

MY  
BOX-  
SHAPED  
HEART

RACHAEL LUCAS



Feiweil and Friends  
New York

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

An imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

MY BOX-SHAPED HEART. Copyright © 2019 by Rachael Lucas. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by email at [MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com](mailto:MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-250-13000-6 (hardcover) / ISBN 978-1-250-13001-3 (ebook)

Book design by TK  
Feiwei and Friends logo designed by Filomena Tuosto

First American edition, 2019  
Originally published in the United Kingdom by Pan Macmillan

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

[fiercereads.com](http://fiercereads.com)

Dedication TK

## CHAPTER ONE

Under the surface, deep in the blue-lit water, nobody can see me.

There's nobody to judge the clothes I wear, or the way my hair frizzles around my head like a halo. I'm wearing a black Speedo swimsuit, which looks like a million others. I'm under here, and when I pull my arms up, gliding up and cutting through the surface, it still feels secure.

I count my strokes and revel in my power as I speed from one end of the pool to the other. I regulate my breathing. This is my thing. I have control.

I roll over and float on my back in the water. The sunlight pours through the glass panels in the roof and sparkles across the pool's surface, shooting off prisms of light, which dapple the tiled walls.

Something hits me on the side of my leg, and I feel the water sloshing over my face and up my nose. Instinctively, I reach out to grab something, but I'm in the middle of the pool and there's nothing there.

I bob sideways, like a cork, and my feet stretch down to find the tiled floor. I swipe the water from my eyes and tuck a dripping strand of hair behind my ear.

“Hey.”

The sound is distorted by the echoing acoustics of the swimming pool.

“Sorry—didn’t see you there.”

My eyes are stinging from the chlorine. I blink hard, and the person in front of me comes into focus. I step back reflexively, realizing it’s a boy. The resistance of the water makes it hard, and I wobble sideways. It’s hard to be graceful when you’re up to your shoulders in a swimming pool.

“I didn’t spot you under there.” His face is apologetic: eyebrows half raised, mouth in a smile that somehow tugs down at the corners. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to land on your head.”

“You didn’t.” I tug at the strap of my swimsuit, looking down. “It’s fine.”

I’m conscious that it’s a bit too small and a bit too tight. Generally, I don’t stand close enough to other people for them to notice me.

One of the eyebrows lifts up as we stand there for a second, neither of us saying anything.

He’s taller than me—which is unusual—and on his head is a wet thatch of dark brown hair. He rakes a hand through it, and there’s an awkward moment where neither of us quite knows where to look. That’s the moment when the fact that we’re both standing in a pool of water, wearing almost no clothes, seems to cross both of our minds at the same time.

I take a breath in. “Okay.”

“Right,” he says. And he jerks his head upward slightly, in a sort of nod, and steps sideways. I watch as he dives down beneath the water and disappears under the sparkling surface of the pool.

“Holls, my little ray of delight.”

The spell is broken in an instant. As if someone has flicked a switch, the atmosphere changes, and the space fills with the excited gabbling of small children and harried parents. Cressi, the swimming instructor, is beckoning me over. In three long strokes, I traverse the pool and lever myself out.

“You’re supposed to use the steps.” Her round face breaks into a mock-admonishing smile. “If you’re going to be leading these youngsters astray before you even get started, we’re going to be in trouble.”

I take a step back and look at her, my head cocked to one side. Does she mean—

“I’ve cleared it with the management. You’re in.”

Cressi’s our neighbor—or near enough. She doesn’t live on our estate, but in a little stone house, which was there long before the housing association came along and filled the fields with row upon row of identical white-clad terraces. She sort of found us, and the next thing I knew she’d whisked me up to the pool where she worked, and now she’s offered me the chance to escape on a regular basis. They need an assistant to help with the swimming lessons, and I need a place to go that isn’t home.

“Wednesdays are a definite, but can I get back to you about the others?”

I nod. I don’t think I can trust myself to speak—mainly because I can’t quite believe that I now have a justifiable excuse for being away from everything, here in the silence and the cleanliness and the space and the clear blue water.

“Excellent. I think you’ll love it.” Cressi gives a decisive nod. She sticks her pen behind her ear, and then she hoicks the strap of the swimsuit under her council-issued polo shirt, hefting up her not-inconsiderable bosom as she does so.

If Cressi were an animal, I think to myself as I’m washing my hair in the showers, she’d be a sea lion. She barks—which can be terrifying, until you realize that it’s just her fancy exclusive school background—and

she's sort of substantial. Like there's twice as much of her as there is of other people. She owns her space. I like her for that.

ooo

I see the boy again afterward.

The bus stop smells of the chip shop opposite, and my stomach is growling so loudly that the woman standing next to me smiles conspiratorially.

“Those chips smell good, don't they, hen?”

She picks up her bag as the bus groans to a halt and the doors open with a tired sigh. “No' be long now and you'll be home for your tea.” She motions to the bus, gesturing for me to get on.

“I'm waiting for the 236.”

The door squeaks closed on her reply.

The Hopeburn high street is quiet—the children are all home from school, and the procession of cars full of commuters from the train station hasn't started yet. But there's a queue forming outside the door of the just-opened chip shop opposite, and the warm smell drifts across on the wind. My stomach gives a hopeful rumble.

“Hi.”

I assume that the voice is someone talking on their phone, so I don't raise my eyes from the ground.

I'm still waiting for the bus. I'd text the thing that tells you when the next bus is coming along, but predictably my crappy pay-as-you-go phone battery has died. So I'm just sitting looking at the ground and watching a tiny ladybug making its way along a crack in the pavement.

The smell of vinegary chips hits the back of my nose, but this time it's not on the wind—it's so close that my mouth starts watering and I can feel my stomach contracting. I am ravenous, and the bus is never going to come.

There's a beat of silence, and I realize the voice wasn't on the phone; it was talking to me.

