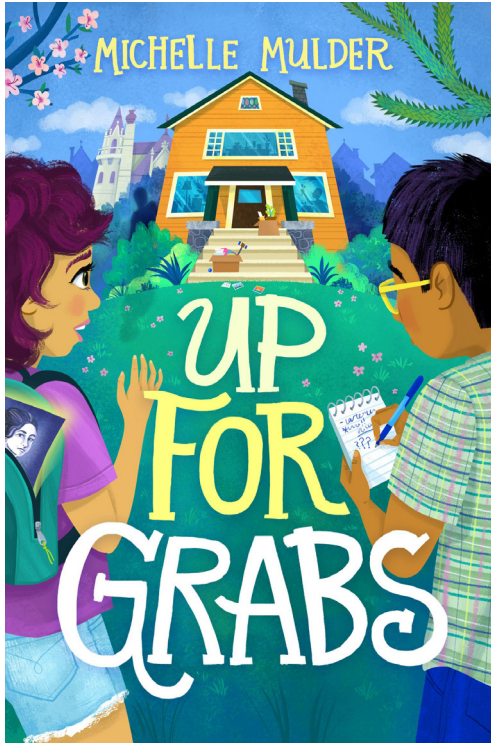


Excerpt from *Up for Grabs*
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Published by DCB

Publication Date: May 2023

160 pages

\$14.95

Ages 9-12; Grades 4-7

Chapter One

July, 2015

Zac was never big on talking about family, but you'd have thought a detail like "Grandma lives in a mansion with a castle outside her kitchen window" might have come up at some point. A castle. With turrets, a covered carriageway, and big lawns. Sure, a big ring of houses surrounded it now, but who knew Canada's west coast even *had* a castle?

Our grandmother's front porch was huge, and the house was up on a slope, so you had to clomp down the wooden steps to the stone ones before finally reaching the pavement.

We'd been here for a week now, and we hadn't met anyone — unless you could count the woman halfway down the street who was always sitting on her porch. She waved at me every time I went by. I waved back, but we never said a word to each other. She was the only person I ever saw outside. The only light I ever saw in a window was in the house across the street. A kid my age lived there with his mom. No one else ever seemed to be home anywhere on our street. *That's the trade-off*, Zac said when I mentioned it to him. *Living here means you have a big house near a castle, but you work so hard that you never have time to enjoy it. I'd rather have small and comfy any day.*

As far as I was concerned, they could all keep their castle. For me, the best part of the neighborhood was the tiniest house, which stood on a post at the edge of someone's property at the end of the street. The little box was an exact copy (just a billion times smaller) of the house under renovation behind it. I unhitched the latch at the side and pulled open the door to peer at the two neat rows of books.

“Hey, Pierre,” I said. “The romances with the cringe-worthy covers are still here. They haven’t moved all week.”

Pierre pushed his silver hair back from his face. You’d never guess he was in his seventies. He looked like he split his time between the gym and the tanning salon, although he never set foot in either. “Someone has taken the pot roast cookbook.” He snapped his fingers like he was disappointed that it had gotten away. “*Suburban Haiku* is new, though, no?”

“Hi Pierre!” said a voice from behind us. I turned to see a boy about my age crouched a few feet away, opening a green backpack and smiling up at us. A notepad and a pen stuck out from the back pocket of his jeans, and I, as someone who carries a sketchbook and a pencil everywhere I go, appreciated that detail.

“Hazeem!” Pierre said. “It is a pleasure to see you again. This is my young friend, Frida. The one I was telling you about.” Thankfully, he didn’t add all the details that my brother Zac usually added at this point: that I was named after Frida Kahlo, a Mexican artist last century who was into bright colors and was way ahead of her time. Mom was a fan, and so was I for that matter, but no way was I going to mention this to a kid I’d just met, even if Hazeem *did* keep a notepad and a pen in his back pocket.

“I’ve seen you sitting on the front steps,” Hazeem said, “drawing or writing or something. I live across the street. For the summer, anyway. We’re from the Yukon.”

“We’re here for the summer too,” I said.

“I know,” Hazeem said. “Pierre told me. I met him last week when he got here. He said that he wasn’t living at the house, just opening it up to air it out, but that someone my age would be arriving soon to stay for the summer.”

I eyed the notepad in his pocket. “Do you sketch too?”

He shook his head. “I write.”

