground, rolling dramatically around the grass. She wasn't sure what was worse – Robin's football, or his acting.

'Owwwwwww! My leeeeeegggggg!' Robin screamed as Vesper jogged over to her teammate. 'Ref, that brute fouled me! Red card!'

'Get up, you melon!' Vesper scoffed. 'It was a decent tackle, and you know it. And it was your other leg, so ...'

‘Are you trying to give them the win?’ Robin hissed back, quickly switching legs. ‘We need this to have a prayer of winning the league! Play the game!’

Vesper thought how much she wanted to raise the league cup over her head. That would impress Alisha Carr. That would impress everyone.

But Robin was lying. And Vesper didn’t like liars. She felt her darkness rear up inside her, but she quickly pushed it down. Not here. Not now.

‘Put a sock in it, Snyder. We’ll win the league because we’re the best,’ she pronounced, grabbing the ball. ‘So unless you can play on your bum as well as talk out of it, get up!’

She tossed the ball back to Tom and signalled to the ref that her player was under control.

‘Traitor,’ Robin glowered at her, leaping to his feet and immediately forgetting his ‘injury’.

‘Muppet,’ Vesper muttered, intercepting the defender’s clumsy pass and sprinting away towards the goal.

‘That’s it!’ yelled the unfamiliar parent. ‘Keep your focus! Pay attention!’

‘Pass . . . er . . . serve . . . er . . . hit it really hard!’ Mr Stepp screamed.

But as she steamed down the pitch, Vesper wasn’t passing to anyone. They’d kept a tough



game to a 0 – 0 draw. Robin was right about one thing – they really needed this win. There were only a couple of minutes left, Vesper needed to score the winning goal – and she needed Alisha to see it. The goal was looming larger with every lengthy stride. Vesper was on the edge of the box – once that ball hit her left foot she was absolutely unstoppable—

‘OOOOOOF!’

With an almighty shove to her back, Vesper was absolutely stopped.

‘Ref! Ref!’ she protested, trying to ignore the searing pain in her ankle.

‘Umpire!’ Mr Stepp shouted from the sidelines. ‘That looked like a . . . bad thing!’

‘Oh, so now we’re allowed to call a foul?’ sighed Robin Snyder. But Vesper didn’t have time to deal with him. There were bigger things at stake.

‘Come on, ref!’ Vesper insisted, her ankle now on fire. ‘He brought me down from behind! In the box! Stone-cold penalty!’

‘Thank you, Number Nine, I’m aware of the rules,’ the ref answered, bringing her whistle to her mouth. Tom Stone blew Vesper a sarcastic kiss. Vesper could feel the darkness fester again as her fists clenched at the ground. She’d played fair and

done the right thing and this was how Stone repaid her? The darkness formed shadowy images of all the things she'd like to do to this lying, cheating . . .

'Ref!' the parent screamed. 'Where are your glasses?! Which game are you watching?'

Vesper gripped the grass, breathing through both the pain and the urge to go and teach Tom Stone a lesson he'd not forget. But she knew she couldn't let the darkness out. Not here. Not anywhere.

Vesper struggled to her feet, making sure she didn't wince at the throbbing in her ankle. She could feel Alisha Carr's eyes on her. Injured players were weak. And Vesper needed Alisha to know how strong she was.

The rest of her team were crowding the ref now, appealing for the penalty. Vesper kept her voice out of it. She didn't want the scout to see her argue with the ref. And she didn't trust what she might say if she did.

Batting away the protesting players, the ref finally blew her whistle and pointed to the penalty spot.

'Yes!' Vesper celebrated, grabbing up the ball. Penalties were her speciality. She was ice-cold. She was unbeatable. She was—

‘You’re injured,’ whispered a voice in her left ear. It was her teammate Rishmi. Vesper didn’t really have friends on the team – or anywhere else, for that matter. She didn’t understand friendship and it didn’t seem to understand her. Besides, between training and the farm, she didn’t have the time. Rishmi was probably as close to a friend as she had. Or needed.

‘Vesper, you can’t take the kick, you’re limping,’ Rishmi insisted. ‘Let me. I can do it, you know I can.’

Vesper knew that Rishmi was an excellent spot-kicker – if she was completely honest, nearly as good as Vesper herself. But Alisha Carr hadn’t come to see Rishmi. She was here for Vesper. And Vesper was going to give her something to watch.

‘I’m fine,’ she insisted, carefully placing the ball on the spot. ‘I’ve got this.’

‘You sure?’ whispered Rishmi. ‘I honestly think—’

‘Well, I’m honestly the captain, so it’s my call,’ Vesper snapped. ‘So if you don’t mind . . .’

Rishmi reluctantly retreated. Vesper turned the ball three times. Not for luck. She didn’t need luck.

But it couldn’t hurt.

‘Come on, Vesper!’ Mr Stepp yelled encouragingly. ‘Make it an ace!’

