

JENNY
McLACHLAN

STAR
STRUCK



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

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R FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

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DEDICATION TK

ONE

I draw green daggers stuck deep in each heart, and then I cover the poster with glittery blood. Just as I'm adding Romeo (dead), the door to the principal's office flies open and Carol sticks her head out.

"Mrs. Pollard will see you now, Pearl," she says, peering at the notice board. "Oh dear. What are you doing?"

"Nothing," I say, dropping the pens in my bag and following her inside. Carol is Mrs. P's secretary, and that means we get to hang out together a lot. I grab a couple of Mint Imperials from the bowl on her desk, then wander through to Mrs. P's office.

My principal is sitting in her big swivel chair, her head bent over a pile of letters. "Hello!" I say. She doesn't look up, so I make the steel balls on her Newton's cradle start clanging against each other. Her hand shoots out and

silences them. "I've come to get my phone." I can actually see it sitting on the corner of her desk.

She signs another letter. "Take a seat, Pearl."

I drop down in my usual place on the sofa. My fingers are itching for my phone. "C'mon, Mrs. Pollard. I could be on Instagram right now."

She signs a final letter, puts the lid on her pen, then looks up. "Pearl, can you explain why Mr. Hickman confiscated your phone during geography?"

"Because he's *insane*. Seriously, he totally overreacted. I just got it out to check the time, and he grabbed it from me!" I rub my hand as if it still hurts. "He might actually have a problem. . . ."

"Well, your stories don't *quite* match." Mrs. P peels a Post-it note off my phone. "He says, 'I took this off Pearl Harris because she was using it to sell the contents of my classroom on eBay.'" She looks at me over the top of her glasses. "Is this true?"

"No!" I say, outraged. It's not entirely true. I'm also selling his car. "I think he was in a bad mood because he was behind with our reports."

"What?" Her eyes narrow.

"He hadn't even started them, so he put on *The Day After Tomorrow* and did them during class." Mrs. P drops the Post-it and attacks her keyboard. "You're clearly busy," I say, "so how about I take my phone and promise never to get it out during class ever again?"

She glances up. "How many times have you sat there and promised me that?"

I let my head roll back and stare at the ceiling.

"Sit up," she snaps.

"Hang on," I say. "Still counting." I look at her. "One hundred and twenty-three times?"

"Very funny." She frowns, but the corner of her mouth lifts for a moment. I love making Mrs. P laugh. Along with getting sent out of class, it's probably my main hobby. "You may have your phone back tomorrow, Pearl."

"How about *today*?"

"Tomorrow."

"Or today might be better, like, right now." I slowly reach for my phone.

"Oh no you don't." She pulls it back.

I start to feel hot. All the windows are shut and the room smells like coffee and egg sandwiches. "Mrs. Pollard, I *need* my phone."

We stare at each other. Suddenly, everything about her annoys me: her little gold glasses, the way her orange lipstick has gathered in the corners of her mouth like baked-bean sauce, and her owl earrings. I *despise* those owls. She takes off her glasses and pinches her nose between two fingers. The owls shiver. "You *want* your phone, Pearl. There is a difference. Tell me why you *want* your phone so much."

"Basically it's my watch," I say, pulling my sleeve over

my black Casio. "Without it, I'll be late for things, like the *Romeo and Juliet* audition that I'm supposed to be at *right now*."

"You're a talented young lady, Pearl—clever, musically gifted, confident—"

"Thanks, Mrs. P!"

"*But* I'm starting to get worried about you." She taps her pen on the desk. "You're at the start of junior year. In a matter of months you will be taking your SATs, but you're skipping school, you never do homework, and you have so many detentions that I can't keep up with them. You're predicted to get A grades, but we know that's never going to happen."

I roll my eyes. I am *so* bored by this conversation.

"Stay with me, Pearl!" she says, clicking her fingers. "Do you remember when I met you in seventh grade? You had won a spelling competition and you came to collect your prize."

"The Toblerone," I say. It was a meter long. I ate half of it and put the rest in Mrs. Bradman's exhaust pipe.

"You were so proud. But soon the detentions began, followed by suspensions. . . ."