I let my eyes dart up, and as I do I feel the physical presence of the boy from the swimming pool as if it were an actual thing. It's like the air is fizzing, or something.

"D'you want one?"

He's holding a bag of chips, and he sort of shakes it in my direction. He's got a big, open sort of face. Strong eyebrows.

(I have no idea why I've just noticed he has strong eyebrows.)

"No—it's fine, thanks," I say. I have no idea why I just said that either.

My stomach gives a growling sort of squeak, which is so loud neither of us can ignore it. His mouth (also big) turns down at the corners as he tries not to laugh.

"You sure?"

I reach out and take one, popping it in my mouth and closing my eyes for a split second as the taste of it fills me with delight. I haven't eaten since this morning, and I am so hungry that I realize now that the spacey feeling I've had since I got out of the pool is probably lack of energy.

I swallow.

"Thanks."

"Have some more. I've got loads."

He perches beside me on the seat so we're almost the same height. He must be over six feet tall. I'm five eleven, so I tower over almost everyone I know. You'd think it'd be hard to be invisible when you're the size I am, but somehow I just sort of blend into the background.

I pull out another chip. I'm aware that he's offered chips, and therefore part of me feels that I ought to have some conversation handy for situations like this, but I have nothing. I'm racking my brains.

I look down.



He's wearing a pair of black trainers, which have the ghost of a hole worn in the toe.

I like that. It makes him seem a bit more real, somehow.

"Do you go to the Academy?"

He's interesting-looking. And he doesn't know anything about me.

"Yes," he says, and he rakes a hand through his still-wet hair. "I just started—"

There's a second where he stops, as though he's checking himself. He looks at me sideways and rubs his chin.

"Just started what?"

I turn to look at him properly. I think there's something about being here, in a different place, that is making me act more like the person I think I am in my head, and less like the person I am back home in Kilmuir, even though it's only three miles away.

I don't think I've stood this close to a boy in years, but the weird crackly static I can sense in the air is probably completely in my head and the result of watching one too many cheesy films. And the thing is that as "meet cutes" go (the bit, in case you're wondering, where girl meets boy, and you know that they're just going to get together), meeting at a bus stop after bumping into each other at the swimming pool would be quite a nice one.

Except this is reality, and I am not cute and ditzy and about to fall over and do something adorable. I am tall, I am a bit fat, and I think my nose is weird.

"I go to Kilmuir High."

He looks blank.

"So by rights," I continue, thinking aloud about the feud between the two schools, "you shouldn't be sitting here. And you definitely"—I take another chip and wave it for emphasis—"shouldn't be giving me your chips."

He raises an eyebrow slightly, and the corners of his mouth turn down again in that funny half smile.

“But you know that already, right?”

“Yep.” He fiddles with the sleeve of his hoodie, pulling it down for a second and then pushing it back up almost straightaway. It’s a bit short. Or maybe he’s just a bit tall. I know the feeling.

“Do you go to the pool often?”

It’s his turn to ask an awkward question. It’s sort of comforting that even weirdly good-looking boys haven’t got a clue how to have a conversation either. And we’ve got no idea when the bus is coming, so this could take some time.

“All the time.” I hitch my swimming bag on my shoulder as I say it, as if it’s just reminded me it’s there. “I’m going to be teaching soon.”

“Cool,” he says. He laces his fingers together and then untangles them. For a weird moment, I have to suppress the urge that my brain—which seems to be doing all sorts of odd things this afternoon—has to make me reach over and touch one of them, just to see if they’re warm or cold. I have no idea why. I have absolutely no reference points for this stuff. It’s not like I can watch my loving parents being physically affectionate to each other and think, Ah—*this* is what it’s supposed to look like. I’m just making it all up as I go along, and it’s pretty confusing.

“Maybe I’ll see you there again?” he says. “I reckon I’ll be going most nights after school.”

“Same,” I say, and he gives me another one of his wide-mouthed smiles. Is he handsome or is he weird-looking? I can’t actually tell.

He’s sort of both at the same time.

A second later, the bus pulls up, and I grab my things.

“You coming?” I ask, fishing my pass out of the front of my rucksack. I grab the metal rail and turn back to look at him. He’s moving in an unhurried sort of way, unfolding his long legs and straightening up.

“Nah,” he says, standing up and pulling up his hood despite the sunshine. “I wasn’t waiting for the bus.”

“Can you two no’ have this conversation by text message?” the

driver calls out at us from behind the glass, nodding approval as he scans a look at my bus pass.

“I—” I begin, but the door swooshes shut, and I’m jolted as the bus lurches forward. I watch as—I don’t even know what his name is—raises a hand in farewell. I flop down into a seat and turn to look back at him. He grins at me as the bus pulls away, down the high street, back to my own life, where nobody talks to me and strange, weirdly good-looking boys don’t offer to share their chips with me.

“Those seats aren’t for you, hen.”

I feel my face going scarlet as the woman opposite me motions to the wheelchair sign. I pick up my bags, and—despite the fact that the bus is empty but for the two of us and two younger boys who are drawing faces on the window in the condensation from their breath—I move. Obediently, and without making a fuss. In my head I point out that if someone got on and wanted the seat, of course I would move. But like most of the arguments I have with people in my head, it stays there.

We turn the corner out of Hopeburn and head past the castle on the way over the hill. The trees are lime green with leaves, and the sun is shining. It’s summer, and the loch is shimmering blue.

I rest my head against the window and it bumps along as we pass the outskirts of town, rising up to the crest of the hill that leads to Kilmuir. My stomach isn’t growling with hunger now; it’s lurching with a strange, half-nervous feeling. Am I ever going to see him again? What sort of person just randomly sits down and has a conversation in a bus shelter?

I think back over everything that was said (which isn’t that much, I know). His accent sounded more like Edinburgh—definitely not from round here. Maybe that’s what he meant when he said he’d just started?

