

LOVE
BOMB



JENNY McCLACHLAN



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS

NEW YORK

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

An Imprint of Macmillan

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FOR MY MIGHTY
AND AMAZING GIRLS,
NELL AND FLORA

1.



ing Betty to sleep.

Lined up on her changing table is a box containing eighty-seven “true lilac” envelopes, a fountain pen, and a pad of Vergé de France ivory paper. I pull off a sheet and run my hands over the cool, blank surface. My skin is as pale as the paper. I take out a new envelope and look at Betty lying in her crib.

She’s started blowing dream bubbles, her lips opening and shutting, and her cheeks are a rosy pink. The thin curtain lifts on a breeze and her whisper-fine hair trembles.

I haven’t got much time.

Plumface is 15¹, I write on the envelope. Then I pause. I feel so tired. Through the open window, I hear the neighbors’ boys scream as they jump in their kiddie pool. Then I enclose my words with a big cartoon heart, smooth out the sheet of paper, and start to write . . .



LATER . . .



Holy smoke . . . school actually *started* seven minutes ago, and here I am, playing with Legos. I shake Frosted Flakes into my mouth, glug down some warm milk, and abandon my last birthday presents. I'm actually going to have to *run* to school. At least I get to try out my brand-new Puma sneakers . . . gold stripe!

I fly down the road and cut through Sunrise Senior Living, glancing down every now and then to admire my retro feet.

"Get off the grass!" yells an old lady from her kitchen window. I smile and wave, then run across the parking lot, sending a flock of baby seagulls squawking into the sky.

Clambering up the wall by the art block, I manage to hover on the top for a second before losing my balance and crashing down on the other side. A last-minute roll saves

me from injury, and I lie on the ground, catching my breath, kind of regretting the warm milk.

“Explain yourself, Betty Plum!”

Oh, bum. I know that voice.

“Hello, Mrs. Pollard,” I say sweetly, scrambling to my feet. My head teacher sucks in her breath and grips her clipboard with white fingers. As usual, I have filled her with rage, but for some reason she’s suppressing it. And that’s when I realize she’s not alone. Standing behind her, leaning against the fence, and staring up at the sky is a boy.

At least, I think he’s a boy. He’s almost too gorgeous to be real. It’s like a movie star has dropped onto our playground. My heart goes crazy and I blush. I *never* blush, and the only other time my heart’s felt like this was when I was shocked by a toaster. I look at the new boy again and see pale skin, a mesmerizing mouth, and wild dark hair. Vampire, I think. No, Betty, stupid, vampires don’t exist. He’s just supernaturally hot. My heart pounds as if it’s trying to escape from my body. What’s happening to me?

The new boy yawns, and I gaze at his long, curling lashes. Wow. They are *Beautimus Maximus*. They make me feel faint! And then I realize what this means. Something momentous has just occurred: I like the new boy! This is literally the first time in my life I have fancied someone *real*. Unlike my friend Kat, I don’t wander through school, tongue hanging out, drooling over “the talent” and giving boys scores out of ten . . . until now, that is.

Because New Boy is definitely a ten out of ten.

"I'm still waiting," says Mrs. P., tapping her clipboard with her pen.

I can't speak. I've just FALLEN IN LOVE, and now my mouth won't work. How can Mrs. P. fail to register the epic sexual tension in the air? Doesn't she feel awkward?

"Sorry, ma'am," I finally manage. "As I was running to school, I found an old man out walking in his pajamas, so I took him back to his old folks' home." She doesn't look very impressed, so I add, "He had *bare* feet."

"Hmmm," says Mrs. P., eyes narrowed.

"It's true!" I'm indignant because this did actually happen . . . several weeks ago. "He gave me this to say thank you." I pull off the newsie cap I'm wearing and shove it under her nose.

"Hmmm," she says again, making a few notes on her clipboard. "You may have noticed we have a visitor, Betty." Slowly, oh so slowly, the new boy lowers his eyes from the sky. "This is Tobias Gray, and he will be joining your class."

"Toby," he says, his deep voice tickling my stomach.

"What's that?" Mrs. P. says.

"I'm Toby."

"Right. Make Tobias feel welcome, and join me at lunchtime to discuss"—she wiggles her finger in little circles, indicating my purple nails, bracelets, sneakers, and newsie cap—"everything."