I make my eyes go wide. "I promise to change, Mrs. Pollard."

Her eyes flick over my skinny jeans and battered ballet pumps and rest on my leather-and-silver wrist cuffs. "Well, if you don't . . ." She pauses.

"Then what?"

"Then I won't let you be in *Romeo and Juliet*."

I laugh. "You wouldn't do that."

"Yes, I would. I've already spoken to Ms. Kapoor. I'll do anything to keep you in school."

I stare at Mrs. P as I try to imagine not performing in *Romeo and Juliet*. I've starred in Ms. Kapoor's musicals since seventh grade, and I love everything about them: the dancing, the singing, the feeling I get when I walk onto the stage and everyone gazes up at me, waiting to see what I will say or do next . . .

No. I push the thought away. Mrs. P wouldn't do that to me: How many times has she threatened to chuck me out of school or send me somewhere else? But here I am, still sitting on this sofa while she yells at me. "I'd better get to the audition," I say, standing up.

"Hang on." She holds up one finger. "There's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"What?"

"Did you and Tiann steal Ms. Higginson's gel pens?"

"Is that what she said?" I pick up my bag. The pens rattle around inside. "Absolutely not, Mrs. Pollard. She is such a liar."

Mrs. P shakes her head and goes back to her letters. "Come and get your phone tomorrow morning."

At the door, I pause.

"Yes, Pearl?" she says with a sigh.

"I *need* to be in the show," I say.

Mrs. P smiles, then bends her head back over her letters, owls jiggling. I leave her office, making sure I shut the door behind me.

"Everything sorted?" Carol asks.

"Great!" I start to straighten up the photos of her Jack Russell. "How's Pippa's tick problem?"

"Much better, although I did pull a whopper off her last night." I encourage Carol to go on about tweezers and rubbing alcohol, then I remind her it's time for Mrs. P's chamomile tea. "You're such a thoughtful girl," she says, turning on the kettle. Soon she's heading for Mrs. P's door, carrying a steaming mug.

"Oh, Carol," I say. "I left my phone on Mrs. Pollard's desk. Will you grab it for me?"

"Of course!"

TWO

I walk into the drama studio, my phone in my hand, and immediately everyone turns and stares. I have this effect on people at school. I'd like to think it's my gorgeous face . . . but more likely it's my reputation. I've done a few things in the past that people never seem to forget.

Well, let them stare. I like it. I lift my chin up, smile, and look right back at them. One by one they look away, but a short girl with glasses can't take her eyes off me. Her mouth is hanging open and she's holding a chip in the air. "What flavor?" I ask, looking down at her.

"Smoky bacon," she whispers.

"Nice." I snatch it out of her hand and stick it in my mouth. Over by the stage, my friend Kat is strumming away on her ukulele. "See ya," I say to the girl.

"Bye. . . ."

Kat's sitting on the floor, legs crossed, back perfectly straight. I drop down next to her and she glances up, still playing her ukulele. "What did you say to Bus Kelly?" she asks.

"Who's Bus Kelly?"

"That girl you were just talking to. You've been riding the bus with her for years."

"Have I? I don't recognize her. . . . Don't worry. I was just being friendly." I slap my hand across the strings of her uke to stop the strumming.

She stares at my hand. "That wasn't very friendly."

"The thing is, Kat, when you play that thing, I want to smash it."

She starts playing even louder and faster. "How about now?"

I laugh. "Yep. Definitely want to smash it. On you."

She grins and strums the uke in my face until I grab it off her. "Where are the others?" I ask. "The others" are Bea and Betty, Kat's friends. They used to be my friends, too, back in elementary school, but then we had a falling out. My big mouth might have had a tiny bit to do with that. . . . Recently, the four of us have been hanging out together again. It's nothing like it used to be, but at least we're talking.

"They've got art homework. Betty's papier-mâché'ing Bea's nose . . . or maybe it's her toes. Definitely some part of her body."

"Such freaks," I say, shaking my head.

"Hey, you promised to be nice to them."

"I'm trying, but they make it so hard for me. Especially Betty. Is she wearing her bowler hat?"

"Yep. Don't you dare say a word about it." Kat puts her ukulele away in its case. "I'm guessing you want to be Juliet?"