My mum’s English, which means I don’t sound anywhere near as Kilmuir as the people at school. She was always really particular about

me “speaking properly,” as she put it. (If you’re looking for a way to mark your children out as different, teaching them to speak in a way that everyone considers stuck-up is a good start.) So we say, “yes, darling,” not “aye”; and it’s “not,” never “no”; and you don’t ever say “dinnae.” Useful if I was planning a career as a newsreader, I suppose. All it’s really done is give me a little extra something—as if I needed it—to make it clear I’m not like everyone else.

I used to daydream about moving house and starting again. In my fantasy we’d have a huge, spacious white house (when I was ten, I used to pore over the IKEA catalogue and mark my favorite pages) with giant windows and bright light pouring in. It’d look like spring all year round. I’d be minimalist and uncluttered, and nobody would know who I was. When I turned up for school, I could reinvent myself, start afresh.

But that’s not what happened. Instead, we live here in Kilmuir, where every single one of your mistakes hangs around your neck forever. That’s partly why I decided to start swimming at the pool in Hopeburn. Cressi sort of forcibly befriended my mum—it’s hard to explain, but that’s just how she is—and the next thing I know, I was being bundled in the car with her and given a lift to the pool where she worked. And I realized that nobody there knew or cared who I was, and I didn’t have to worry about bumping into people I wanted to avoid. There is a pool in Kilmuir, but even though you might be hard to spot in the water, there’s always the chance that afterward, hair ratted with chlorine, you might bump into someone from school. So I took Cressi up on her offer, started using my bus pass, and escaped to another world—or the closest I can get to one. I’m aware that exchanging one tiny Scottish town for another three miles away isn’t exactly reinventing myself, but there’s a limit to how much I can do. I’m only sixteen.

## CHAPTER TWO

I've walked this path so many times that I swear my feet know their own way. I feel the gravel of the path crunching through the thin soles of my fake Converse (which are actually quite nice—they've got red flowers all over them), and I run the flat of my hand along the tops of the cow parsley, which is frothing along the verge. I walk past the path that leads down to Cressi's little stone cottage and along the pavement toward the estate. Down the path, through the play area, three little girls are dancing on a makeshift wooden stage they've made out of an old pallet, like I used to with Lauren, when we were sisters.

A picture of her seven-year-old face pops into my head for a fleeting moment, and I remember the day we met for the first time: me on roller skates on the path outside the house; Lauren standing, a too-big pink holdall over one shoulder; and Neil, her dad, giving us both money for the ice-cream van.

And then Neil moved in with Mum, and we went from two to four. Our house was my granny's house, and when she died the housing

association let us stay there. Over the years, the flowery wallpaper was painted over with bright colors, and the patterned curtains replaced with long cotton ones from IKEA. And Lauren and I crashed up and down the stairs surfing on a mattress and scuffing the walls with our school shoes, and for a while it felt like we were a proper family—the kind you see on the adverts on television. I liked having a stepsister, and I felt happy lots of the time. And Mum smiled a lot then too. Until Neil started disappearing and leaving us at the weekend and saying he was working. And then he'd come back and be all smiles and charm and flowers from the petrol station up the road and they'd share a bottle of red wine from the corner shop and Lauren and I would fight over the television and then one day it all just ended.

Round the corner and past the gardens.

Our house is the second in a long white terrace, the walls spiky with stone harling. I press the flat of my hand against it for a second, feeling the way each little stone jabs into my palm.

When I was little, I fell on my roller skates and crashed into it, headfirst. I've still got a constellation of scars on my forehead left over from the accident.

I try the door, but it's locked. I fish my key out of my pocket and try to shove it in the keyhole, but the key's in the other side, so I can't do that either. I think about yelling through the letterbox, but decide it's just as easy to go round the back. Our house is so small that when I peer through the dappled glass, I can see straight through it to the fuzzy green of the back garden. I pocket the key and head round the back.

The passage is crammed with a heap of bikes, which makes me smile. Mine used to be one of them. Before Kilmuir High—before the gang we used to be was divided by some unknown criteria into the cool, the uncool, and the unspeakable—we all used to hang around together. We'd hurtle around the pavements, playing bike races and speed skating, football and rounders on the big green along the way.

And then it all stopped. These bikes belong to the little kids who used to tag along begging to join in with us—they were four then.

Now they're freckle-nosed nine-year-olds, and I half wish I could join in with their games. It's funny, but growing up isn't anywhere near as much fun as it looks on the Disney Channel.

We don't have a back garden so much as a sort of patch. The grass is a bit long and shaggy, and there are dandelions sprouting up in the corners. I take a handful and shove them in the side of Courtney Love's cage. She hops out, twitching her nose in approval. I like to think the actual Courtney would be pleased to discover there's a rabbit named after her. We used to have a guinea pig too, called Kurt Cobain—but he died. We probably could have predicted that.

The back door's open. I push it—hard—and manage to squeeze through the gap. We've got a sort of little back room—I think maybe it was meant to be for bikes and stuff. But it's not full of bikes and stuff. It's full of . . . everything.

There's a tower of kitchen rolls balanced on top of a stack of newspapers, which were going for recycling until they weren't because they were being saved for something. There's a pile of bags full of bags, because they're going to go out someday but we might just keep them in case they come in handy. The bookshelf is overflowing, the shelves double stacked with books and covered in dust. There's some sort of cross trainer under a heap of black bags, which are full of clothes from when I was little, which are going to be a patchwork quilt. One day. Everything in this house is going to happen on a mythical future date when the planets align, and in the meantime it's as far removed from my tasteful, white-painted Scandinavian dream escape as it's possible to be. I step over a huge crate of Avon catalogues and the kit that came with them. They're dated September 2015. The catalogues weren't handed out. The makeup samples are still encased in their shrink-wrap. One day, I'm sure, they'll make their way to wherever they're supposed to be. In the meantime, they're just another might-

have-been, boxed up—just in case—and lying in a pile of all the other stuff that makes up the chaos of our house.