“But, Mrs. Pollard, it’s my birthday!” She is unmoved and turns and walks away.

Toby straightens and looks in my direction. I freeze. His eyes are a startling pale blue and more catlike than Mr. Smokey’s (who is actually a cat). A smile plays on his lips, and the hairs on my arms stand on end. Then, as quick as a flash, he winks at me before following Mrs. P.

I’ve never been winked at before. Not a boy-girl wink. I watch him go. His pants are nonregulation and too skinny, and he’s rolled up his blazer sleeves. Mrs. P. hates us doing that. He’s so tall that as he passes the trash cans he has to duck to avoid being hit by a low-hanging branch that reaches into the playground.

He looks back at me.

My mouth is hanging open, and my hands are pressed into what I believe is my heart area.

He smiles and turns away.

Not cool, Betty. Not cool at all.



Somehow I manage to return to planet Earth and stagger to art. After giving Miss Summons a lame “late bus” excuse, I go and find Kat doing something disgusting with human hair. Bea is nowhere to be seen. “Miss Summons’s son works at a hairdresser’s,” explains Kat, her face wrinkled with disgust as she sprinkles blond fluff onto a pile of white glue. Her perfect shell-pink nails push stray hairs

back into the heart she's making. "Apparently I'm experimenting with the fragility of the human body."

I drop into the seat opposite her. "It looks like you're experimenting with being a serial killer," I say. "But forget about hair, Kat—look at me." I point at my face with both fingers so she can't miss it. "Do I look different?"

She studies me, wrinkling up her nose. "Do you look fifteen and not fourteen?"

"No, but thanks for remembering."

"Are you a little red because Mrs. P. told you off in front of that *lush* new boy? I saw through the window."

"No, Kat, I am a little red because someone has just made my heart explode, and I believe I have *fallen in love*."

"I knew you and Mrs. P. had a special thing going on, always hanging out together at lunchtime and after school—"

"Those are called *detentions*."

"Joke, Betty," says Kat, grinning. "You like the new boy. Of course you do. He's eight and a half out of ten, totally gorgeous"—Kat disappears under the desk—"and so is this!" She pulls out a huge helium balloon. "Happy birthday, Betty! Look, Eeyore and Pooh are hugging Tigger. You're Tigger, I'm Eeyore, and Bea is Pooh."

I tie the balloon to the end of my hair, and we watch as it starts to drift toward the ceiling.

"Hey," she says, "it makes your hair float."

“Thanks, Kat,” I say, and we smile shyly at each other. We are kind of newish friends, so this balloon is special. In our first art lesson, I volunteered to pose for figure sketching and did a series of demented poses. Only Bea and Kat laughed, even though they were *very* funny. I got sent out, but it was worth it because the three of us have been hanging out together ever since.

The timing couldn’t have been better. My two so-called *best friends*, Charlie and Amber, had just abandoned me. At the start of term, Charlie went to live with her dad in Manchester, and Amber’s parents sent her to a private school for a “fresh start,” or possibly just to get her away from me.

“Kat,” I say, pulling the balloon down, “I need your help.”

She pushes her hairy art aside and makes her face look serious. “Go on,” she says.

“So there’s this new boy, Toby, and he looks *just* like a hot vampire.” She nods. She understands—she’s seen him. “He stared at me like he wanted to *devour* me.” Kat raises her eyebrows in alarm. “Let me make this clear: I *want* him to devour me.”

“But, Betty, you’ve never even kissed anyone . . . or had a boyfriend. I’m not sure you’re ready to be devoured.”

“I’ve never *wanted* to kiss anyone, but I think I do now.”

Kat claps her hands with excitement. Finally, she can talk boys with me . . . her best skill. “Hey, Bea must

be showing him around,” she says. “She got told to go to reception.”

“Good. He’s safe for at least one hour,” I say. Unlike me, as Kat so loudly pointed out, Bea has a boyfriend. But I’m still worried. “Soon Pearl Harris and Jess Cobb will sniff him out and pounce on him. He’s the only boy I have ever liked in my entire life, so I can’t let Pearl steal him from me. Plus, I saw him first.”