"Want to be and *will be*. Look around you."

"What?" She peers across the studio.

"Except for me, every girl in this room is weird, ugly, or a skank. Look at Evie Russell. She manages to be all three! No way are any of them Juliet."

"What about me?"

"You're not auditioning, are you?" That wouldn't be good. Kat actually looks pretty Julietish with her big blue eyes and blond hair.

"Nope," she says. "Too scared of you. Everyone knows it's your part. Plus there's the little issue of me not being able to sing." She pulls a packet out of her bag. "Jaffa Cake?"

I take four. I'm starving. "Evie's sitting with Hairy Jonah," I say, nibbling around the edge of a Jaffa Cake. "Imagine if they had kids. . . . They'd be *beasts*."

"You're kind of obsessed with Hairy Jonah."

"I am not!"

"Didn't you go out with him?"

I roll my eyes. "For two weeks . . . over a year ago. Doesn't even count. Anyway, shut up about Hairy Jonah."

"You're the one who can't stop talking about him."

"I said *shut up!*" I throw one of my Jaffa Cakes at her.

But she just laughs and says, "Someone's feeling nervous."

"Nope," I say, holding out my hand. "Totally steady."

She stares at my fingers. "They're shaking, Pearl."

"That's only because I want a cigarette."

"You should stop smoking—you managed it in Sweden."

Kat and I went to Sweden last summer, and Kat's crazy auntie forced me to stop smoking, but the moment our plane landed in England, I lit up again. Just thinking about smoking is making my hands twitch. "Don't you want to know which part I'm auditioning for?" asks Kat.

"Okay, tell me."

"A man. I don't care which one. Betty says the male characters will be trained in stage combat, so we're all going to be men and fight each other!"

"Well, I'm going to be Juliet so I can be trained to get it on with Jake Flower."

Kat stares up at the stage. "Hello, speaking of *The Flower* . . ."

I follow her gaze. Jake just walked onto the stage with Ms. Kapoor. Everyone knows he's going to be Romeo even though seniors aren't supposed to participate. He's such a legend that he didn't even have to audition. He has his own rules at school, just like me. We'd be perfect together.

Kat sighs dramatically. "Even his teeth are sexy. . . . Have you noticed?"

"Because of the little gap?"

"That's it! And his ears . . . I like his ears."

"His *ears*?"

She shrugs. "I like his ears," she says. "Is that weird?"

"Yes. And haven't you forgotten Leo, your *boyfriend*?"

"He's eight hundred miles away in Stockholm, and right now Jake is eight meters away. . . . There's no harm in looking." We fall silent and take a moment to appreciate Jake, although Kat might be thinking about her boyfriend. She's smiling at nothing, which usually means she's drifted back to last summer and Leo.

Up on the stage, Jake is laughing, one hand messing up his short dark hair. I don't think I've ever seen him look worried. That's one of the reasons I like him so much. When I'm around him, I get this feeling that everything's going to be okay. "Kat," I say, "do you remember in ninth grade when Miss Butler asked us if we could think of any other words that meant beautiful?"

"And I said, 'Jake Flower!'" says Kat.

"You're such an idiot," I say, but I'm laughing. "Well, the good news is, he just dumped his ugly, dumb girlfriend, Ella."

"Do you mean his *stunning, clever* girlfriend, Ella?"

"Whatever. If I'm Juliet, Jake will have to kiss me—every night. We'll have to rehearse it!"

"Nice." Kat nods appreciatively.

"Romeo!" I gasp, sticking my tongue into the jelly part of my Jaffa Cake. " 'You kiss by the book.' "

"Not nice. Disgusting."

Ms. Kapoor claps her hands. "Everyone up on the stage!"

I shove the rest of the Jaffa Cake in my mouth and point at my face. "Juliet," I say.

"If you say so," Kat says, pulling me to my feet.

THREE

Ms. Kapoor waits, arms folded, until everyone is silent. She's tied her hair back with an elastic band and, as usual, she's wearing her brown trousers with the hole in the side and the droopy hem. Ms. Kapoor is such a mess, but I love her. She's my favorite teacher.