It's not just a bit untidy. It's more than that. We used to live—when there were four of us, and life wasn't unraveling—in a sort of happy muddle. Paintings on the walls, and piles of coats on the end of the banister in the hall. Shoes heaped up under the stairs, and stuff that was going to be tidied up (but never quite made it) in piles on the kitchen worktop.

But that was before. Now it's just the two of us, and the walls are closing in. I thought when Cressi found out what the house was like, it might make things change—that Mum would be embarrassed out of her torpor and into action. But no. And as time passes, and Mum spends more and more of her time shopping online in a dressing gown and watching *Friends* on repeat, it's like the fuller the house gets, the emptier it feels. It doesn't make sense.

I try to tidy it up when she's not looking, stacking stuff in piles and filtering through out-of-date stuff. But it causes arguments and she gets stressed out and it's easier to escape to the pool on the bus, or catch a lift with Cressi. And when Cressi asks how things are, or why she hasn't seen Mum for a few weeks, I manage to gloss over it by saying she hasn't been feeling well. Cressi's busy managing the swimming school, and I think she's worked out there's not much point trying to get through to Mum anymore. It's happened before with the woman who used to live across the road. Eventually, if you don't get anything back, you stop trying to be friends with someone.

As I walk through the back-room door, I can hear the television on in the sitting room.

“Hi, darling,” calls Mum.

I go inside and find her sitting on the sofa, hands wrapped around a mug of tea, her feet curled up under a blanket despite the fact that it's June and sunny outside.

“D'you want to watch this with me?”



She's watching repeats of *Friends* on one of the Freeview channels. Her hair's tied up in a scruffy sort of bun, and she's still in her dressing gown. I shake my head and reverse out of the room, making an excuse about having to have a shower to wash the chlorine out of my hair. I'll grab something to eat on the way.

ooo

I wake up before the alarm goes off and head downstairs.

I step carefully through the minefield of plastic bags and cardboard boxes, piles of washing and unopened letters. I put the kettle on and pick my school jumper up from the drying rack, sniffing it as I do so—I'm paranoid it smells weird, but I can't smell anything but the acrylic of the fabric and a faint odor of dish soap. I had to wash it by hand last night in the kitchen sink because we've run out of laundry detergent.

I half hope as I open the fridge that a miracle might have happened overnight, but when I look inside there's still only a dried-up lemon, a piece of cheese that has cracked and gone dry, and the milk carton in the door. I really need to go to the shop.

I shake the milk and realize there's only enough for one cup of tea, so I put the tea bag from the second mug back in the jar and pour the water into one. There's the end of the loaf in the bread bin, so I toast it, spread it with butter, and put it on a plate.

When the tea's ready, I take it upstairs with the toast, repeating the precarious journey. I slop some onto a heap of papers in a shoebox and pull a face, but there's nobody there to see it. Whatever it is, it'll dry out. I hope.

"Mum?" I push open the bedroom door with my foot. It resists, and I transfer the mug to my other hand and lean my body weight against it. There's a crackle of plastic bags and a slithering noise as the objects behind the door shift, making space for me to tiptoe into the room.

All I can see is a lock of faded henna-red hair sticking up from under the naked duvet. The clean covers I left there the other day are still folded up on the floor, and she's sleeping on the bare mattress.

"Mum." I lift the corner of the duvet and shift her alarm clock round so the red numbers are shining in her face.

"Off," she mumbles.

"It's eight o'clock," I say. I shove an empty box of headache pills off the bedside table to make space for the mug, balancing the plate with the toast on top.

"I'll get up in a minute."

I'll be going in a minute. I don't let the feelings in. The only way to cope is to take a deep breath and just let it go over my head. She can't do mornings—she never could. But especially not now. I turn to leave.

"Holly?"

I have my hand on the door. I lift my head and tuck my hair behind my ear.

"Mmm?"

"Love you, darling."

"I know." I make my way back across the room and kiss my fingers and put them on the duvet, approximately where her head should be.

"I'll be up later, I promise. I just need to have a bit more sleep, then I'm going to get things sorted."

"Okay."

I've heard that a million times. Sometimes I get home and there's a pile of black bin bags by the front door where she's started clearing up, but inevitably I find her slumped on the sofa with a cup of tea watching the shopping channel, or dozing. She starts off with good intentions, but she just gets tired halfway through. It's as if she can't quite work out what to throw out and what to keep, and it's too tiring to figure out. So she just gives up.

And we live on in this house, as it silts up slowly with layer after layer of random stuff.

“Mum?”

I call up the stairs. There’s no sound.

“I’m leaving now.”

There’s a vague mumbling.

“Try to eat something,” I say, and pull the door closed behind me.

ooo

School is . . . school. I hover around the edges of it. I’m basically invisible, which is better than it sounds. I don’t get into trouble. I don’t get picked on by anyone. Teachers don’t single me out to read aloud in class. In fact, sometimes I wonder if I’m there at all. I swear it’s like I wear an invisibility cloak. I was standing in the corridor last week when Lauren and her friends walked past, talking about Jamie’s party. She didn’t even acknowledge my presence. As time passed after our parents split up, she drifted further and further away, snared by the sharp-edged cool-girls gang, who were impressed by the big house she lives in and the expensive car Neil drives now.

And so these days, Lauren and I don’t really talk to each other at school. I’d say we’re not in the same social group, but my social group is the weird collection of misfit people who end up sitting at the same table at lunch every day, not really saying anything. I sometimes wonder if I went somewhere else and started again, if I would still end up sitting at the same table, just in a different school.

