

THE  
STATE  
OF  
GRACE

Rachael Lucas



Feiwei and Friends  
NEW YORK

A Feiwel and Friends Book  
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To Verity.  
This one was only ever for you.

## CHAPTER ONE

Being a human is a complicated game—like seeing a ghost in the mirror and trying to echo everything they do. Or like walking in step, but with someone trying to trip you up—and you’re juggling at the same time, with people pelting more and more balls at you. Then, just when you get the hang of it, someone starts flashing a flashlight in your eyes and then yelling in your ear.

I’ll be midconversation and listening and responding in all the right places, then someone will say something on the other side of the room—a snatch of something that my brain will pick up. I’ll lose the thread for a second, and when I tune back in I’ve lost my way. And then the other person might—for a split second—look at me oddly or scratch their nose and I’ll start thinking, *No, Grace, you’ve lost it*, and by then I’ve fallen even further behind, and I remember that my face has probably stopped making the appropriate shapes (interested, listening, concerned, thoughtful—I have a full repertoire, as long as I don’t get distracted), and then I panic.

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And that's where it starts. We're in geography and Mrs. Dawes is talking about tectonic plates and Sarah's sitting next to me and she won't stop breathing and the clock on the wall is ticking slightly out of time with the clock that she's got on her desk and I'm trying to focus on what she's saying but it feels like the walls are collapsing in on me.

And I'm sitting there thinking—I could just walk out. Like people do in films or on television. You see it all the time. They just get up and they walk out the door and there's a slam and they just keep on walking and the rest of the pupils all look at one another in surprise and there are raised eyebrows and the teacher pushes back her chair with a screech of metal on tiled floor and a sigh of resignation and . . .

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“*Obviously* we're doing everything we can for Grace. But we have the interests of the other pupils to think of and—well—behavior like this could set an unfortunate precedent.”

I'm not supposed to be able to hear Mrs. Miller through the door of her office, but she's got a voice like a strangled crow, even with discretion mode activated.

The rough material covering the chair in the school foyer prickles at the backs of my knees. I run my hand across the wooden arm, tracing the shape of the heart etched into the varnish by another waiting student, sometime in the past. I've watched it fade over the years from a bright scar in the wood to a faded memory of a moment. I run my finger around and around it as I listen.

“Yes, of *course*. I appreciate your position, obviously.” Mum is echoing her words carefully, using the reflective listening skills she's been working on, and that's her *oh yes, I completely understand* tone, the one she saves for teachers, counselors, support-group workers, doctors, educational psychologists . . .

“I’ll have a word with Grace.” I hear her pausing for a moment. “The thing is, her father is away.”

There’s a pause and a clattering of fingernails on laptop keyboard.

“If you *could* keep us up to date with information like this, it really would help.”

I can feel the atmosphere crackle. I can imagine Mum in that second. Hands balling into fists under the table, back straightening defensively, chin rising.

“Well, I did *try* to call, Mrs. Miller.” Her words sound spiky now. “But it’s virtually impossible to get past the school secretary. I’m *more* than aware that change unsettles my daughter.”

When Mum gets angry, she gets more clipped and posh. There’s another pause before she carries on. I can imagine them glaring at each other across the desk.

“He’s gone for a—well, he’s . . .”

There’s another beat of silence before she finishes. “He’s on another contract shoot.”

(Dad’s not a hired killer, incidentally. He’s a wildlife cameraman.)

More silence.

“We’ve been very busy with end-of-term reports, and we have had *quite* a bit of contact already this half term regarding Grace and we’re only seven weeks into the year.” Defensive reply.

I know they’ve had meetings without me there, as well as the awkward ones where I’m dragged out of class and forced to sit in Mrs. Miller’s office staring at the wall and trying to nod in all the right places. And then there’s *this* kind, where I’m waiting outside, the problem they need to solve.

I curl my knees up toward my chest. It makes me feel sick when the adults start snarling at one another. I take a breath in, but it shudders through me. I can hear my heart thumping in my ears. The smell of the chair fabric is causing a headachy throb behind my eyes.

“I think it’d be best if you take her home this afternoon, have a

chat. We've got the exams coming up next term, and you need to stress to her how important it is that she's focused in class. There's only another week left until the holidays."

There's a silence before she adds an afterthought—and she sounds half surprised as she says it.

"Grace is a very bright girl, you know."

I slouch down at the click of the door handle opening, making sure I look as if I'm staring absently into space, and definitely *not* eavesdropping on the whole conversation with my super-bat-hearing powers.

"Mrs. Miller and I have had a little chat."

I look at them as if I'd forgotten they existed. They fall for it and explain that under the circumstances, Grace, it's best if we just remember that we don't just walk out of the classroom, Grace, even if we are feeling a little overwhelmed. And don't forget, Grace, you can always tell the teacher if you need some time out.

It's not that easy. It's like there's a wall that stops me from saying the words, even if I need to. And that's before the whole everyone-else-looking-at-me thing, because we all know school is basically just a socially acceptable version of the Lord of the Bloody Flies. But there's something that makes saying the words *I am a bit stressed—can I please go outside to the carefully constructed quiet room?* just a tiny bit completely impossible.

Oh, and then there's the fact that the quiet room is (a) next to the cafeteria, so it smells of hot metal and thin, pointy headaches and (b) is opposite the gym hall so the *thud thud thud* of basketballs makes me want to scream. But I suppose they tried. It's a shame they didn't actually consult anyone who'd want to use it, and that's why it ends up being a glorified store cupboard with a wall stacked with props from the end-of-term performance and a stack of leftover copies of *Of Mice and Men* beside the ergonomic beanbag (hissing noise, weird smell) and a token lava lamp and some inspirational posters. And a dying plant.

Anyway. None of that matters because we're in the car now and it's one more week until half term and that means (a) I can be at the stables all week and (b) oh my God, the party. A tiny little bubble of fizzy excitement flirrups through my stomach. And yes, I know "flirrup" isn't a word, but it is in my head. In fact, that's one of the things my best friend, Anna, likes best about me. My words always make her laugh. I like her because she's nice and she makes me laugh and she's kind and funny and she doesn't mind that I'm a bit—

"Grace, if you don't like geography, it's not too late to drop it as a subject, concentrate on the ones you like. We're only seven weeks into tenth grade."

Mum, who's been driving in silence, turns to look at me as she pauses at the junction. I'm tapping thumb against fingers, one after another, in time to the clicking noise of the blinker.

"Grace?"

I close my eyes so I can concentrate. I hear her sigh in irritation.

"Grace, you're just being bloody *rude*, and that's not okay. I've told you before if someone asks you a question you have to answer them."

We turn onto our road and the ticking stops. I open my eyes again, staring ahead. I'm counting the road signs down. NO LEFT TURNS. ONE-WAY STREET. 20. It reminds me of being four and coming home from nursery school.

"GRACE, I am sick to death of this."

After a few moments, I find my voice.

"I don't dislike geography."

We're pulling into the driveway now and I can tell she's seriously pissed off. She gets out of the car, hefting her brown bag onto her shoulder with a huff of air and slamming the door. She's marching up to the porch, not waiting for me. I climb out, deliberately slowly. The second I close the car door, she blips the car locked without looking back, and heads into the hall, leaving the front door open for me.