“I’m not sure you can bag boys,” says Kat. Then she starts rummaging through the hair on the desk in front of her. “Okay, so who am I?” She holds all the hair on her chin and says, “Ohhhh, I wuv you, Toby!”

“Are you me with a beard?”

“Yes!”

Then we have a hilarious art lesson making hairy things.



Bea joins us as we’re leaving. “That new boy is so *rude*,” she says, all shocked and pink and Bea-like. “He followed me around the school, always walking three steps behind, and he kept *sighing*.” She does a pretty good impression of Toby staring up at the sky, rolling his eyes, and doing a bored groan. “So I took him to see the school piglets, but he wasn’t even interested in them.”

“Weird,” says Kat. “They are cute piglets.”

The three of us link arms and head toward math, the

balloon bobbing between us. Even though we're new friends, we're old friends, too. When we were in nursery school, we were in a gang called the Ladybirds, along with Pearl Harris, who has since become a man-eating bully. The Ladybirds drifted apart, but now we're almost back together.

"Bettyass is in lovass with that rudass boyass," Kat tells Bea.

"I can understand what you're saying, Kat," I say. "Your secret ass-language is rubbishass."

"It's coolass," says Kat.

"No, it's notass," I say. "Anyway, he was probably sighing because he was thinking about me." Kat and Bea laugh. I laugh, too, so they know I'm joking.

I'm not joking.

Please, please, god of love . . . Eros? Venus? Whatever, *please* make Toby Gray speak to Betty Plum *today*. It would be the most awesome birthday present ever.



Thanks for nothing, Erosnus.

Despite stalking Toby all of lunchtime, I leave school without exchanging a single word with him. I start to walk home, reminiscing about the way his powerful fingers tore off a Twix wrapper, and just as I'm thinking about the lazy way he played soccer with the juniors, I spot Bill waiting for me outside the grocery store.

“Bill, you freak!” I yell across the road. He looks up and smiles. Bill’s my best friend, even though, as his name suggests, he is *un hombre*. He goes to the Catholic boys’ school, Cardinal Heenan, which is why right now he’s wearing a hideous maroon blazer and a stripy tie. His uniform clashes very amusingly with his wild blond hair and deep tan. Bill’s a surfer, a *windsurfer*, to be precise—apparently there’s a difference—and he spends every available moment on the sea.

I cross the road. Despite his alarming appearance, I’m still willing to be seen in public with him.

“Hey,” Bill says, throwing a Tesco bag in my direction. “Got you a present.”

As we walk toward my house, I look inside the bag. “Yuck! What is that?” I pull out a tiny but very realistic horse mask. “Is it for a baby?”

“It’s a cat mask for Mr. Smokey,” he says. “Now you can have a tiny horse running around your house.” I stroke the mane. “Don’t you like it?” he asks, frowning.

“Are you joking?” I say. “I *totally* love it.” I start to tell Bill about my other birthday presents. “Dad got me a Lego set, as usual, the *Millennium Falcon*, although it clearly says for ages nine to *fourteen* on the box. I need you to help me make it.”

Bill and I turn the corner, and I gasp. Toby is slouched at the bus stop, still hanging out with his new soccer friends. Instantly my heart speeds up, and I feel my cheeks burn.

“Bill,” I say, stuffing the mask back in the bag, “when we go past those boys, promise not to let me look weird.”

“Honestly, Betty, I can’t promise that. Why?”

“Because you see that tall boy with the floppy dark hair?”

Bill scans the group of boys. “The one doing rapper hands?”

“That’s him,” I say. “I want to impress him.”

“Why?”

“Errch, don’t make me spell it out.”

“What are you talking about, Betty?” he asks. We are getting really close to the bus stop.

“Because I *like* him,” I hiss.

“Oh,” says Bill, and he goes quiet. This is a strange moment for us. It’s the first time I’ve ever mentioned liking someone who is real and not a singer or an actor or Flynn Rider from the Disney film *Tangled*. We watch as Toby shows a boy something on his phone.

“You mean you *like* him?” Bill asks.

“Yes.”

“*Him?*”

“Yes!”

“I suppose he does look a little like Flynn,” he says.