There’s one thing different about today. Halfway through math, I feel myself grinning, and I look down at the page before anyone notices. I remember the look on the boy’s face as I turned around to look at him, surprised.

*I wasn’t waiting for the bus.*

## CHAPTER THREE

get home from school and the house is silent.

“Mum?”

She must be asleep. Again. I got up to go to the loo last night at four, and the light was still on in the hall downstairs, so I bet she’s either gone back to bed for a nap or she hasn’t been up since. I look up at the clock on the wall—no, she can’t still be asleep. She must be—

“Holly, honey, is that you?”

Her voice is small.

“Mum?”

I make my way through the hall and up the stairs, and she’s lying there in the doorway of her room. Her leg is twisted at a weird angle, and her face is tiny and pinched with pain.

“I couldn’t reach the phone.”

I feel a sickening wave of guilt wash over me, right through my whole body.

“What have you done? How long have you been here?”

She exhales, her breath making a shaky sound in the silence. “Maybe an hour or two. I think I bumped my head.”

I dart a look at her, leaning in close to peer into her eyes. They look normal, but . . .

“I need to call you an ambulance.”

“No.”

Her nostrils flare—I’m not sure if it’s pain or anger, or maybe it’s both. She tries to shift herself sideways, but her hip knocks against the bottom of a stack of shoeboxes and they start to topple. I reach out and steady them before they fall on top of her, and the lid of one of them dislodges, revealing its contents. It’s full of ancient-looking pieces of paper; something to do with the bank—I can see the familiar logo at the top. The date says August 2009.

“I’ve been meaning to sort them,” she says, giving me a look I recognize. It’s the look that says *Please, let’s not have that conversation now*. In other houses, it’s the other way round—the parents telling the children to clear up—and I feel a wash of shame and something uncomfortable passing over me. Our life is locked away in boxes. I shove the lid back on the box and I know my cheeks are stinging red with the awkwardness of it all.

“It’s fine,” I say.

“Give me a hand up. I’m going to get this place sorted. This is the final straw.”

She reaches out a hand for me to pull her up but, although I’m tall and pretty strong, she’s taller still—and she’s heavy. My pulling isn’t doing much because her body is protesting instead of cooperating.

“Mum, seriously, you can’t move.”

“No.”

If I were the grown-up, I’d pick up the phone and call for help. But I’m not. I’m in a sort of half state where I’m not one thing or the other. I have to be responsible for stuff, but she gets the final say, and there’s nothing I can do.

And I know what's wrong. If an ambulance comes and sees the state of our house, she's worried that I'll be taken away. But I don't think it works like that. I don't think they just take you away because the walls are lined with things for a rainy day and emergency tea bags and enough stuff to keep a family of six going for a year.

"If I can just . . ." She rolls herself over the other way this time, away from the precariously balanced shoeboxes of stuff, her body sliding on the papers that are lying on the floor. "There."

She lifts her good leg up so she can press her foot down and reaches her hand up again to me where I'm standing in the hall, surrounded by years of assorted things that might be useful one day. I heave and she pushes against the floor, and there's a sickening moment when her face goes a horrible whitish green with pain and she lets out a gasp involuntarily. Seeing it makes me feel sick, so I can't imagine how she feels.

Mum leans against the white-painted banister, her head bowed. Her forehead is beaded with sweat, and her hands are curled into fists, nails digging into her palms.

I know she needs help, and I know she's going to resist every way she can.

"What about if we get a taxi?"

Her ankle must be broken. She's standing on one leg, the other one held up in the air slightly like an injured animal.

"I haven't got any money on me."

"It's fine. I've got that twenty pounds Neil gave me in my room."

I'd hidden it away ages ago, planning to spend it on something nice. But when you don't have money, there's something about getting some that leaves you frozen and indecisive—so it had just sat there on my dressing table, neatly folded up underneath a china horse my granny had bought me from a charity shop when I was five.

I can hear Mum's breath coming in tight little puffs. I slip past her and into my room. I don't have lots of stuff. My dressing table is as

neat as the rest of the house is chaotic. I lift up the china horse and take the money out from underneath—there’s a little hole where I’ve stuffed the note, folded and folded over again until it’s a bulky little square. I shake it out and brandish it at Mum.

“I don’t know how you’re going to make it down the stairs.”

“Just ring the taxi,” she says, and her jaw is set tightly. “I’ll work that out.”

I know the number off by heart—we don’t have a car—and ring it from the home phone, which is, miraculously, sitting on the window-sill in the hall. Sometimes it goes missing for weeks on end, lost in the maelstrom of random stuff that fills every surface.

When I look up, I see that Mum is shuffling down the stairs on her bum, her leg sticking out in front of her, mouth twisted up in pain.

“Can I help?”

She shakes her head.

I shove the coats from the end of the banister onto the chair under the stairs, where they slide off and fall in a heap. They’ll have to wait. When we get back, I’m going to sort this place out properly.

The taxi arrives just as Mum hits the bottom step. I stick my head out and hold up two fingers, mouthing, *two minutes*, at the driver.

“I don’t want him coming in here and helping,” says Mum unnecessarily.

There’s not much chance of that. He’s on his phone, scrolling with one hand, his other arm out of the window holding a cigarette. The cab is going to stink, and the smell of cigarette smoke makes me heave.

We make a sort of tripod shape. Mum leans heavily on me, and we make it to the taxi, where she hops and shuffles onto the front seat. I slide it back, ignoring the taxi driver’s raised eyebrows, and pass her the seat belt before closing the door and getting in the back.

The taxi driver’s clearly decided it’s an emergency. We hurtle along the shore road toward the hospital, past the weird, otherworldly shapes of the oil refinery. The air is thick with the chemical smell from

the thick plumes of smoke that belch from massive chimneys. And then we're at the emergency room, and for a second I feel anxious because he's parked us right outside the door. We're not meant to be there and someone's going to say something and I can feel a wave of anxiety building.