Withnail is there, snaking around my ankles, tail a hopeful question



mark. I scoop her up and carry her through to the kitchen, where I place her on the table while I tip out a sachet of disgusting dead-animal food for her. She chirrup with delight and hops down precisely, meeting the bowl on the cold tiles of the kitchen floor.

“Mum says you’re in trouble?”

There’s a *clonk* as my little sister throws her bag down on the table. Her school finished early today, and she’s not going to be impressed that her Netflix time has been eaten into by my returning unannounced.

Mum reappears. “Leah, I said nothing of the sort.” She shoots Leah an eyebrows-down, *shut up* sort of look.

She’s already tied her hair back in a ponytail, swapped her contact lenses for glasses, and replaced her shirt and posh coat with a sweatshirt.

“I don’t know why you get dressed up to see Mrs. Miller. It’s not like *she* makes an effort.”

Mum fills the kettle and flicks it on before turning to face me. I catch a waft of Bach Rescue Remedy on her breath—if you ask me, it’s just a socially acceptable way of drinking in the middle of the afternoon. The amount she goes through, she’d be better off making her own remedies by shoving a bunch of flowers in a bottle of brandy.

“I don’t have to explain what I’m wearing to you, Grace. For your information,” she continues, and I look at her, wondering if she realizes that’s exactly what she’s doing, “I happened to feel like making an effort to wear something nice because I don’t have to spend every day in a shirt and a pair of leggings. I’ve done that for long enough. And because it’s important the school recognizes I’m taking the—situation—seriously.”

Leah looks up from the overflowing bowl of Coco Pops she’s just poured herself. She raises her eyebrows and looks at me sideways. “You’re a situation now?”

I shrug. “Apparently.”

She shovels in a spoonful of cereal and crunches it noisily, which makes me feel a bit sick.

Basically, if Leah's not doing some kind of sporting thing, she's eating. She's like a one-person training montage, and I guess it uses up a lot of energy. Right now she's in her PE clothes. I can see the tangle of her blazer and school uniform balled up in her bag. (I predict that Mum will complain about that within the next half hour, once she's finished with me.)

"What've you done?" She looks at me, and then I catch her glancing at Mum. For a split second I feel like I'm on the outside of some unspoken conversation—but then I often feel like that. I think it's probably how it feels when you're really fluent in a language but you're with native speakers. I speak human as a second language, and there's always a subtext that I miss.

Mum shakes her head slightly.

"Leah, leave it."

She leans back against the kitchen counter, and looks directly at me in a way that makes me feel distinctly uncomfortable. I stare at the floor, but I can feel her eyes burning into me. It doesn't matter how many books she reads—and, believe me, she's read them *all*—she just. Doesn't. Get. It. It's physically painful to have someone staring at me like that. Her eyes burn into me and I can feel my skin prickling. Trying to escape, I step backward toward the door.

"Grace got a bit upset today. That's all. Anyway," Mum says, in the cheerful voice that always indicates that she's gathered herself and decided not to make a fuss about whatever I've done wrong, "how about dinner in front of the TV, and hot chocolate and pj's?"

"Can we have those cookies?" Leah knows we've got Mum over a barrel this week. "The chocolate ones you hid in the garage?"

"How did you know about them?"

I raise my eyes in time to see Leah pull a face. "We know everything, Mother. It's our job."

The truth is Mum went on a major comfort-food shopping trip the night that Dad left for Greenland. She came home loaded with chocolate-caramel-covered everything, about fifty-seven tubs of Häagen-Dazs, and a crate of red wine, which she locked in the garage, where the freezer and all the food worth eating lives. She keeps the key on her at all times. She's been even stressier than usual for some reason since Dad went this time, and she keeps snapping.

Anyway, I'm happy to watch whatever she wants on television (even if I'll be reading my book at the same time) if it means chocolate.

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### **Where were you? Waited at the flagpole until ten past.**

My phone's on silent because we're supposed to be having Quality Family Time, which means no contact with the outside world, but I catch it glowing sideways through the cushion where I've stuffed it out of sight. It's Anna. Oh God. When Mum took me home, I completely forgot to tell her I wasn't going to be there. My stomach gives a glurp of anxiety and I hold my breath as I reply.

#### **Got picked up. REALLY sorry.**

I don't want to go into the whole walking-out-of-class thing, and she's not in my geography class. I don't want to think about it at all, actually, because when I do I get that weird swooping horrible feeling in my stomach and my skin goes all fizzy just thinking about it. And I'm gnawing on my thumbnail waiting for her to reply. I'm worried that she might just think *sod it*, because, honestly, she could. Anytime. I have no idea why she's friends with me, because Anna's *lovely*. She's sort of accepted by the populars and the jocks and the geeks *and* the funny in-betweeny ones—and even with all that she still chooses to be my best friend, even though I must bring her down about fifty nerd points in the universal school scale of social acceptability.

#### **No stress. But . . . party crisis. WTF are we going to wear?**

And with one sentence the prickly skin feeling is gone and my heart settles down with a little thump, like a stone landing at the bottom of a pond.

Mum's fallen asleep on the sofa, where Leah's lying beside her with her thumb in her mouth (even though she's thirteen, don't ask) staring at an old episode of *Friends* like she's about to take an exam in it. I get up, unplugging my charger, and slip out of the room as Anna messages again.

**You doing anything tomorrow? Come around to mine and we can try some stuff on. I'll do your hair?**

## CHAPTER TWO

I love Anna's bedroom, because it's not mine, so the mess doesn't feel so messy. And she's much better at lining up her posters and she doesn't have a dressing table that looks like an explosion in a nail-polish factory. And she didn't carve the names of JLS on her mirror when she was nine, so she doesn't have to live with the reminder every time she puts on eyeliner that she used to be in love with a crap boy band. Saying that, she does have One Direction stuck on the back of the bedroom door. I know because, when the door closes, her bathrobe swings sideways and Harry Styles peeks out from under the sleeve.

"What about leggings and denim shorts?"

I pick them up from the tangle of clothes on the bed, and wave them at her hopefully.

"Too short."

We're only invited to Charlotte Regan's party because Anna's mum works in the health center with Charlotte's mum, and they're friends. They still haven't quite grasped the idea that just 'cause we were friends

in nursery school doesn't mean we're going to hang out ten years later. But anyway, whatever Charlotte's mum said (something along the lines of *You're only having a party if Anna and Grace come because they're so completely überdorky, particularly Grace, that there is NO CHANCE of anything even vaguely scandalous happening*), we're invited to the Party of the Year.

Charlotte's family lives in a farmhouse three miles out of town, and her sixteenth birthday party is taking place in the barn. It's going to be all sitting-around-on-straw-bales and like something out of a film. Or so everyone says. It's been all anyone's talked about since we got over Tom Higginson falling off his brother's motorbike and breaking both ankles.

"Grace?"

I look up, realizing Anna's been talking for at least a minute. She's wearing a pair of ripped black jeans and a skinny purple T-shirt with a kitten-fluffy black cardigan, which makes her red hair look like flames on her shoulders. (She doesn't mind "red," hates "ginger," prefers "auburn"—but she's totally living in fantasy land, because it's *orange* and it is AMAZING and I would love orange hair.) Anyway, she looks like she'd fit in perfectly with the super-cool gang and I feel a horrible pang of something in my stomach. For a second I don't say anything, because I always, always, always feel like I'm panting to keep up with her and I always have been, ever since we made friends when she helped me wash the paintbrushes at Little Acorns when we were three.