As she tells us about our rehearsal schedule and the performances, the jittery feeling in my stomach starts to fade. It feels good to be sitting up here on the stage. Right now, the studio is blacked out and the lighting rig is arranged so that we're all bathed in a golden glow. I glance across at Jake and catch his eye. He winks at me, and I smile before looking away.

"So what happens in *Romeo and Juliet*?" asks Ms. Kapoor. Then her voice drops to a dramatic whisper. "I want you

all to imagine "Two households, both alike in dignity, in fair Verona, where we lay our scene . . ."

"*What?*" says Evie.

Ms. Kapoor ignores her and continues. "Imagine two great families, the Montagues and the Capulets, battling for supremacy in the same city. Then, one fateful day—"

"Miss," says Evie. "*What* are you talking about? Use English." Ms. Kapoor sighs and scratches the side of her nose. It's what she always does when she's about to lose it.

"God, Evie," I say. "Listen, Romeo is this boy and he *says* he's in love with a girl named Rosaline, but he only wants to get it on with her—you know, like you and Harry Musham last Friday behind Iceland Supermarket. . . ."

Evie looks indignant. "Sainsbury's!"

"But then Romeo goes to this party, sees Juliet, and—*bam!*—they fall in love."

"What about the other girl?"

"Rosaline? Forget her. She's not important. She's just there to show that Romeo feels *true* love for Juliet. Right, Miss?"

Ms. Kapoor nods. "Once again, Pearl, you've stolen the stage. Carry on."

"Romeo and Juliet's families hate each other, so they marry in secret, and, get this: she's only *thirteen*."

"Okay, thank you, Pearl," says Ms. Kapoor.

"Hang on." I hold up my hand. "Juliet's dad doesn't know she's gotten married, and he says she has to marry

his friend, Paris. To get out of this, Juliet pretends to be dead. Trouble is, Romeo isn't told she's faking it, and when he sees her lying there in a tomb *acting* dead, surrounded by corpses, he freaks out and drinks poison. Juliet wakes up, sees really-dead Romeo, and stabs herself." I plunge an imaginary blade deep into my guts. "Urrghh! Two dead teenagers—the families agree to stop fighting—the end!" Jake leads a round of applause. "Did I remember everything?" I ask Ms. Kapoor.

She nods. "Thank you, Pearl."

"No worries." I might hate Ms. Higginson, but she's a good English teacher. I know everything that happens in *Romeo and Juliet*.

"We're sticking to Shakespeare's original language," says Ms. Kapoor, "just cutting some lines and a few scenes, and adding songs and dances, of course. Our very own Mr. Simms has written the score. He's basically ripped off massive hits, so I'm fairly confident this show is going to rock the pants off anything we've done before."

She grins and looks around at us before continuing. "We're taking over the theater in town in the week running up to Christmas, so it has to be a totally professional show. I'm looking for the very best performers for each role." Her eyes rest on me for a second. "Ready for the auditions?" she asks. I am so ready. I already know most of Juliet's lines. "If you want to be Juliet," she says, "stay on the stage."

"Good luck," says Kat as she gets to her feet.

"Don't need it," I say, looking around. The stage is almost empty: just me and a few ninth-grade girls.

"Right, who's first?" asks Ms. Kapoor. "Jake's been cast as Romeo, so you'll be auditioning with him." I jump to my feet, walk to the center of the stage, and stand opposite Jake. The other girls stare up at me.

"Hello," I say to Jake, tucking my hair behind my ear.

"Hey, Pearl," he says with a smile. I love how tall he is. He's wearing an unbuttoned shirt, sleeves rolled up, with a white T-shirt underneath. I find myself wondering what it would feel like to slip my arms around his waist and rest against him, to have his arms wrap tight around me. "What are you thinking about?" he asks.

I smile, not taking my eyes off him. "Just thinking that I haven't seen you out much recently."

"Been studying . . . playing soccer. Why? What have I missed?"

"Me!" I say. This makes him laugh.

"All right, you two," says Ms. Kapoor, putting a script in my hands. "The rehearsal hasn't actually begun yet. Read these lines. It's the scene where Romeo and Juliet first meet. Remember, it's love at first sight: fireworks, pounding hearts—that kind of thing."