‘Focus!’ shouted the parent unhelpfully. ‘You have to focus!’

Vesper quickly scanned the small crowd of parents to see if her dad was there. He hadn’t made a game all season. She understood how busy he was, especially at weekends. He’d promised he’d try today, though.

But Dad wasn’t there. Again.

Vesper refocused and eyeballed the goalie, who was rocking in a squat, searching for any clue which way she was going to strike. She tucked a stray curl of her black hair behind her ear, another thing she didn’t do for luck. She weighed up her options, ignoring the heat in her right ankle. Vesper’s right foot was good. But her left was lethal. Her eyes glanced up at the top left corner of the goalpost, hoping the goalie was watching her fake-out. But really, Vesper was going straight down the middle.

She could hear Lakeside players muttering their trash talk.

*‘No pressure.’*

*‘How’s your ankle?’*

*‘Miss, miss, miss . . .’*

Vesper blocked them all out. This was between

her and the goalie. And she knew precisely who was going to win.

The ground silenced and the ref's whistle blew. Vesper took five carefully measured steps back, feeling the anticipation from the crowd. She tried not to smile at what was about to happen. She just hoped Alisha was ready.

With a calming breath, she took off on her short run. She had done this a thousand times to perfection – while the other kids were doing . . . whatever it was they did, Vesper was here, on the field, practising her shots. This was no different to any of those times. She set off, timing her run perfectly. The goalie was ready to dive the wrong way, Vesper put her weight on her right foot to let her left perform its magic and—

‘Argh!’

Her right ankle buckled painfully beneath her, shocking her into stopping. The goalie smiled as she repositioned – Vesper had given herself away. Panicking on the pitch wasn't her style and she didn't like the feel of its icy fingers encircling her heart. She had to take this kick, she had to score. So with as much strength as she could muster from her painful standing start, she powered the ball down the line . . .

. . . and straight into the goalie's waiting gloves.

For a moment, the world stopped as everyone made sense of the last few seconds. But as they all regained their wits, Vesper was overwhelmed with the explosion of cheering.

The cheering for the other team.

Her knees gave way as the ref's whistle confirmed full-time. Vesper had blown it. She'd had her chance and she'd blown it.

'Bad luck, team!' the parent commiserated. 'Keep working on that focus! Pay attention to the small details and the big ones will come! I'm still your biggest supporter! GO, FALCONS!'

'Falcons?' Mr Stepp queried. 'This is Brysmore School versus Lakeside Academy.'

The parent looked aghast, then looked at their watch.

'Oh, crumbs,' they gulped, before racing for their car.

Vesper sat on the pitch for she didn't know how long, until the players and the crowd had left the ground. Her head sank to her knees as she hoped the world would leave her alone. She had enough disappointment in her own head without needing anyone else's right now.

A hand on her back snatched her from her dark solitude. She blinked into the sun to see who it was, perhaps Dad had made it after all . . .

‘Hey,’ said the smiling face standing above her.

‘Er . . . hey,’ Vesper spluttered back, scrambling to her feet. If she was going to be humiliated by Alisha Carr, she was at least going to look her in the eye when she did it.

‘Good game,’ said Alisha kindly. ‘You did really well out there.’

‘I . . . I did?’ said Vesper uncertainly.

Alisha laughed.

‘If all our careers were decided on penalties, Vesper, none of us would ever play again,’ she sighed. ‘I’m still not over that World Cup semi-final shoot-out five years ago, if only I’d sent the goalie left . . .’

Vesper smiled. Alisha Carr knew her name. That was epically cool.

‘You’re a natural,’ Alisha continued. ‘Your instincts for positioning are fantastic and you are positively balletic with a ball at your feet. And you managed your . . . dramatic teammate with class. You’re very impressive, Vesper. And so I think . . .’

Vesper’s heart performed a drum roll. This was it! This was when she was invited to the national youth team! She’d done it! This would show everyone.

‘. . . you have a lot of potential,’ Alisha said.

Vesper waited for the next part, the part where Alisha told her she was in the squad. But after an awkward silence, it appeared that was all the scout had to say.

‘I’m sorry,’ Vesper finally piped up, ‘I don’t understand, I thought you—’

‘I know what you thought,’ Alisha said sympathetically. ‘I’m sorry, Vesper. Today’s not that day.’

‘But . . . but you said the penalty didn’t matter!’ Vesper gabbled. ‘You said that – and you’re right by the way, you totally should have sent the goalie left, in twenty-five shoot-outs, she never saved a spot kick on the left – but that’s not the point, you said—’

Alisha held up a hand to stop Vesper’s jabbering.

‘I had made up my mind long before you missed the penalty,’ she said with a sad smile. ‘You’re a great player, Vesper. But you’re just not ready.’