"It's perfect." I say the words brightly. Then I do a sort of half frown because I'm not sure that it didn't sound a bit sharp.

Anna gathers her orange hair in a bunch and sort of balls it in her fist, frowning, like she's not sure where it all came from. "You think?"

I nod. And Anna flashes a really sweet smile. It's a smile that says *thank you for being my friend* and *thank you for saying I look nice* and I know that I got it right. It's not that I don't want to get it right, it's just . . . God, it's hard work being a person sometimes. I floomp down sideways onto the fluffy pillows at the head of her bed and breathe in the

fake plastic smell of them, which reminds me of inflatable toys and a trip to Singapore we made when I was seven.

“Grace?”

I take my head back out of Singapore.

“What about you?”

Argh. If I’m honest, I want to wear my favorite black jeans and my mum’s ancient, slightly holey Pixies T-shirt she had when she was seventeen. And my gray hoodie, and my Vans with a hole in the toe. But I’m guessing that’s not in the rules. I might just pack the T-shirt in my bag in case I need a comfort sniff of it at the party when it all gets a bit . . . well, people-y. Parties are a bit like that, even if they don’t have Pass the Parcel and organized fun.

Anna holds out a bright red T-shirt with a My Little Pony on the front.

“It’s ironic,” she points out helpfully, “and I’ve got to face the fact that I can’t wear red and must stop buying it.” She thrusts it at me, waving it in my face.

“If I wear it, it’s not going to look ironic. I’ll just look like a complete loser with a My Little Pony obsession.”

I giggle and she throws the T-shirt at my head so I can’t see. I feel her landing on the bed beside me with a thump and a snort of laughter, which doesn’t quite mask the splintery noise of bed slats cracking in half.

“Thing one,” says my friend, removing the T-shirt from my head and throwing it so it hurtles toward the wall. It slides out of sight behind the chest of drawers, where it’ll be eaten by a million lost hair bands or move in with a family of dust bunnies, “you *are* a complete loser with a My Little Pony fetish—that’s why we’re friends. How many do you own?”

I hide my face behind a cushion so all she can see are my eyes peeping over the top.

“And thing two: slightly more urgent. We just broke the bed.”

I can already hear Anna's mum making her way upstairs, and they're not the footsteps of a happy parent.

"You can talk." I point to the row of dusty Barbie dolls that balance, their legs swinging back and forth like a line of retired Mean Girls, on top of Anna's wardrobe. "At least my ponies are in a box under the bed. I keep my weird habits private." I stick my tongue out at Anna just as the door bangs open so hard that Harry Styles bangs against the edge of the bookcase and Anna's bathrobe falls off the hook.

"Oops, sorry. Pushed it with my foot. Do you girls want some cake?" Anna's mum doesn't seem to be upset at all, weirdly. In fact, she's wielding a plate with two fat slices of gingerbread with thick white icing on top.

"Do you need to ask?" Anna shuffles carefully forward, clearly trying not to give away the fact that the mattress underneath her is now sagging in the middle.

"Darling, are you all right?" Anna's mum cocks her head to one side, looking at me for confirmation. "Grace, is she going mad? Is there something I should know about?"

I shake my head, feeling the laughter threatening to escape, lips tightly clamped together. Sometimes when I start it's so hard to stop and then Anna joins in and we just laugh and laugh until we're almost sick. We got sent out of English last week for snortling with laughter over "*Thou cream-faced loon*" in Shakespeare.

I can feel it boiling up inside me, and any second now I'm going to start. Anna's shoulders are beginning to shake.

"It's just . . ." Anna grasps the fail-safe method of shutting up all adults, at all times. "*Women's problems.*"

"Ohhh," says Anna's mum with a knowing nod. "Definitely time for cake, then, darling. D'you want some medicine or something?"

"No-I'm-fine," says Anna in a rush, as the bed gives another warning creak.

"All right. Let me know if you want anything."



And she pulls the door closed as she backs out of the room, brow wrinkled in an expression of bemusement, half shaking her head at the weirdness of us, and we fall over on our sides and laugh and laugh until the bed finally gives way underneath us and Anna's legs shoot upward as her bum sinks to the floor.

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It's a couple of hours later. I'm hovering in Anna's kitchen, staring out of the window and talking to her cat, Michael. Anna is upstairs with her mum, who apparently has psychic powers or something, because she returned half an hour later, this time without cake, but with a toolbox. She made us move the mattress into the hall while she fixed the broken slats in the bed frame. We were too weak with laughter to argue, and we tried to make up for it by getting her a cup of tea and offering to hold pieces of equipment, but she just rolled her eyes at us and told us to sod off.

I wonder if that's why Anna and I are friends: because we both have the sort of mothers who just get on with stuff. Because Dad's always worked away—he spends months balancing behind his lens, waiting for the perfect photograph of an antelope doing a cartwheel (or something like that)—Mum's always been the one who does all the stuff. She bosses us around and organizes everything and remembers appointments and buys stuff for cookery class on the way to school when I forget. Thing is, when Dad is around he's on another planet too, holed up in his study editing hours of footage and collecting coffee cups and chip bags. And Anna's dad is the same—lovely, but not exactly practical. He's an engineer, so he ought to be, really. He spends a lot of time in his office looking at very complicated pictures of stuff on his computers, which we're not allowed to touch.

And we both have cats with cool names, so there's another reason why we're friends. And then there's our mutual interest in the mysterious Gabe Kowalski. He arrived halfway through the summer term from one of the other schools in town. Someone said he's got A Reputation, but I'm not really sure what that means. He seemed per-

factly nice when he picked up Anna's sneaker—it fell out of her bag last term—and he smiled and said, “There you are,” reeeeeeally nicely in his lovely accent.

Friendship is a weird sort of thing when you think about it.

I look at the calendar on the wall above the kitchen sink, scanning the details that Anna's mum has written in her neat, spidery black writing.

It'd be useful for their parents if Anna and *Charlotte* were friends, really. “Lunch with Adam and Gillian,” it says for tomorrow. They're Charlotte's parents. Anna hasn't mentioned it. I know that's not because she's keeping it as a special secret and she's planning on running off to be best friends with Charlotte, because Anna is one of my safe places. She's one of the things that doesn't move and doesn't change. That's a good thing.

What's *not* a good thing is standing here in the kitchen feeling faintly worried that I'm going to be in trouble because Anna broke the bed. Even though Anna's mum's mouth said it was fine, her face said, *Oh, for God's sake, I've got better things to do than fix this bloody bed.*

I recognize the look. My mum gets exactly the same one on her face when we break stuff.

“All sorted.” Anna's mum comes back into the kitchen, putting the toolbox down on the table with a thump, all the tools inside banging together in a metallic, teeth-on-edge crash. It makes me jump and another wave of anxiety rushes through my body, sending me cold from my toes to my head in a whoosh of panic.