“Exactly. Now shut up.” We are walking past the bus stop. “Hey, Toby!” I say. My words come out loud and hysterical. Startled, he looks up from his phone and stares at me. His eyebrows raise and then he smiles. His smile

makes me dizzy with happiness, and I have to say something to him, something that will make him fall in love with me. “Getting the bus?” I ask.

“Er, yeah,” he says, turning back to his friends.

“Getting the bus?” says Bill loudly. “Brilliant!”

I try to smack him with my bag, but he just catches it and pulls me around. Unfortunately, what with all his windsurfing, Bill has powerful upper-body strength, and he swings me deep into a bush.

“I think I look weird,” I say.

“Just a bit,” he says, pulling me out. “Sorry about that.”



Bill is so at home at my place that he’s making toast before the kettle’s even boiled. I go to get some jam and see that Dad’s left a birthday message on the kitchen table—*Hippo Birdday, Betty!*—and I mean he’s *literally* written it on the table. I started this when I was six when I wrote *Daddy smells ugly* with a permanent marker. There’s not much room left now.

“What do you want on your toast?” asks Bill.

I throw him the jar, and he catches it with one hand. Our mums met in the maternity unit at the hospital and instantly became BFFs. They made sure Bill and I did everything together: breast-feeding, naps, potty training, oh, and baths, of course, loads and loads of naked baths.

Obviously, they took hundreds of photos to record the humiliating early days of our friendship.

Then, just before I was two, my mum checked out on the world. It wasn't her fault. She had cancer.

I drop tea bags into mugs and pour in the boiling water. Now Bill and I are the BFFs. "What's this?" I say, picking up my favorite mug, the one with GROOVY GRANDDADS written on it.

"It's definitely a mug."

"No, *this*." I point at a pale pink smudge on the rim. "Is that *lipstick*? I know Dad's been home because he's written on the table." I sniff the smudge. "It smells like lipstick. Bill, do you think Dad dresses up as a woman while I'm at school?"

"Or, maybe," says Bill, licking the jammy knife, "he made a woman a cup of tea?"

"What?"

"Maybe your dad's got a girlfriend."

"No way," I say, and then I start sniffing. "Does the house *smell* different?" I sniff my way into the hallway, then back to the kitchen. "I think it smells like a shop in Brighton. The kind of place that sells crystals or beads." The smell is making me feel funny, like someone's broken in. Our house should smell of curry and paint, not flowery incense.

"Your dad's got a hippie girlfriend, Betty. It was going to happen one day."

I shake my head. "Bill, the idea of Dad sneaking a

pink-lipstick-wearing hippie girlfriend in here and making her a cup of tea in *my* mug on *my* birthday is just”—I try to think of the right word—“wrong. Honestly, we tell each other everything. I’d know if he had a girlfriend. Anyway, we’re happy on our own.”

“Is that why I’m not invited to your birthday tea tonight?”

“Yes! You’d ruin it. It’s perfect with just me and Dad . . . no offense.”

“You’ve got a card you haven’t opened here.” He taps a purple envelope with his knife.

“Oh, that’s Mum’s birthday letter.”

“Sorry,” he says. “I’ve got butter on it.” He tries to rub it off with his sleeve. “Aren’t you going to read it?”

“Not this year.”

“Why? You used to love them.”

“Not really. She wrote them for a baby. They’re all, ‘You can say *bird*, you hate bananas, you did a massive poo.’ . . . They’ve got boring.”

Bill passes me my toast and looks at me with his serious gray eyes. He’s waiting for me to explain. But I don’t want to talk about Dead Mum’s letters, not today. I hardly ever think about the fact that I don’t have a mum, and it’s only on my birthday, when I get one of her letters, that I realize I’m missing something.

“Come on,” I say, picking up my tea. “If we’re building a naked Lego man, we need to get a move on.”

“You said we were making the *Millennium Falcon*.”

“I lied,” I say, leading him into the front room.



After Bill’s gone, I keep working on the naked man’s tiny toes. Suddenly I hear Stevie Wonder’s “Happy Birthday to You” come on in the kitchen, and then Dad bursts into the room singing along and doing a truly shocking dance routine.

He does a couple of circuits of the room, then puts his hands out to me and says, “Dance with me, birthday girl!”

“No way,” I say, but eventually I let him pull me up, and then I dance with him just like I did when I was little, standing on his toes and going round and round in a circle.