"We can do that," says Jake, nodding.

My heart speeds up, and I stand a bit taller. "Great," laughs Ms. Kapoor. She steps back, leaving us alone in the middle of the stage.

A spotlight shines down on the two of us, and everyone drifts into the shadows. Jake reaches forward and takes my hand. His fingers are warm and strong. “‘If I profane with my unworthiest hand,’” he says, “‘this holy shrine—’” his eyes flick from the script to my face—“‘the gentle sin is this.’” As he speaks, he pulls me so close that I can smell the fabric softener on his T-shirt.

“‘Good pilgrim,’” I say, gripping his fingers, “‘you do wrong your hand too much.’” I can tell from the hush that falls across the room that everyone is watching us, and, as I say my lines, I feel all eyes—Jake’s, Ms. Kapoor’s, even the other wannabe Juliets’—focusing on me.

“‘Then move not, while my prayer’s effect I take,’” says Jake, pulling me even closer until our faces are almost touching, then he pauses. The script says *He kisses her*, and now I’m holding my breath, waiting to see what he will do. He grips my hand tight and stares into my eyes.

A sudden bang echoes around the hall, making us jump apart. Jake lets go of my hand and we look toward the door that’s been thrown open. Someone is standing silhouetted in the doorway. I shade my eyes so I can see who’s interrupted us. It’s just some girl. She lets the door swing shut and then walks toward us, stepping around students and abandoned bags. “Who’s that?” Jake whispers in my ear.

I shrug. “Never seen her before.”

The girl stops at the foot of the stage and looks up at us. "Hi," she says, smiling.

I laugh. I just can't help it. Her hair is bubblegum pink and cut in a messy bob. Her dark almond-shaped eyes blink into the bright light. She's wearing weird jeans and a baggy gray sweatshirt, and a My Little Pony toy is hanging around her neck. I hide my smile behind my script, but it's too late. Her eyes have already flashed to me.

Ms. Kapoor steps forward. "Are you here to audition for *Romeo and Juliet*?"

She nods, still looking at me. "I want to be Juliet," she says.

FOUR

The girl jumps onto the stage like she owns it, and I see chunky-soled sneakers peeking out from under her jeans. "I thought I was going to be too late," she says. Her accent is strange, hard to place. Part London, part American . . . and part something else.

"We've just started," says Ms. Kapoor. "Are you new?"

"I'm starting my junior year tomorrow. Mrs. Stone was showing me around and told me about the show, and I thought, *why not?* *Romeo and Juliet* is my favorite play." She puts both her hands in her back pockets and looks around. Everyone is staring at her, but she doesn't seem bothered at all.

"Well, great!" Ms. Kapoor's eyes light up. She loves anyone who's a bit different—it's one of the reasons she

likes me—and this girl is *different*. Her clothes, her accent, her dark eyes. She's totally and utterly different.

The new girl bounces on her toes and says, "I love acting and singing—"

"Where are you from?" I interrupt.

She looks back at me. "Japan. Tokyo."

"How come you moved here?"

She shrugs. "I'm staying with my dad. He's English."

"So you just moved all the way from Japan to live with your dad?"

"Come over here," says Ms. Kapoor quickly. "You can watch the end of Pearl's audition."

"Shall we start from the beginning?" I ask.

"No, pick up from where you were. Skip the kiss."

Jake and I read on, but now we're standing apart, hands hanging by our sides, and all around us people are talking. Somehow that girl has ruined everything. Only Ms. Kapoor still watches us closely, a finger pressed to her lips. "Pearl?" says Jake.

Quickly, I say my last line. "'You kiss by th' book.'" Jake's already turning back to the first page of the script.

"Great." Ms. Kapoor gives her folder a light clap. "I don't need to hear you sing, Pearl. I know you can belt them out. Now, who's next? Let's have Grace, Bethany, Jaz, and then, sorry," she says, looking at the new girl, "what's your name?"

"Hoshi," she says.

"We'll finish up with Hoshi."

Without looking at the new girl, I jump off the stage and go and sit with Kat.