“You all right, my love?” Anna's mum makes her way across the wooden floor toward me and puts her hand on my arm. I stiffen up. I don't mean to—it's just I'm reaching the point where everything's a bit too *much* everything and I'd like to magically be back home in bed with a heap of blankets. I shiver, even though the room is warm. I just need to get home. Now. But I don't say that.

I say:

“I'm fine.”

I realize I'm drumming my fingers against the counter and it probably looks like I'm impatient. It's not that; I'm just tapping the rhythm of an ancient Beyoncé song for some reason that makes no sense, but I can't stop it because it's weirdly soothing. *Taptaptaptap break tap tap break taptaptap.*

"Do you need a lift home?" She gives my fingers a fleeting glance for the tiniest second and I notice it and hold them still. The rhythm shifts to my toes and now each one of them is beating their turn (but she can't see that bit).

She turns to look for Anna, who is nowhere to be seen—probably putting the bed back together. I feel super awkward all of a sudden, like my arms and legs are too big for my body and they're going to keep growing like the magic porridge pot until they take over the whole kitchen.

"Oh no, my mum's just coming," I reply after a moment, realizing that I'd forgotten to say the words out loud. "She's on her way back from town, said she'd pick me up on the way past."

The doorbell rings and Anna comes hurtling down the stairs, shouting that she'll get it.

"Gracie Moo, your mum is here." She does a cartwheel in the hall, which makes her mum pull the sort of face I imagine mother dragons pull when their children are naughty. Her nostrils go all snorty.

"Anna, will you *keep* that behavior outside. For goodness' sake, you're fifteen, not five."

Anna flashes a grin at her mum then catches my eye as she swings onto the kitchen table, picking up an apple from the fruit bowl.

"Make your mind up, Mother." She spoke through a mouthful of apple. "Yesterday you were all full of woe that I'm growing up too fast. Now you're telling me off for being youthfully exuberant."

"You've broken a bed and now you're doing acrobatics in the hall," she said pointedly. "I think under the circumstances I'm allowed to be a bit annoyed."

Her mum looks at mine and shakes her head.

“These two.” She half moves toward the kettle. “Got time for a cuppa before you go?”

Mum wavers for a second.

“Go on, then.” She pulls her phone out of the back pocket of her jeans. “I’ll text Leah, tell her we’ll be half an hour. Thanks, Lisa.”

She sits down at the big wooden table while Lisa clatters around with coffee cups.

“Have you girls been behaving?”

Mum says this to me, but looks at Anna’s mum with that look mothers reserve for each other. I feel about seven.

“They’ve been perfect angels.” I feel a wave of love for Anna’s mum and her kind voice and her not minding that we bounced the bed in half after all. My mum snorts with laughter.

Anna, who has been teasing Michael the cat with a feather, looks up at me, motioning toward the door with her head. We can escape.

“So how long’s he gone for this time?” Lisa slides a coffee across the table toward my mum.

As we leave, I hear my mum telling Lisa it’ll be almost Christmas before my dad is back. She sounds distinctly unimpressed.

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“Come on, you,” says Mum, an hour later.

“You’ve been ages.” I hoist myself out of the gigantic squashy sofa, plonking Michael onto Anna’s lap.

“And now it’s time to go. Leah’s been texting, asking where we are.”

“I’ll message you,” says Anna, waving Michael’s paw at me in farewell.

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And then we’re home. And I’ve done enough everything for today. I’ve been enough. I have literally no Graceness left to offer anyone or anything. I’m wrapped up in my fleece blanket like a burrito and it’s safe and warm and I’m watching *Walking with Dinosaurs* on Netflix for the fifty billionth time. I just want to sit here all evening, because then my brain might just stop whirring around. It’s like a million shooting stars

flying out in different directions and I can't make them stop and then I can't sleep. The dinosaurs help. The beanie hat I've got on helps too. It sort of stops the thoughts from shooting around.

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I can't sleep. It's after midnight, and I've read the whole internet and I've had a shower and watched so many trashy American TV shows that my brain is beginning to melt, and I'm starving.

As I'm creeping down the stairs, trying not to wake anyone up, I realize there's a noise coming from the sitting room. I open the door to find Mum. She's sitting on the couch in her pajamas, and Nirvana is on old-people MTV, and there's a bottle of red wine three-quarters drunk by her side. She looks up, head cocked to hold her cell phone in place under her ear, and beams at me fuzzily.

"Hello, darling. I'm just rediscovering my lost youth."

She giggles as presumably someone on the end of the phone says something. "Shh," she says to them, waving a hand pointlessly. "You okay?" She looks at me quizzically.

"Fine." Withnail is curled up on a fluffy tartan blanket at Mum's feet and the fire is still glowing from earlier. I like it when the fire's lit—it makes the house feel alive somehow, like it's got a personality. "Just getting food."

She nods, and turns back to the television and her phone as I withdraw.

I had no idea she could get Dad on the phone from Greenland, but I can't think who else she'd be talking to at this time of night. The floor's freezing, so I sit on the kitchen counter as I wait for the toast, shoving over a heap of Mum's paperwork as I do so. She doesn't work, but the voluntary stuff she does with the local autism support group takes over her entire life. Maybe she was talking to one of her cronies from there.

The toaster pops, and I stop thinking about anything else apart from melty butter deliciousness.

I'll clean the mess up in the morning.

## CHAPTER THREE

Sometimes I wonder what it'd be like to be one of those people who sleep until midday on the weekend. At six in the morning our kitchen is silent, apart from the pop and click of the kettle switching off and the fizz of instant coffee as I fill the travel mug.

Screwing the lid on tightly, I shove it in my backpack and hitch it over one shoulder. I'm sure they'll know where I am—I'm a creature of habit, after all—but I'm getting better at this stuff, so I leave a note, scrawled on the back of an envelope, lying next to the toaster on a heap of last night's crumbs, which I've forgotten to clean up, but never mind.

I pull the door behind me and my bike clatters down the front steps as if eager to get away. It's a funny sort of half-light at this time of the morning, and the town feels like it doesn't quite belong to anyone—night has handed it over, but daytime isn't quite here yet and there's only me, and the almost-silent whirring of the milk truck that's waiting outside the houses opposite.

And then I'm in the yard and everything is forgotten. The stables

are a sanctuary. The routine—the way every day is the same, no matter what’s going on in the outside world—is part of why I love it here. I throw my backpack down in the tack room and pick up the kettle, shaking it from side to side. It’s still warm—Polly must be here already. I’ll have a coffee when I get back from the field.

ooo

Mabel’s there, as if she read my mind. I reach across the fence, holding my hand out, palm flat, feeling the velvet whiskeryness of her muzzle as she softly sniffs me hello. I don’t bother putting on a lead rein or a halter when there’s nobody around to tell me off—she doesn’t need it. I open the gate and she slips through gracefully, one ear flicking backward as she senses the other members of the herd looking up.

Together, side by side, we walk up to the yard, her hooves clipping precisely as we step from the earth of the track onto the concrete. I open the door to her stable and she steps inside.

When I’m with Mabel, everything melts away. I forget about the coffee. I brush her silver-gray mane until each strand shines like spun silk. When she’s groomed, I shove her grooming kit back into the cupboard under the feeding trough and pull out her saddle and bridle, tacking her up quickly. I want to be out while it’s still early, before the rest of the world comes alive, and we make it, a plaintive whinny from Mabel’s best friend, Harry, sounding out across the field as we disappear from sight.