"Here you are, hen." The driver's found a wheelchair, and, clearly feeling important now, he's hefting Mum out of the seat and into the chair. "Just pull that lever—that's the brake—and you'll be sorted."

I pull the twenty-pound note out of my pocket, and he gives me a tenner back.

"Give me a ring when you're done, and I'll see you's back—if my shift's no' over, that is." He shakes his head and looks inside. The waiting area is crowded with people. "Mind you, by the looks o' that, you'll be a wee while."

But we're not. The triage nurse takes one look at Mum's face and wheels her through to a room where he takes some details. Mum's henna-red hair flops forward over her eyes. I twist the hem of my T-shirt absentmindedly while the nurse taps some details into the computer.

"You might have a bit of a wait at X-ray, but the shifts have just changed, so we'll see what they say."

He looks up at me.

"Your mum's lucky to have such a sensible girl."

I don't say anything. I just duck my head and let go of the twisted hem of my T-shirt, which has now been stretched out of shape. I pull the band out of my hair, shaking it out so I catch a sudden whiff of the chlorine from the pool, and tie it back in a ponytail. And I remember the boy and the bus stop. It feels like a million years ago, and I look up at the clock on the wall. It's half seven. I've got a mountain of studying to do for a science test and literally no idea when we're going to get out of here.

After waiting for an X-ray (Mum, spaced out on painkillers, lying on a trolley in a corridor; me sitting on the floor because there's



nowhere else to go), we find out she's cracked a bone that I can't remember the name of, and they put her in a temporary cast.

I call the taxi firm, expecting someone else to turn up—but it's the same driver. He helps Mum and her crutches into the car, pushing the seat back as far as it'll go so her leg can stick out and not get damaged. I sit wedged behind him, the smell of lemon car freshener mixing with the whiff of stale smoke from his clothes, making me feel even more carsick than normal.

ooo

“D’you want a hand inside, darlin’?”

He hoists Mum up. She pulls down her top, which has rucked up, and wobbles slightly on the unfamiliar crutches. This is going to take some getting used to. I'm already working out how best to clear a space for her to get to the sitting room, and thinking about where she's going to be most comfortable sleeping.

“We'll be fine, won't we, Holly?” Mum's voice sounds fuzzy round the edges with pain and painkillers.

I nod. We always are.

By the time I get her inside, tell her to stand still for a moment while I clear a path so her crutches don't slip on a heap of magazines and send her hurtling to the floor with a second broken ankle, I'm already mentally calculating how early I can get up to do my studying.

I plonk Mum on the sofa, grab armfuls of magazines and papers, and shove them on top of the sideboard. The coffee table is still piled up with stuff, but it'll have to wait until tomorrow. Maybe if I get up early enough, I could sort it a bit before school.

“Holly?” Mum looks up at me. She's got shadows under her eyes so dark, they look like bruises.

I sit down carefully beside her on the sofa. “Uh-huh?”

“Love you, honey.”

“I know.”

“The most.”

“More than that.”

I bob sideways, nudging her with my shoulder. We’ve always said it, ever since I can remember. She might be tired and frazzled and a bit broken, but she’s the only mum I’ve got.

## CHAPTER FOUR

There's a brief moment of calm after my alarm goes off before I remember what's happened. I'm about to get dressed for school as usual, tiptoeing so I don't wake Mum up, when I suddenly remember. She's not lying under the duvet in a heap. She's downstairs on the sofa with her leg propped up on cushions.

I shrug on my dressing gown and make my way downstairs through the teetering piles of stuff. A plastic-clad magazine slips down the stairs in front of me, sliding to a halt when it hits the wall at the bottom, joining several others that have had the same fate. None of them have been opened—it's a music magazine she subscribed to at some point, but they're months out of date now, and have never been read. I bend down to push them into a stack so at least they're out of the way and—

“AAAARGH!”

“Holly?”

I jump back, heart pounding, and sit on the stairs, shaking both hands rapidly.

“What’s going on?” There’s a *thump* and a muttered curse. “This is impossible,” I hear her saying. A second later, there’s a clattering, and another *thud*.

“Spider,” I say, recoiling and bum-shuffling up another step.

Not just any spider either. One with a proper body and sturdy, *I mean business* hairy legs. My back squirms at the thought of it sitting there waiting to get me.

“I’d love to help,” Mum says . . . and I remember again.

I slither down the stairs, and edge my body sideways round the newel post as if my life depends on it, which it quite possibly does, given that the house has been invaded by flesh-eating tarantulas.

Her crutches have fallen down, one in one direction, and the other under the coffee table. I can see straightaway that this is going to be way harder than it would normally be, because our house is so full of crap that I have no idea how she’s going to get from A to B without falling over something and breaking her other ankle.

“I’ll get you some tea.”

Before I go to the kitchen, I put a couple of cushions on the coffee table (shoving a load of stuff off to one side to clear a space) so she can prop her leg up.

“Can you get me some painkillers as well? I can’t believe they’re expecting me to deal with this with just a couple of ibuprofen.”

ooo

By the time I’ve found some microwave porridge hiding in the back of the cupboard, sorted out tea, cleared a path to the downstairs loo, helped her on to her crutches, and got her back through to the sitting room, I realize there’s no way I’m going to make the school bus. Throwing on my clothes, I remember that—to top it all—I haven’t done any study for the science test.

I’m going to have to walk, and I’m going to be late.

“I’m sorry, darling,” she says.

“I’ve made you a flask of coffee, and there’s some oatcakes in the tin.” I put it down on the table in front of her. “I’ll just go in for the test this morning, then tell them I’ve got a hospital appointment this afternoon.”

Mum looks up at me and pushes a stray lock of hair out of her eyes. For a moment, I think she’s going to tell me that, no, I need to stay at school, and not to worry, she’ll sort something out. But then I watch as her face seems to flatten somehow, and the blank, emotionless expression is back.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.” I lean down and give her a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll see you later. It’ll be fine.”