“Hazeem is working on a story about the Munich Olympics crisis,” Pierre said, as though everyone knew what that was (I didn’t) and as though Hazeem wouldn’t mind him mentioning this quirky interest to another teenager.

Hazeem didn’t look embarrassed, though. “I was asking Pierre if he remembered any details.”

Pierre closed the door of the box. “Nothing for me today, although the *Book of Knots* is tempting. I will say goodbye now to the two of you. I need to run a few errands and then I will go back to my boat. I think the problem with the propeller may be barnacles.”

“Barnacles?” I asked. Pierre hadn’t been planning to be in Victoria when we got here, but he was in the area and the propeller of the sailboat he lived on was doing some strange things so he was mooring here for a bit to investigate.

“They are getting in the way of the spinning,” he said. “Today, I will try to scrape them off.”

“Sounds like you have quite the afternoon ahead of you,” I teased.

“Indeed!” he said. “Hazeem, it was a pleasure. Frida, I will see you and Zac again tomorrow.”

Pierre headed off down the street. I was turning in the opposite direction, but Hazeem kept talking. “Liz keeps this box well-stocked.” He jerked his head at the house surrounded by scaffolding. A few dumpsters stood in the driveway, and roof shingles speckled the pavement. He opened the book box and began sliding paperbacks onto the shelves. At his feet, his backpack stood open, brimming with more books. “What do you like to read?”

“Art books, mostly,” I said, “but I’ll read almost anything. Except romances and 1960s cookbooks.”

“Good call,” he said. “You should check out the box at Langham

Court Theatre. I always see art books in there.”

“There’s another book box like this?” I asked. “Is it far from here?”

He shook his head. “Just a few blocks. I can show you, if you want. I don’t think all these books will fit in here anyway, so I planned on a walk. Liz here printed a map for me of all the local book boxes — the ones in the neighborhood, anyway, not all 300.”

“*Three-hundred?!?*”

Whatever expression I had on — excitement? admiration? — totally shifted the conversation. Hazeem’s face lit up. “Isn’t it fantastic? Sometimes I spread the books around a bit, like if one box gets too crowded and another is half-empty, you know? That’s how I know the Langham Court Theatre one almost always has art books.”

It was the nerdiest thing he could possibly say, and either he didn’t know, or he didn’t care. I felt myself relax. “What are some of the best titles you’ve seen so far?”

“*God Is Not a Fish Inspector*,” he answered without even having to think about it. “It was a book of short stories or something.”

“Excellent.” I hesitated, wondering if I should add that to the list of weird titles that I’d started at the back of my sketchbook, but decided I should only include ones I’d seen myself. “My favorite so far is *The Curtain Book: A Sourcebook for Distinctive Curtains, Drapes, and Shades for Your Home*. That was here until Tuesday. I bet there are tons of really random books out there. I’d like to see that map sometime.” I looked down at his backpack. “Did these all come from other boxes?”

“Nah,” he said. “I’m helping a neighbor clear out her shelves. She’s eighty-three. They’re mostly about local history, but they’re kind of historic themselves. They all end about fifty years ago.”

That sounded familiar. Zac and I had been neck-deep in

historic stuff ever since we got here. “The house we’re in, it was my grandmother’s. She died a few months ago, and —”

“I’m sorry,” Hazeem said. “My grandfather died last year. I know how rough it is.”

I bit my lip. “Actually, I barely knew her. I mean, I wish I did, but she didn’t — she was kind of —”

“Oh,” he said.

We stood there awkwardly while I tried to figure out what to say next. I’d had friends who’d lost grandparents, and friends whose parents had divorced, and Zac always told me to talk about it right away, say how sorry I was, and let the other person lead the conversation. Great advice, if I could avoid thinking about what life would look like if I lost anyone because the only Anyone I had was Zac. Sure, we saw Pierre every few years, and he was a great guy, but basically, it was Zac and me. If Zac kicked the bucket, I was on my own, and that’s not something I ever wanted to think about. “I’m sorry about your grandfather. Sounds like you were close.”

“He lived in Pakistan — that’s where he died — but he spent every summer with us,” Hazeem said. “This is our first one without him. That’s part of why we came to Victoria.” His eyes looked sad, but he talked like it was the most normal thing in the world to be standing on the sidewalk telling a complete stranger how much he missed his dead grandfather. Part of me wanted to turn and run, but a part of me was fascinated. What else would he talk about as if it was a totally normal conversation topic?