There’s nothing in the pink silence of the morning but a gentle clinking as Mabel chews on her snaffle bit. We turn down onto the bridle path, startling a hare, which stops, front paws in midair, before shooting off into the hedgerow. The leaves are sparkling with dew, my breath and Mabel’s puffing in air as the thin sun breaks through the clouds.

Spring and autumn are my favorite times to be outside. And winter, when it’s cold and the sitting room is full of the sparkly darkness of fairy lights and candles on the fireplace. But not summer. Summer’s

too obvious, too yellow, too shiny and easy to please. It doesn't have to try too hard, and everyone just loves it anyway.

We're as one, Mabel and me. Her ears are pricked forward, questing, the dark gray tips curving in toward each other, her mane flying gracefully, neck curved in an arc. The repetitive rhythm of the trot has me counting one-two-one-two like Penny, my riding instructor, used to when I was seven and having lessons. I realize I'm muttering it under my breath as we reach the top of the little hill.

The trees here have been sawn away by the forestry workers, exposing circles of startled pale wood, the ground still blanketed with fallen needles. I pull Mabel to a stop and slide off, hooking her reins around my hand. I've got a packet of mints and I'm training her to take one from my mouth. I balance the sweet between my lips and she reaches out gently, her mushroom-soft top lip catching it and knocking it to the ground. She hoovers it up instantly. We're working on it.

Anna, who appreciates Mabel—but from a distance—thinks it's disgusting that I'd let a horse snuffle all over my face.

But I love Mabel with the heat of a million suns. She's standing silhouetted in the golden light of early morning, her profile as beautiful as her desert ancestors, nostrils flaring in a sigh of contentment. I reach up, placing a hand against the flatness of her cheekbone, sending a silent message.

Thank you. Thank you for letting me be your person. Thank you a million times for the day they said, *We've decided you can have a horse of your own*. I can't say the words out loud, but I feel them pulsing through me and into the warmth of her skin.

And then there's a crash, which sends Mabel wheeling and snorting to the end of the reins, my arm jerking as she pulls away from me, the tips of her ears almost meeting in the middle, her nostrils flaring, neck rigid with shock.

"Shit."

There's a voice behind me.



There's a metallic sound and a groan. As I turn, I see a mountain bike emerging from the ditch, followed by a soaking-wet, mud-splattered arm, followed by—

“Jesus. What are you doing up here at this time of the morning?”

The voice comes first before a shape clammers over the bank, its face completely covered in mud, water dripping from the visor of his—it's a he, I realize—helmet. He hauls himself out over the edge of the bank and looks at me through his mud mask, wiping his face with the hem of his sweatshirt. I'm so hopeless at recognizing people out of context that it takes me a second before I recognize the dark brown eyes staring out from the mud-covered face.

“It's a bridle path. And this”—I indicate the highly unimpressed Mabel, still stock-still, who gives a well-timed huff of disapproval—“is my horse. Wearer of a bridle. Hence the path.”

Shut up, Grace, for God's sake.

Gabe Kowalski looks down at the slightly mangled bike, which is lying beside him on the grass.

“Right,” he says, and he's laughing. “Did you have sarcasm flakes for breakfast?”

I thought I was simply stating the obvious. Not sure what to say, I carry on looking at him as he clammers to his feet, frowning down at the bike wheel.

“I'm not being sarcastic,” I manage eventually. “It's just—what on earth are *you* doing riding a mountain bike into a ditch?”

“It wasn't exactly in the plan. I was coming down the hill and the ditch just sort of—appeared. And then we—me and the bike—were in it.”

He gives a sheepish smile. One front tooth crosses over the other, I notice.

“D'you need a hand?” I step forward, but Mabel has other ideas. She's rooted to the spot and she's not moving one inch. She's got no concept of sisterhood, this horse.

“Looks like your transport isn’t behaving any better than mine.” He hauls the bike upright. “It’ll be fine, just need to get it home and fix the forks.”

“If you take the path down there”—I wave my arm in the direction of the stables—“there’s a shortcut back to Lane End.”

“Past the stables?” He’s holding on to the bike now, readying himself to leave.

“Yes.” I don’t know why I don’t say, *Oh, that’s where I keep Mabel*. Or even, *That’s where I’m headed—do you want to walk with me?*

I couldn’t really say that (even if it wasn’t a lie, because it’s not where I’m headed, obviously), because Mabel is utterly convinced that the bike is some kind of evil swamp monster designed to murder her in her sleep, but even so, I can tell this is one of these moments where if I were in a film I’d say something cute, and so would he, and then he’d wipe the mud off his face and we’d walk home together chatting and . . .

“See you, then.” He jerks his head upward as a sort of good-bye, and heads back down the track toward home.

“Yeah,” I say, realizing as I do that Anna and I are going to replay this conversation a million times. “See you.”

I watch him wheeling the bike, the damaged front wheel in the air, down the track toward the stables, until he’s a tiny speck in the distance and Mabel’s nudging me in the back, the metal of her bit jingling, and then I get back into the saddle and ride on, up to the moor.

The hollow thudding of her hooves on the peat turf and the occasional whoop of the birds overhead are the only things I can hear. It’s not exactly helpful. My thoughts are spinning around and around inside my head, my brain going over all the amusing things I could have said. Like, *Hello, I’m Grace. We’re in opposite sections, so we don’t share any classes, but it’s nice to meet you*. That might’ve been a start. Instead, just for a change, I’ve gone for socially awkward, as usual. A vision of me

at Charlotte's party, standing in a corner, trying to look like I'm mysterious and interesting instead of a total loser with no social skills pops into my head and I feel a bit sick.

I'm looking forward to the party. Keep telling yourself that, Grace. I am.

I loosen the reins and Mabel, reading my mind, soars forward into a canter and I lose myself in the thrumming of hoofbeats and the wind in my face.

## CHAPTER FOUR

It's Monday. Again.

There's a smell in here that's making it impossible to concentrate. I'm vaguely aware that Miss Jones is saying something, but I can't pick it out among the stink. It's overwhelming.

“GRACE!”

I open my eyes. Tabassum, who has—I've just realized—been nudging me, lets out a resigned sigh. She knows what's coming next.

“What?”

Holly Carmichael, who sits opposite me, mutters, “Weirdo,” under her breath. I don't look at her. I haven't looked her in the eye since she deliberately wrecked my donkey painting in third grade, just because it was loads better than hers. I'm aware that sounds ridiculous, but we all have coping mechanisms, and not looking at people is one of mine. I don't imagine she's even noticed—I'm not exactly on her radar these days. I'm just glad she's forgotten the time I peed in my pants at her fifth birthday party because I was having a meltdown and the balloons were scaring me.

“Don’t you ‘what’ me, my girl.” Miss Jones is approaching the table now, her mouth set in a straight line. She slams her palm down on the table so my books all jump in the air. Holly makes a *wooooo* sound, which makes the rest of the class laugh. I reach a hand forward to straighten the books, but Tabassum kicks me under the table.

The smell’s coming from outside, I realize, as I see a man jumping down from the low roof of the PE storage sheds. They’re sticking something down and the gluey smell has adhered to my nostrils and it’s making me want to throw up. And I’ve just realized she’s still talking.