"That was surprising," she says, offering me another Jaffa Cake. I push the packet away. She shrugs, and we turn back to the stage and watch as Grace blushes her way through her audition. She's followed by a couple of awkward performances from Bethany and Jaz. Ms. Kapoor gets each of them to sing the start of "Let It Go" from *Frozen*.

"Hey." Kat nudges me as Jaz starts to sing. "Stop looking so miserable. You were *amazing*. You and Jake leaped into each other's arms."

"But how good is *she*?" I hiss. Up on the stage, the new girl is silently reading through her script, mouthing the words.

Kat shrugs. "I guess we're about to find out."

"What a freak. . . . Have you seen her necklace? She's wearing *a toy* around her neck."

"Japanese street fashion," Kat says, nodding. "I have a Pinterest board on it—"

"Shh! The freak speaks."

"She has a name."

"Poshi . . . Goshi . . . Noshi?"

"You know what her name is."

Hoshi, I think. *Hoshi*. Her name makes me shiver. Up on the stage, she's still frowning at her script. Then she puts it on the floor. "Ready," she says, turning to

Jake. He looks back at her, eyes wide. His smile has vanished.

"Your line is first, Jake," says Ms. Kapoor.

"Right. Yeah." His eyes flick down to his script. "'If I profane with my unworthiest hand, this holy shrine . . .'" He reaches his hand out to the new girl, just like he did with me, but she just ignores him and takes a step back. Jake steps closer, saying his next line, and she twists away from him, strolling to the edge of the stage. Jake follows her like a dog.

"What is she *doing*?" I say to Kat.

"I don't know, but it's funny."

It is funny. She starts to say her lines—somehow she's memorized them—and all the time she's avoiding Jake's touch. People start to laugh. This makes Jake try harder, and the laughter gets louder. Now that he knows what she's doing, he's really getting into it.

But I'm not laughing. I stare hard at the new girl, watching every move she makes. What she's doing is so much better than what I did, it's like she's doing it on purpose. I'm glad it's dark down here. I don't want anyone to see my face.

I'm so focused on her that I don't notice Bea and Betty slip into the hall. "Who's that?" Betty asks.

Bea's staring up at the stage, her curly hair standing out against the bright lights. "She's *good*." She glances at me. "I mean . . ."

I roll my eyes. "She's *weird*," I say. "She's short, she's Japanese, and she has pink hair. *That's* what she is." Normally, Kat would shout at me, tell me to stop being such a jerk, and recently Bea and Betty have started joining in—but instead they all exchange looks. "What?" I say. "She is weird. Look at her boy jeans and her bangs. Did she cut them herself?"

Betty shrugs. "She looks cool. I love her Trixie Lulamoon necklace."

"You would," I mutter. Today Betty is wearing a man's vest with her bowler hat, but I can't even be bothered to say anything about it. Then I see a ukulele case slung across her back. "Not you, too!"

"We're forming a uke band," says Betty.

I look at Bea. "Do you have one, too?"

"Thinking about it," she says with a shrug.

"God. I suppose it was only a matter of time." I turn away from them and stare at the stage, my chin in my hands.

The new girl and Jake have just finished their scene. "Should I sing?" she asks Ms. Kapoor. Then she stands at the front of the stage, puts her hands behind her back, and starts to sing "Let It Go."

Her throaty voice effortlessly fills the studio. Even though she's staring straight ahead, I can't shake the feeling that she's singing to *me*. Annoyed with myself, I look around and see that everyone is watching her,

open-mouthed. Without thinking, I pull out my phone, but still her voice creeps inside me, like the burning rush of a cigarette, making my heart pound. I stare at my fingers wrapped around my phone. I can't shut out her voice. It trickles through my body from my scalp to the tips of my fingers.

Suddenly she's finished and everyone is clapping, even Kat. I must be the only person in the whole room not joining in. The new girl laps it up, her baby face raised to the lights.

I want to slap her.

"Wow!" says Ms. Kapoor, laughing. Jake leans forward and whispers something in the girl's ear. She laughs and tugs on her necklace.

"That's some voice," Kat says, glancing at me.

"I'm getting out of here." I jump to my feet. I actually feel sick.