I know it’s not my job to make her feel better. I’m not even completely sure when the roles were reversed. I haven’t got time to think about it now anyway—the bus has gone, and the streets have that weird emptiness they have in the between time before school starts. Lateness hangs in the air. I walk as fast as I can, breaking into a jog now and then.

ooo

“You’re late.”

Predictably, because this is me we’re talking about, I can’t just sneak in through the school office, make up an excuse, and head to class. Instead, I walk straight into Mrs. Lennox, the head teacher. I tower over her, but she’s still terrifying. I try to think of an excuse.

“I—”

“Is that the best you’ve got?” She shakes her head, lips set in a tight line. “This isn’t the first time, Holly. I think we need to have a little chat with your class advisor about what’s going on.”

“My . . .” I scrabble around for an excuse. “My rabbit escaped.”

She raises her eyebrows slightly and tilts her head to one side. “Is that so?”

I nod. “And we live near the road, and I was worried she’d get out of the garden.”

Her eyes raise skyward. She’s not convinced.

“Why don’t you join me at the end of the day, and we’ll discuss this. Three thirty, my office.”

I nod my head obediently.

“Now get to class. Haven’t you got a test this morning?”

ooo

Talking to her has made me even later. By the time I get to class, everyone’s at their desks, heads down, in total silence, working through their test papers. I can’t even remember what we’re supposed to have learned. I push the handle down carefully, hoping it won’t squeak too loudly.

Everyone looks up as I push the door open. Mr. Gregory tuts.

“Not a word, please.” He puts a finger to his lips.

Allie, a girl who sometimes shares the same table as me at lunch, looks up, catches my eye, and grins.

After class, she catches up with me, tapping me on the shoulder.

“Hey. D’you want to come and hang out at break with me and Rio?”

I look at her and suppress the urge to check around to make sure she’s not talking to someone else.

We get a coffee from the vending machine—it’s vile, and tastes more of hot plastic and sugar than anything else, but our lunch tokens cover the cost of it, so it’s essentially free—and we go and sit on the wall underneath the library corner, shaded by the trees.

“Bad morning?” She tucks her hair behind her ear and looks at me sideways before checking her phone.

“Something like that.”

“I can’t wait for this bloody term to be over.”

“What’s this?”

There’s a *thud* as Rio launches his bag over the wall and sits down between us. He reaches across and takes Allie’s coffee before she has a chance to object.

“Gerroff!”

She grabs it back, but not before he’s taken a huge swig.

“That is spectacularly disgusting coffee.”

“I rescued Holly. She’s had a bad morning.”

Rio nods. He scuffs the toe of his shoe in the gravel, tracing a circle.  
“This place is hellish.”

We spend the rest of break talking about Allie’s plan to spend as much of the summer in Edinburgh as she can. Rio’s dad—who I always assumed was some sort of hippie farmer—is actually an artist, and he sells his work at a gallery in town. It’s weird, because I don’t really know them, but it’s quite comfortable sitting there listening to them rambling away. When the bell rings, Rio and I walk up to geography together, and I watch Lauren—standing alone, waiting outside her math class—giving me a curious look and a half wave as we walk by. It feels good not to be the one hovering on the edges for a moment.

One late mark, a run-in with the head teacher, a completely failed test, and a lecture about taking my responsibilities seriously now I’m in S5, and I’m heading back to the office.

“If you want time off for a hospital visit, you’re supposed to produce a letter,” says the woman behind the glass of the reception desk.

“I’ve left it at home.”

“No letter, no hospital,” she begins.

I think of Mum lying in the house, and my stomach clenches in panic.

“I have to go,” I say.

She shakes her head disapprovingly. “This time, I’ll let you go. But I want that letter in tomorrow, okay?”

I nod, hitching my bag over my shoulder. I’ll work out the details later.

ooo

It’s not until I’m home, helping Mum to the loo—she’s waited all morning because she couldn’t face trying to get there alone—that I remember I’m supposed to see Mrs. Lennox after school.



## CHAPTER FIVE

I've just made it home when I get a text.

*Are you en route? C*

It takes a second for me to work out who C is, and why an unfamiliar number is texting me. And then I go cold. This is officially the Day from Hell. Not only have I screwed up the test, been late for school, missed a summons by the head teacher, but now I'm sitting in a one-sie on the couch when I'm supposed to be at the pool signing the forms for the swimming assistant training course. Shit. Cressi's going to kill me.

I look across at Mum, who is dozing on the sofa, her head leaning against a floral-patterned cushion. Her face is pale, and even though she's sleeping, she still looks like she's in pain. Wake her and tell her I'm going on the bus, or make an excuse? (Another excuse?)

She shifts slightly, and I watch her forehead crease. I can't leave her.

*I'm sorry—Mum is sick,* I type, and look at it for a second.

Then I look at the jumble of stuff on the floor and the piles of stuff lining the edges of the room and think of the gigantic spider that's living in the hall under the mountains of everything. And I delete it.

*I'm sorry—I got sick.*

My phone buzzes as I go to put it down on the arm of the chair.

*:) No probs. Will drop form in later.*

Shit.

## CHAPTER SIX

sit waiting for the doorbell to ring.

Cressi's seen the house before, and she's cheerfully unfazed by the total chaos. She makes her way into the hall, brandishing the forms I need to fill in, a pen in one hand.

"Let's just sort this out." She lifts up a pile of washing and moves it off the table in the hall to make a space for the paper to go. A cardboard box full of goggles ("Are you going into business?") topples over as she does so, and they spill all over the bags of stuff that are lying on the floor. "What's this? Washing?"

I can feel my cheeks stinging pink with secondhand embarrassment. "Stuff for the charity shop."