“. . . a whole class here, Grace, and I can’t keep interrupting to deal with you if you can’t keep on task and I . . .”

I reach into my pocket. I can’t concentrate on a word she’s saying and it’s all in the textbook anyway.

“Miss . . .” Tabassum begins hesitantly.

I shoot her a look. There’s no point even trying to explain when she’s on a roll. I pull out the time-out card so it’s tucked in my palm and hand it to Miss Jones, standing up as I do so. I don’t have to stay here. I’m going to the library to read about the circulatory system in peace.

“Sit down.”

“I’ve got a time-out card.” I say this almost under my breath, turning away so that the only people who can hear me are the teacher and Tabassum. It’s not a state secret, but my parents seem to think life will be easier if my autism is on a need-to-know basis. I’m not sure it works, but nobody bothered to ask me. So the teachers know, and most of my friends, but—

“I don’t care what you’ve got, young lady.” Miss Jones looks down at the card again, and back at me. She’s got a sort of wart thing on her forehead, and there’s a speck of mascara on her cheek. “You’re not leaving my class.”

I knew this would happen when Miss Young laminated this time-out card. Half the teachers are terrified in case I start climbing on the

tables or setting fire to the desks. But the old-school ones—and they're not old-wrinkly-old; some of them are the youngest teachers we've got here—think it's just a cop-out, an excuse for me to disappear out of class before anyone realizes I haven't done my homework. The irony is I always do my homework, because I'm terrified of getting into trouble. But trouble just keeps getting into me.

I can feel everyone looking now, getting ready for something to gossip about over lunch. The silence is roaring in my ears and their eyes are all on me, all over me. I feel hot and cold and sick.

"If you're feeling *stressed*, Grace"—in what I assume is her attempt to tick the box and do the right thing, she has lowered her voice to a whispered hiss, her face rigid with fury—"why don't you turn the chair around to face the wall?"

"What?"

Have we gone back to the Victorian times? I can't concentrate on a thing she's saying because the smell is screaming in my head and everything I have is focusing on not throwing up on the table, and she wants me to face the *wall*?

"What?" I repeat it, scrunching up my face to indicate I literally do not get it.

"You mean 'pardon.'" The words are sharp-edged. They feel like broken glass.

"I don't mean 'pardon,' *actually*. If you'd read Nancy Mitford"—which I did last summer at Grandma's house, when I was completely obsessed with British manners and all that stuff, but I digress—"you'd know that saying 'pardon' is incredibly rude. So—for that matter—is 'toilet' instead of 'bathroom,' and 'serviette' instead of 'napkin,' and—"

A vein stands out on Miss Jones's forehead, and I watch her face turn puce with fury.

I don't turn my chair around. I don't throw up on the table. I sit for the remaining twenty-five minutes with my nails digging into my palms, everything shut down so I don't hear a word she says, and then when

the class is over I turn around to pick up my stuff, but because I'm stressed and hungry—and, well, because I'm me—I drop my bag and the contents spill out all over the floor.

And because my life is only like the crappy bits of films, as I'm scrabbling around on the tiles shoving it all back in, I realize that there is a pair of immaculate black shoes standing in my way and I follow them up and there's Holly Carmichael, and she's holding something in her hand.

It's my time-out card.

Holly taps it thoughtfully on her palm, her head cocked slightly to one side. She looks down at it for a moment, thinking. I can feel my heart racing, and my stomach lurches as if I'm going to throw up.

She looks at me, her eyebrows raised. Her voice is dripping with scorn.

"You don't look autistic."

"And *you* don't look ignorant. And yet here we are."

She gives a snort, half turning as if to check her harpies are all still in place (which they are, flanking her on either side, like airheaded, gum-cracking henchmen).

I snatch the card from her hand and march out of the room before she has a chance to answer.

As soon as I turn the corner, I flop back against the wall of the science corridor and start to laugh.

Yes. Yes, yes, YES. I've had that bloody comeback stored away in my armory forever. Stuff you, Holly Carmichael.

## CHAPTER FIVE

It's only the middle of the week—and I shouldn't complain, because we're being dismissed at lunchtime on Friday—but I am so tired. Tired-to-my-bones tired. The teachers are wound up about exams as usual, and the special-needs coordinator is stressing out about me having somewhere quiet to do my practice test. The room she wants to put me in is right next to the science lab and it stinks, but I couldn't face the conversation, so I just nodded when she suggested it. I'm so tired I've run out of words. Mum picked me up from school and she must've gotten it somehow, because I flopped into the back seat and she called Polly and asked her to look after Mabel this evening, and she didn't ask me how my day had been, or expect anything but silence. Lucky, because I don't have any words left.

“Come on.” Mum fiddled around with the CDs in the side pocket of the car as we left school. “We'll take the coast road home.”

It takes twice as long to drive this way, but it's nice, because the car is one of the places I feel safe, and where I can turn my brain off.



And I'm glad Mum gets it. She might make me want to scream sometimes, but she is good at recognizing when I've hit the wall and keeping me from losing it.

It makes me think about being small. When Leah was a tiny little pink blob in a car seat, Mum used to take us out in the car and drive around and around town, along the long shore road with the bleached grass of the dunes and the huge sky stretching out beside us. I remember the music playing and my blue shoes sticking out into the air and the same songs playing over and over, because it was the only thing I'd let her listen to.

She'd drive and drive, until Leah would fall asleep, and she'd sing along to Avril Lavigne, and she says I used to too, and it became *Grace's Avril music*, soundtrack to a million afternoons.

Only now it's more than a decade ago, and Mum's not singing this time—she's driving in silence. I don't mind, because the last thing I need is any more noise in my head. Leah's got netball training, so she doesn't need picking up for ages yet. She chose to go to the school on the other side of town, the one with the award-winning sports teams. If it weren't for the fact that she looks like a smaller, neater, less scribbly version of me, I'd be convinced Leah had been swapped at birth.

I let my eyes stop focusing. Outside becomes a blur, passing by the car windows.

I rest my head against the glass.

The trouble is that by this time my filtering system has broken down completely and there's a light flickering in the corner of my eye and the plastic smell of the car is giving me a headache right behind my eyes.

"Grace?" Mum's voice breaks through my thoughts. We've pulled up outside Leah's school.

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Dinner's in front of the television tonight because Dad's program is on. I'm curled up in my chair, with a cushion on my knees and a bowl of pasta balanced on top. Mum's got a row of tea lights flickering along the mantelpiece, and the fire's lit—it's only October, and the weather

forecaster said we're going to have an Indian summer this week, but it looks pretty, anyway. And autumn is waiting to catch us—I see it when I'm out riding Mabel. The fields have been plowed and the grass on the edges is faded and tired. A bit like me tonight.

Leah is sitting on the sofa beside Mum, who is clutching the remote control so tightly her knuckles are going white. She's upset—I think because she was half hoping Dad would call tonight before his show went out, even though he's already told her it's virtually impossible to ring to order when he's floating around on an iceberg, or whatever he's doing this week.

“Right?” Mum looks at me.

“Ready when you are.” I hate missing the beginning of programs. If I do, I won't watch them at all. Same with the cinema. I like to be in my seat before the ads start, and I stay until the end of the credits, long after the lights have gone up and the usher is tidying up the sweet wrappers and strewn popcorn. It's just one of my things.