"Pearl, you don't know that she has the part," says Bea.

"Yes, I do." I look down at them, and their silence makes me think that they know it, too.

"Hang around and watch us audition," says Betty. "You can tell us who makes the best man."

I hesitate. Betty and I have spent most of high school hating each other, and now, when she's nice to me like this, it takes me by surprise.

"C'mon," she says, patting the floor next to her. "I promise you'll get to laugh at me."

I shake my head. I can't stay here another moment watching that girl with Jake. "I've got to get home."

I walk straight across the studio to the fire door. Then I take one last look at the stage. Jake is talking to the new girl. She stands opposite him, arms folded, one foot tapping. As if she knows I'm watching, she meets my eyes.

I turn and hit the bar on the door. It swings open, revealing a muddy football field and a gray sky. Behind me, I can feel the warmth of the studio, but the voices and laughter push me out into the cold air, and then the door slams shut.

FIVE

The busy highway isn't the safest way to walk home, especially when it's getting dark, but it's the quickest. I walk with my head down, hands shoved in the pockets of my blazer as the rush-hour traffic thunders past.

My mind is crammed full of the new girl. Again and again, I replay her sudden appearance, how she bounced toward us . . . how she owned the stage, and how her voice silenced the room. I turn my back on the traffic to light a cigarette. It tastes disgusting, so I suck a Lakrisal at the same time. Leo sends me packets of them from Sweden—salty licorice sweets that take me back to last summer the moment I tear the silver paper.

A truck blasts past, blowing back my hair, and I start walking again, smoke stinging my eyes, and slowly, slowly, I begin to calm down.

I turn off the highway, cut down the footpath, and try Mum's phone. It goes straight to voicemail. "Mum, it's me," I say. "When are you coming home?" Then I'm on the path that leads toward the farm and stables and, beyond them, our house. The noise of the traffic fades away, leaving an inky sky, black trees, and the lit-up farm in the distance. Mum works at the stables and gets the house with her job. As she tells us all the time: it may be a dump, but at least it's free.

A single bird starts singing, loud and clear. A robin. Gran used to tell me stuff like that. The robin sings and sings, cutting through the dark, and it reminds me of the new girl. I can see it sitting high on a branch, so I pick up a stone and throw it at the tree. The bird's wings beat the air and it shuts up.

I smile. For a moment, I feel better, but then I see our house at the end of the path, dark and alone, surrounded by trees, and my smile slips away.



I put my key in the lock, twist it, and the door clicks open. I listen and breathe as quietly as possible. "Alfie?" I say, listening for my brother. "Mum?"

It's stupid. She won't be back from work yet, and if she were, Ozzie would have tried to knock me over by now. Ozzie is Mum's dog, and the two of them basically live at the stables, and if they're not there, they're over at Heather's

house. Heather owns the farm and she's rich. Well, richer than us anyway.

I step into the kitchen, turn on the light, and drop my bag in the middle of the junk on the table. I find a clean mug, fill it with water, and start opening and shutting cupboards. We hardly have any food in them, just ancient tins and packets that Gran left behind—marrowfat peas, crab paste, strawberry Angel Delight. Eventually I find some bagels at the bottom of the freezer.

"Alfie?" I say as I walk into the living room. Silence. I don't bother with the overhead light. The bulb went ages ago. I pick my way around horse tack and sacks of dog food and head for my room.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I see an orange tip glowing in the darkness and a thin curl of smoke. Water from the mug spills on my feet. "God," I say. "You scared me!" I can see him now—feet up on the coffee table, head resting on the back of the sofa. He's wearing tracksuit bottoms and a sleeveless shirt, like he's been working out. His curly hair is wet and slicked back. "What are you doing, Alfie?" Silence. "*Alfie!*"

"Having a cigarette. What do you think?"

"Why are you just sitting here in the dark?" He doesn't reply, just continues smoking and watching me. Alfie does this. Sometimes he speaks, sometimes he doesn't. "When's Mum coming home?" I ask.

He shrugs. "I'm going out on my bike soon." Alfie got a

dirt bike that he takes through the woods. It makes Mum mad—she hates seeing the paths churned up. “What’ve you got there?” He nods at the bag.