‘I am!’ Vesper shouted desperately. ‘If you’d come last week and seen the game against St Mark’s, I scored a hat trick, I’m the highest-scoring player in the league—’

‘Your statistics as an individual aren’t in question,’ said Alisha. ‘You just need to learn to be part of a team.’



‘But . . . I am part of a team,’ Vesper objected. ‘I can’t help being the best part.’

‘And there’s the issue,’ Alisha replied. ‘A team doesn’t have a best part. All the parts should work together to make it the best. You run when you should pass. You argue when you should listen. You take penalties on an injured ankle . . .’

‘My ankle’s fine,’ Vesper lied.

‘And you don’t ask for help when you need it,’ Alisha whispered. ‘I can’t work with that. You might think you’re the best player in this team. But in my team, you’d be in a squad of best players. My job is to make them the best team. You’re just not there yet, Vesper. I’m sorry.’

Vesper went to disagree, even though she knew it was hopeless. Her heart dropped heavily into her bad ankle.

‘But can I leave you with a piece of advice?’ Alisha offered.

Vesper shrugged. It wasn’t like today could get any worse.

‘Sometimes, to really shine,’ Alisha began, ‘you have to let someone else be the star.’

Vesper nodded. Although she had absolutely no idea what Alisha was talking about. She was the star. She’d just lost her shine.

‘I’ll leave you alone,’ said the scout, with

another pat on the back. 'I hope to see you again. And get that ankle checked out. You've got some big games coming up.'

Vesper watched Alisha Carr walk off the pitch. With perfect timing, a light drizzle broke out, sending Vesper trudging towards the muggy changing rooms.

'Bad luck,' said Rishmi, as Vesper threw her boots at her bag. 'How's your ankle?'

Vesper didn't know what to say, so she said nothing. She caught a glimpse of her despondent face in the mirror. Her green eyes were filled with disappointment. She just wanted to go home.

'Hey,' Rishmi tried again with a nervous gulp. 'Some of us are heading to my folks' café for some calorie commiserations. Do . . . do you wanna come?'

'No,' sulked Vesper, immediately feeling bad. Rishmi was the only one who ever tried to include her. Vesper wanted to explain that when she felt like this, she just needed to be on her own. That other people didn't understand. That she was no good to anyone when the darkness tried to consume her and she didn't know how to get it out.

'See ya,' was all she could manage as she slumped out of the changing rooms.

‘See ya,’ sighed Rishmi, leaving behind her.

Vesper strode out of the school and across the playground that would release her from this horrible afternoon. It had not been her favourite Saturday.

‘Nice one, captain,’ a sarcastic voice hissed behind her. ‘My gran could have scored that penalty. With her zimmer frame.’

A cautious giggle applauded the burn. Vesper generally commanded respect from her teammates. But Vesper knew that Robin Snyder didn’t respect anyone or anything. The very wealthy rarely did.

‘Robin, back off,’ said Rishmi. ‘Anyone can miss a penalty, that’s the way they go.’

‘Who asked you?’ Robin snarled. ‘Shouldn’t you get back to your family’s café? I hear they can’t afford to pay any real staff.’

‘Just like they couldn’t afford to buy her a place on this team,’ sighed Vesper, turning around to face Robin’s unkind smirk. ‘But we can’t all have a rich daddy whose big money pays for little talent.’

The small gaggle of teammates around Robin went silent, much to Vesper’s satisfaction. There was only so far they were prepared to back him. Good.

‘You’re just jealous, farm girl!’ Robin snapped,

his cool completely lost. ‘And you’ve no right talking about talent after that performance!’

‘You wanna talk performances?’ laughed Vesper. ‘How’s about your nomination for Worst Impersonation of a Footballer?’

Nervous snorts escaped some of her teammates. When Vesper had started the football team, she had insisted it was unisex so that anyone felt welcome to play. If only she had added that spoilt brats need not apply.

She gave Robin a sarcastic smile and headed for home. She could eat fools like Snyder for breakfast.

‘Leaving so soon?’ Robin snarled behind her. ‘What’s the hurry? Someone else order the Takeaway Baby?’

Vesper halted as a collective gasp sucked the air out of the playground.

‘Robin!’ Rishmi exclaimed. ‘That’s an awful thing to—’

‘I’m talking to you, Takeaway Baby!’ said Robin, sounding slightly less sure of himself as his friends peeled away. ‘For someone who’s been dumped on a doorstep, you might want to be careful who you upset. After all, if your own mother didn’t want you, you have to ask: who really does?’

If he said something else, Vesper didn't hear it. The darkness inside was screaming at her to launch herself at this entitled bully, to make him feel the pain he'd just dished out to her, to let him carry the wounds she hid inside . . .

But instead, Vesper turned and walked away. As she bit down the tears that were forcing their way to her eyes, she wasn't sure what hurt more.

The part of her that wanted to scream that everything he'd said wasn't true.

Or the part of her that agreed with every single word.