“The tortoise of the Galápagos Islands is an intriguing creature . . .” begins the voice from the screen.

I curl my hands around my bowl of pasta and sit forward in my chair, fascinated.

Dad's been disappearing on wildlife shoots for as long as I can remember. He'd be there, then he'd be gone, then he'd come home with a gigantic stuffed cheetah (toy, not actual animal, obviously) or whatever, and we'd all sit watching his programs together. But in the last couple of years he's been away a lot more, probably half the year, and, unlike this one, the shoot he's on at the moment is special, because he's going to be narrating it too, so it'll be like he's here in the room.

Leah's got her phone tucked under the cushion beside her on the sofa. I can see she's messaging with one hand while eating dinner and looking innocent with the other. She's become a complete social-media addict over the last few months, and Mum and Dad haven't noticed. Mum, meanwhile, is halfway down a glass of red and has barely touched

her pasta. She's flipping a coaster between her fingers, and she looks cross—or maybe tired? I can't really tell.

I flick a piece of my pasta across the chair so it lands on the arm beside Withnail.

"Grace, if you're feeding that cat at the table again, he's going out." Mum doesn't even look across at me.

"We're not *at* the table."

I flip another twirl of pasta out and sneak it into my palm for him to have in a moment. He's started his motorbike purr of delight in anticipation. How can I deprive him of his favorite thing? (Besides chips, cheese, strawberry yogurt, and Christmas cake, but you know what I mean.)

"GRACE."

"FINE." God, she's in a mood. Meanwhile, Leah's doing whatever the hell she likes right under her nose.

"Who were you talking to earlier when Grace was in the shower?" Leah looks at Mum, mouth stuffed full of pasta. I swear our carb-wolfing qualities are in the blood, with Mum being half-Italian. "Was it Dad?"

Mum shakes her head.

"Grandma?"

"I do have *friends*, you know," Mum says, and she sounds a bit sharp.

"Who?" I look across at her, interested. The turtles are still doing their thing on the television—between you and me, they're not that interesting, and I speak as someone who's watched more nature nerd programs than anyone I know.

"For goodness' sake, you two." She sounds a bit huffy now. "If you must know, it was my friend Eve from university."

She's never mentioned an Eve before. I wonder if that's who she was talking to the other night when I went into the sitting room. But she can say she's got friends all she wants . . . the truth is that basi-

cally all Mum does is be a mum. And do her volunteer stuff at the center. And attend classes on How to Parent Your Autistic Child. And read books on the same. Meanwhile I just get on with being myself, because nobody actually gives you a guidebook on How to Be an Autistic Person. Anyway, it seems to keep her occupied.

“But you said ‘see you later’ to this Eve person.” Leah slides me a look.

“Ooh, look, pause it—rewind it! There’s Dad.” I wave my arm at the television where, for a brief moment, he pops into view, and I feel a weird, gulping sense of missing him that makes my cheeks ache.

Mum sighs and hits the rewind button. We all sit forward in our chairs for a moment, peering at the screen, not speaking.

“Well, there we are,” says Mum, taking a big mouthful of her wine. “That’s the closest you two will get to a bedtime story from your father this evening.” Her face twists a bit into an expression I don’t recognize, and we all sit back with our pasta and watch the rest of the program without talking. There’s a weird feeling in the air that makes me feel unsettled. When the show is finished, I get up and take the bowls through to the kitchen, Withnail following me for his share of leftover pasta.

I can hear Mum and Leah laughing at some comedy thing on the television now, but I’ve had enough of today. I climb the stairs and don’t even bother getting into my pajamas, because I’ve only got to get my uniform on again in the morning and I’ll brush my teeth later, and I stuff my headphones into my ears and turn the world off and Taylor Swift on.

I don’t mean cool, hanging-out-with-her-squad-in-NYC, everyone-loves-her Taylor Swift. I mean Taylor Swift from when I was little and I wanted her ringlets. That’s what I want to listen to. I pull the covers over my head and hit repeat on my phone so it plays over and over and over again like an aural comfort blanket until I’ve forgotten everything else, and I’m living somewhere in Tennessee and my mom is making pancakes with maple syrup as an after-school surprise.

## CHAPTER SIX

“We need face masks.”

We’re in Costa having a hot chocolate and it’s Friday after school and it’s half term at last. And that also means it’s THE PARTY at last and not that we’re excited or anything but Anna’s written a list of Things We Have to Do and printed it off, because Anna is the queen of stationery and notebooks and paper in general.

I do sometimes wonder whether I sneezed one day and she caught autism from me, or at least the bits everyone reads about, because unlike her I’ve never written a list in my life, and I’m hopeless at math, and I don’t have a special superpower like drawing entire cityscapes from memory.

“Look.” Anna taps the list with an impatient finger. “Face masks. Hair-conditioning treatments. Manicure stuff.”

“Y’know Gabe?” I try to act casual. I haven’t told Anna I bumped into him. I forgot, I think, because of all the school stuff.

“I am familiar with the concept of him, yes,” says Anna, pulling out a pen and adding *EYELINER* on the bottom of her list.

“I bumped into him the other day when I was out with Mabel.”

There’s a silence as Anna puts her pen back in the little pencil case she has in her bag, zips it up, and then looks at me. She cocks her head to one side, curls a lock of orange hair around her finger, and says, “Spill.”

“He crashed his bike. I was awkward. He was covered in mud. There’s not that much to tell.”

“What did he say? Did he like Mabel? Was he nice? Did you chat?”

“He asked if I’d had sarcasm flakes for breakfast.”

“Ooooh.” Anna scrunches up her mouth to one side, the way she does when she’s thinking. “But *how* did he say it?”

I think about Gabe, dripping with mud, and me, standing there with a recalcitrant Mabel on the end of her reins. “Just like a question?” I say, but I’m not really sure. He might have been joking. God, it’s hard having my brain sometimes.

“Interesting . . .” says Anna. “He might be at Charlotte’s party.”

She waggles her eyebrows suggestively at me, and taps her front teeth with the lid of her pen.

We finish up our drinks and head out onto Chapel Street.

ooo

I’m going a bit giddy from being in Boots, where the lights are super shiny and there’s so much stuff everywhere. There are rows and rows of lipsticks and signs that are screaming and the clatter of people putting their baskets on the counter and the smells of perfume and nail polish being sneakily tried out by girls from Leah’s grade. And old people stumbling around with baskets over their arms getting in the way and it’s all just so LOUD.

My brain is end-of-term tired. We couldn’t stop giggling in English this morning and the whole class almost ended up with an after-school detention. I reckon the only reason she didn’t do it was Mrs. Markham

wanted the holidays to come almost as much as we did. She flew out of the classroom even faster than us when the final bell went.

I've got a gift token left over from my birthday and Mum's given us some money-off vouchers she had in her purse. We chuck everything in the basket and spin around the shop, laughing at nothing and everything until we clatter down the hair-dye section and bump straight into Holly Bloody Carmichael, who is leaning casually against the posh makeup counter, twirling a lock of her streaky blond hair and talking to—

“Eek,” says Anna unnecessarily.