The click of high heels on pavement hurried toward us. A woman dressed like she was ready for the office rounded the hedge and stopped short, her mass of silver, wiry curls bobbing. She had a handbag big enough to put Mary Poppins to shame. “Good morning, Hazeem,” she said.

“Hi, Liz,” he said. “Have you met Frida? She’s here for the summer.”

“Pleased to meet you,” I said.

“Are you staying at Anna’s too?” Liz asked.

I shook my head. “At the house across the street from Hazeem’s.”

“Ooh! Such a lovely property!” Liz lied. (The place hadn’t seen paint in decades, some of the windows didn’t close properly. Inside, every nook and cranny was crammed with stuff, and everything reeked of mothballs.) “So much potential, and such a shame about the lady of the house. A relative of yours perhaps?”

I glanced at Hazeem to see if this line of conversation felt a bit intense to him too. He shrugged. “Liz works for an auction house. She’s always on the lookout for —”

“Opportunities to help people choose mindfully between the possessions they’d like to keep and the ones that would fetch an excellent price in our show room. Here —” She plunged a hand deep into her bag and pulled out a business card. “My contact information. I’m happy to help any time. I offer free consultations, of course.”

Pushy much? “Thank you.”

I slid the card into the back pocket of my cut-offs, and she trained her eyes on Hazeem. “How are things going at Anna’s house? Anything she’ll need help with?”

He shook his head. “Not so far. It’s mostly papers and books she’s getting rid of. Lots and lots of books.”

“Well, you’ve got my number if you need me,” Liz said. “Or just knock. You know I’m in the cottage at the back while the renos are going on, right? Oh my! Look at the time! I’m running late. Nice to meet you, Frances! Toodle-oo!” She clicketty-clicked down the street to a yellow Smart car, squeezed in, and took off.

“Frances!” I said.

Hazeem was laughing. “I thought it was only *my* name she got wrong — Hakim, Joaquin, Hansel, Hiram, Hazmat, Hoser —”

“Hoser?”

“Just kidding,” he said. “It didn’t get *that* bad, but it was bad enough for Anna to make her write my name ten times so she would remember it.”

“I like this Anna person,” I said. “How do you know so many people on the street already, anyway? How long have you been here?”

Hazeem shrugged. “A few weeks. Anna’s our landlady and our neighbor too. Liz keeps showing up because she heard Anna’s getting rid of stuff. Other than Pierre, Anna, and Liz, we don’t know anyone. People don’t seem to talk to each other much around here, you know? There’s a neighborhood barbecue next week, though. You probably have a flyer in your mailbox.”

“I’ll look for it,” I said.

He zipped up his backpack. “Right. This box is full, so next stop, Langham Court. Wanna come? It’s only about five blocks from here. I guarantee art books, or double your money back.”

“Such a deal!” I said. “You’re on.”

A few minutes later, we were standing in front of a tall cupboard with four shelves crammed to overflowing with everything from chewed-on board books to ancient copies of Shakespeare. “Look at that!” I pulled out a book called *30,000 Years of Art: The Story of Human Creativity across Time & Space*.

“Jackpot,” Hazeem said. “I knew you’d find something. And what about this one? It’s about a photographer, someone called Hannah Maynard who lived here in the late 1800s. That counts as art, right? Wanna read it?”

I wasn’t much into photography, but Zac said our grandmother’s house was built in 1911, and I did wonder what Victoria looked

like back then. “Thanks.”

By the time we were ready to leave, Hazeem had emptied his backpack, and I’d filled it with books I wanted to take home. One was so big that I had to carry it in my arms.

“Thanks for making space at the book exchange,” Hazeem teased. “I couldn’t have fit in Anna’s books without you.”

“Any time,” I said. “Wouldn’t this be easier by bike, though?”

“Don’t have one,” he said.

“I might be able to fix that.” I told him about the old bike I’d spotted in our grandmother’s basement. “It needs new inner tubes and the chain needs grease, but I can get it working. We’ll have to fix it up for Zac to sell it anyway. You could borrow it in the meantime.”

“Perfect,” Hazeem said. “You look after the bikes. I’ll map out some routes.”

I smiled. This fancy, empty neighborhood wasn’t a place I’d ever imagined living. Usually, we arrived somewhere with a long list of things to see or experience, but here, the list had been mind-numbingly short: sort and sell all of grandmother’s stuff, including the house. It was a relief to add “treasure hunt with interesting new neighbor” to the list. “Book boxes of Victoria, here we come!”