“Bagels.”

“Give me one. I’m starving.” I look in the bag. There are only two and they haven’t even defrosted yet. I throw one to him, and his arm shoots up and he catches it.

“Nice catch,” I say. No answer. “I’ll be in my room.”

As I’m walking down the corridor, he shouts after me, “Say hello to your fishies!”

I pull the string up from under my shirt, find my key, and unlock my bedroom door. Mum got the first lock because she said one of us was stealing stuff from her room. She was wrong: both of us were stealing stuff. Alfie got the next lock, and then me.

As soon as I open my door, I’m greeted by a hum of filters and pumps. I flick on the light to my fish tank. “Just me,” I say as the fish zigzag around. “I’m back.” I put my face close to the glass and see a whirl of cartoon stripes and neon tails darting through coral and waving plants. I check each fish in turn. “Hello, Oy,” I say to a little orange and black fish. Oy’s my clownfish, my very own Nemo. He’s trying to hide behind a bit of wood, but he’s too bright to hide anywhere. “Having a good day?” I ask him. He looks startled and his mouth forms a perfect *o*.

I grab my laptop, put on some music, then sit in front of my tank. I go on Facebook, then YouTube, clicking from

video to video. I don't know what I'd do without my laptop. Dad got it for me for my birthday—a guilt present for never seeing me. He said we'd Skype on it, but that's never happened. After watching some girl vlogger make cheese on toast, I get into an argument with harry16 after he posts: **woah she so ugly!!!!**

I reply as Peawitch: **woah you so dumb**

Immediately he replies: **said the dumb ugly girl**

So I'm forced to log in as Queenyx_x on my phone—she's much ruder than Peawitch—and she says to harry16: **am watching your ugly face right now thru window & it makes me sick . . .** He tries to retaliate, but Queenyx_x and Peawitch destroy him. After **you guys mean** ☹ he goes quiet.

I stare at the screen. Usually, I love doing this kind of thing, but I can't get into it tonight. My mind keeps going back to the auditions and the unbearable thought that I might not be Juliet. And I think about *her*, of course, the new girl, and how everyone stared at her. How Jake stared at her.

I turn my music up, then push my laptop away. Resting my chin in my hands, I watch my fish.

They always make me feel better.

Originally it was Jon's tank, some guy Mum went out with. He set it up in the dining room, and every Saturday he'd take me to World of Water to buy a new fish. The garden center has a café, and we'd sit opposite each other, him putting sugar in his coffee and me dipping a Twix in hot

chocolate, and he'd chat to the fish in their plastic bag sitting on the table between us. It was stupid stuff, like "How rude, I didn't get you anything," but it made me laugh.

One day I came home from school and Jon had left, but his tank stayed because it was too heavy to move. I spent so much time in the dining room, feeding the fish and cleaning the tank out, that Mum let me take it into my bedroom.

Now I work at World of Water on Sundays. I suppose I have Jon to thank for that.

There's a knock at my door. "Pearl?" Mum sticks her head in and stares at the clothes, mugs, and towels scattered across the carpet. "God, what a mess," she says, and Ozzie's nose appears by her knees.

"The whole house is a mess," I mutter.

"I never see you doing anything about it." Her face is brown and wrinkly from all the time she spends outside with the horses. I used to think she was glamorous with her curls, skinny jeans, and riding boots, but these days she just lives in dirty leggings and rain boots, and her hair's pulled back in a bunch. "There's a couple of pizzas in the oven," she says. "Heather was defrosting her freezer and needed to get rid of them."

"Yeah?" I realize I can smell melting cheese.

"Come and help me."

"Is Alfie here?"

"No. He disappeared on his bike."

"Can we make fries?"

She thinks for a moment, then smiles. Mum's smiles don't happen very often. "If you peel the potatoes," she says. I jump up. Ozzie by her side, Mum treads carefully across my room to peer into the tank. "Look at that fish." She points at the tang, which is chasing a firefish. No matter where the tiny firefish goes, the tang is right behind it, nipping at its tail and pushing it into corners.

I can see my smile reflected in the glass. "It's a little bully," I say.