I try to hit reverse gear, but I end up stepping backward onto her foot, so she wobbles sideways. With a crash, a cardboard display of mascara falls off the shelf. Holly looks across at us, her lip curling slightly. Gabe Kowalski, standing in the middle of the shop with a basket full of baby food, raises an eyebrow as if to suggest that we are completely inept specimens of humanity who probably shouldn't be allowed out without our parents supervising us.

“Er. Hi.” I do a flapping sort of wave thing, like an ailing sea lion.

“And bye.” Anna pulls me by the arm back out of sight and down toward the tills.

“Oh my God.”

She's owl-eyed.

“D'you think they're—” She stops midsentence as the woman behind the counter takes the basket and bleeps everything through the till.

We don't speak again until we're outside the shop and heading for Primark, where I've seen black fake nails that'll cover my half-chewed stumpy end-of-finger disasters.

“Together?” I finish her sentence. “No, I reckon they were just talking.”

“God, I hope so. He seems nice. It would be a shame if he ended up with Holly.”

I feel a lurch of dread about tomorrow night. It's weird how you can be so excited about something and at the same time utterly sick to the stomach. "You don't think Charlotte's invited Holly and her lot, do you?"

Anna shakes her head vehemently. "No chance. Her mum had final say over the invites, and she doesn't approve of them."

I've found the fake nails and we're turning to pay for them when I spot the PERFECT thing to wear tomorrow. I start making my way through the sea of clothes racks. It's getting to the point where I'm a bit seasick from shop-ness, but I just want to get to it and pay and then we can leave. I pull the T-shirt off the rail and turn to Anna, holding it up against myself, pulling a silly face.

"TARDIS!" Anna squeals.

"I *know*." I beam at her because she gets it instantly. Never mind My Little Pony, this is it.

"Seriously? A *Doctor Who* T-shirt? How old are you?"

I spin around to locate the voice.

Holly, who appears to have taken on a new role as our stalker, is standing behind me with her arms folded across her chest. I spot Emma and Lucy, her foot soldiers, rifling through the sale rack, which is full of lurid skinny-fit Lycra stuff.

I hold on to the T-shirt awkwardly. The coat hanger is sticking into my collarbone because I've still got it pressed up against my chest. I can feel myself going beetroot red all over, but I just stand there while Holly looks at us, Anna with her arms full of shopping bags and me with a TARDIS draped across me like some kind of Primark toga. Eventually, after about fifteen minutes or five seconds—I can't quite tell—she stalks off, cracking chewing gum as she leaves.

"Well, I think it's nice," says Anna, giving a little nod of defiance. "And sod her. She's just jealous because we're invited and she's not."

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I leave Anna at the end of Chapel Street and head down the road toward home. It's weirdly warm, because the Indian summer they promised has arrived. On days like this I love living here. In the middle of summer when it's heaving with holiday tourists and you can't walk down the road without someone's infant waving a sticky paw covered in candy floss at you, not so much. But when autumn comes, we reclaim the town as ours. It might be tattered around the edges, and a bit dodgy in parts, but I like it here. It's familiar. And that works for me. I turn the corner onto our road, and the red of an unfamiliar car flashes through the bushes that grow scruffily over the wall of our drive. We don't know anyone with a red car, and—I can feel my steps slowing almost involuntarily—I can't face people tonight. Not ones I don't know, anyway. I've done town and school, and that's enough.

I creep up the side of the driveway, squeezing past the fire-engine-red car, noticing as I do that it's tidy inside—ours is covered in sweet wrappers and leftover Costa cups, newspapers, and the junk mail Mum opens while she's sitting at traffic lights. This car has nothing in it but a glossy, unopened packet of Marlboro cigarettes on the passenger seat, and it's dust-free and spotless.

“Grace.”

I see Leah's distorted face through the glass as she wrenches the front door open from inside. She's already changed into a pair of tartan pajama bottoms and a Batman T-shirt, her hair clipped out of her face, a half-eaten apple in her hand. She looks completely unruffled by the fact that there's *someone* here, and it makes me irrationally cross that she just copes with stuff.

I glare at her and walk past without saying anything, shifting the weight of my bag on my shoulder as I head straight up the stairs. I'm hungry and I want a coffee and there's *conversation* coming from the kitchen, and laughing. I had this part of the day all planned and now it's screwed up and I'm not impressed at all.

“Grace, darling.” I can hear Mum calling up the stairs, and there's a tone to her voice I don't quite recognize. “Is that you?”

I don't answer, because obviously it is, given that Leah has skipped back into the kitchen with her perfect-daughter halo gleaming, and who else would be making their way upstairs?

"Grace?" Mum calls again, the same weird edge to her voice.

I dump my bag on the bed.

My bedroom is not tidy. Okay, that's a bit of an understatement. My bedroom is a festering, chaotic, possible health hazard. I can't actually see the carpet because my stuff is all over it, and the bed hasn't been made because—well, I don't have time to make the bed in the morning, and I've banned Mum from her "helpful" tidying expeditions where she starts throwing out stuff I might need and touching everything.

I fish out my jodhpurs from the end of my bed, where they're tangled in the covers, and pull them on under my school skirt, over my tights. I can't be bothered with getting changed properly, so I pull a hoodie over the top of my school shirt and squiggle out of my skirt. It lies on the floor like a deflated gray jellyfish.

My boots are in the kitchen. I'm going to have to face whoever it is.

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"There she is," says Mum, and she's got her *please don't do anything appalling* face on, the one where she looks at me with her nostrils slightly flaring and her eyes popped open just a tiny bit too much, and tries to catch my eye.

I do. Not. Want. To. Look. At. Her.

And I especially don't want to look at The Other Person.

So I don't.

I slide through the gap between her chair back and the wall and capture my boots from the back door.

"Grace," Mum repeats as I pull on my boots, "this is Eve. My friend from university I was talking about the other day?"

"Oh."

Mum does a silly little laugh, one I haven't ever heard her do

before, and reaches across the table. She tips some wine into the two glasses that are sitting there. She leans forward and gives one to Eve-from-university, who is sitting, with skinny legs in skinny jeans, and a stripy blue-and-white top and expensive-looking hair. Eve-from-university turns to look at me.

“Hi, Grace. Wow, you look like your mum, don’t you?”

I roll my eyes.

Mum gives me The Look. “Grace is just off to the stables, aren’t you?” She leans forward, putting her chin in her hand, looking at Eve, who is rifling around in her posh-looking handbag.

“Have a good time, darling. Eve’s staying over tonight, as she’s working in the area for a while, so we’ll try not to keep you up too late misbehaving.”

And they laugh loudly, and clink their glasses together, and Eve stands up. She walks across the tiles of the kitchen, as if she has every right to be there, and she opens the top half of the kitchen door, and she leans her body out slightly. Then, looking at Mum, she flips open a cigarette box and pulls one out. She half raises an eyebrow at Mum, who shakes her head almost imperceptibly, eyes wide again. And then Eve lights up, sucking the smoke down deep into her lungs, before turning to blow it back out into the garden.

I leave the room feeling weirdly unsettled, just as Leah is walking back in from the sitting room. Because I feel weird, I sort of shoulder barge her in the doorway so she bangs off, sideways, and yelps angrily. But I don’t turn around. I just grab my coat from the post at the end of the stairs, and leave.