"I'll take that, shall I?" She scoops it up capably and hands me the pen. "Just need your date of birth, that sort of thing—fill it in there, and I'll get it sorted with the office staff . . . Fiona out?" She peers along the narrow hall.

I lower my voice in the hope it'll be catching. "No—she's sleeping."

“Already?” She looks at the clock in the hall. “Half seven’s a bit early for an early night, isn’t it?”

I don’t say anything. I just fill in the form and hand her back the pen.

“Holly?” I hear Mum’s voice as I’m turning to open the door and shoo Cressi back out into the pale evening sunshine.

“Aha,” says Cressi, and before I can stop her, she’s dodged the assault course of random stuff that silts up the hall and headed to the sitting room.

“How’re things?” I hear her saying, in her cheerful, no-nonsense way. And then, “My goodness, we have been in the wars.”

Mum says something I can’t catch, and I’m surprised to hear them both laughing.

“Stick the kettle on, Holly,” Mum calls through. “I want to hear the whole story about what’s going on.”

ooo

An hour later, we’ve been organized by Cressi. She’s tried her best to get us to come and stay in her cottage—Phil, her husband, is away with work, and there’s plenty of room—but Mum is determined she’s staying put.

“Well,” Cressi says, and her usual brisk tones are softer and kinder than usual, “maybe if you’re sure you want to stay here, you’ll let me and Holly sort the place out a bit?”

Mum sighs and rolls her eyes. “It’s fine the way it is.”

“Fiona”—Cressi pulls a face—“on what planet is this fine?”

She puts a hand on a stack of books, which is balancing on top of a pile of black bin bags, which are stuffed full of . . . I don’t even remember what they’re stuffed with, come to think of it, they’ve been there so long. I look at the room through her eyes for a second, and I realize that we can’t carry on like this.

“I’ll help,” I say.

Mum doesn’t look particularly happy about it, but she’s stuck—literally—so there’s nothing she can do. Maybe breaking her ankle is the best thing that could have happened to her, in a weird sort of way.



Cressi’s house smells of log fires, even in summer. And the lemony scent of the geraniums on the windowsills. And faintly of dogs. The cottage has been there for more than a century, and it sits, square and solid, in a patch of garden, which is full of tumbling flowers and strange structures made of bamboo poles with sweet peas climbing up them.

“Bin bags,” she says, dumping them in my outstretched arms. “Bleach, IKEA bags for recycling stuff, kitchen spray.” She plonks them on me—I’m standing in her kitchen while she thinks aloud.

“Are you sure you want to do this now?” I look at the clock. “It’s quarter past eight.”

“Do you have something better to do?”

I shake my head.

“Right.” Cressi gives a decisive nod. “Then we’ll get started. To be honest I hadn’t realized how bad the place had become.” She beckons for me to follow her outside.

Until the last few weeks, when she had reached the point when she was spending most of her time in bed, Mum had always managed to head Cressi off at the pass, meeting her for a coffee in town, or joining her for a walk to the woods with the dogs. We haven’t had anyone round for ages, come to think of it. Lauren used to turn up now and then, but she’s got her own life now, and I just hover round the edges of it at school.

“Saw your handsome chap at the pool again today.” Cressi looks at me sideways, pulling the boot of the car open.

I dump the armful of cleaning stuff in, on top of a dog-hair-matted

blanket and a pile of old boots, and make a noncommittal noise. At least I hope that's how it sounds. Inside, I'm dying to ask her more.

"I think he was hoping you'd be around. Was asking if I'd seen you."

I feel a swooping sensation in my knees. I think I'm probably blushing.

"Anyway," she says, slamming the boot shut and brushing down her trousers in a brisk sort of manner, "I told him you'd be around sooner rather than later."

Oh my God. Now it's a thing. It's real.

"Come on," Cressi says, beckoning me back into the house for a moment.

I look around her kitchen at the shiny metal range cooker and the matching tea towel and oven gloves hanging neatly on shiny aluminum pegs. Even the dogs' bed looks plump and comfortably inviting, and I half wish I could just persuade Mum to come and stay here until her leg is better. I wonder what it'd be like to live in a house where everything is tidy and finished and done. And I'm wondering too why Cressi doesn't mind the way our house looks. But I don't know how to ask.

She closes the dogs in the kitchen. I catch a glimpse of my reflection and realize that Mum's not the only one with dark shadows under her eyes.

The other day at school, I was pulled out of class so Miss MacInver could ask if everything was okay at home, Holly, because we're not trying to intrude, we just want to make sure, and we've noticed you've been a bit late with your last two pieces of homework, and . . .

ooo

It's midnight by the time Cressi and I stop clearing up. It's not immaculate, but it's better than it was. There's a clear trail to the downstairs loo, the kitchen surfaces have nothing on them, the towels have been

sorted out and stacked in the airing cupboard (well, on one shelf . . . the other one is jammed with emergency toilet paper and seven boxes of bleach, which probably shouldn't be in there in the first place).

“You, young lady, need to get yourself to bed.” Cressi opens the door to my room. “Look at the state of this place.” She’s teasing. “Appalling.”

My room is the only one in the house that doesn't look the way the others do. The bed's made. My little ornaments are still on the dressing table. My slippers are paired on the rug beside my bed. And my science books—oh God. The homework.

“Now you get yourself off to sleep, and I'll finish making up the bed downstairs for Fiona tomorrow when you're at school. She can sleep on the sofa tonight.”

I set the alarm and get into bed obediently. After a while, I hear Cressi letting herself out, and the house falls silent. I can hear the mumble of the television from the sitting room as I lie there with my eyes closed, trying to get to sleep. Mum doesn't like sleeping in silence, so she always has the radio or the television playing.

I realize, as my eyelids feel heavier and heavier and my body starts to drift off, that something has to change. Not just for me, but for Mum. We can't carry on like this any longer.