For dinner, Dad makes my special feast of macaroni and cheese and baked beans (the baked beans are combined in the cheesy sauce), and then we eat my M&M’s-decorated cake and watch *Jailhouse Rock*. Watching an Elvis film is a birthday tradition, and, as usual, Dad sings along to all the songs while I groan and roll my eyes. I love it really.

Finally, I gather up my presents. I’m ready for bed.

“Good birthday, Plumface?” asks Dad. He’s sprawled on the sofa, still wearing his work jeans.

“The best,” I say, from the corner of the stairs. “I love the Legos.”

“You’re never too old for Legos, right?”

“Right, Dad.”

“I see you got started on it. It’s looking good.”

So funny. If Dad looked closely, he’d notice the *Millennium Falcon* has a lovely pair of brick buttocks.

“Night, Bumface,” I say as a special treat. He loves it when I call him this. Me, Mum, and Dad: Plumface, Mumface, and Bumface. These names take Dad back to such a happy place.

At the last minute, he says, “You saw your letter from Mum?”

“I don’t want it.” My presents wobble in my arms.

“Betty.” He comes to the bottom of the stairs. “It’s the last one.”

“What do you mean?”

“You haven’t got any more birthday letters. That’s the last one she wrote. She only managed to write them up to your fifteenth birthday.”

“Oh,” I say.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“I’m fine, Dad,” I say. Then I struggle my way up the stairs into my bedroom and drop the presents on my bed. I flop down after them.

The last one.

I wasn’t expecting that.

When I was little, I got Dad to read my mum’s first letter to me so many times that now I know it by heart.

*Dear Plumface,
Whoop, whoop . . . you are two! I wonder what you will see today. Daddy, obviously, but maybe you'll get a surprise and see a big ginger cat or the moon or Auntie Kate. At the moment these are your favorite things, and you can say all of them. This is what they sound like: ginge, moo, and ka ka. This last one is funny because it's German for poo! I hope it's sunny and Daddy puts lots of M&Ms on your cake. Don't put them up your nose like last year. . . . If you do, Daddy will have to suck them out again.*

*Love you always,
Mumface xx*

But the last one.

I suppose I thought Dad had loads of them stacked away in his wardrobe and that I'd go on getting them forever. I pick up one of my presents from Dad, a bottle of Wild Bluebell cologne, and I spray some on my wrist. It smells yummy, of flowers and woods, but I feel a bit sick. Perhaps hot chocolate *and* chocolate cake wasn't the greatest idea.

I lie back and turn the blue glass bottle around in my hands. This isn't a usual Dad present . . . could it be one of Dead Mum's suggestions? She has done it before. Along with the letters, she gave Dad a list of present ideas. With perfect timing, Mr. Smokey (*twelfth birthday: gray kitten*)

slips into my room, trots to the bed, and leaps effortlessly onto my stomach.

He pushes his head against my hands until I rub his nubby velvet chin. I stare at the glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling while he kneads his nails into my top. Dad makes the best birthday cakes, my friends make my hair fly *and* throw me in bushes, and just the thought of Toby Gray's smile makes me tingle. I should be purring like Mr. Smokey right now.

But something feels wrong.

A knot of worry is hidden deep inside me.

I shut my eyes and try to discover what it is, but everything gets confused . . . Toby's blue eyes falling on me, tracing a curve of pink lipstick on a white mug, and, resting against the bread bin in the kitchen, the purple envelope with a heart drawn round the words *Plumface is 15!*

"Hey, Mr. Smokey," I say, picking up his paws to get his attention. "Ever fancied being a horse?"

"Meow," he says, which obviously means, *Yes, Mistress, it's my life's ambition!*

2.

The next morning, all my worries disappear when Mr. Simms makes an exciting announcement in study hall.

“Listen up, guys!” He’s perched on the edge of his desk, tie loose, sleeves rolled up, doing his cool-teacher thang. “It’s time for our tenth- and eleventh-grade Autumn Celebration.” A ripple of interest runs round the room. The Autumn Celebration is legendary. Not because of the quality of the performances, but because of the imaginative ways students get inappropriate material into it. Last year, Bea’s boyfriend, Ollie, sang “Da Ya Think I’m Sexy?” with his band and gyrated in Mrs. P.’s face for the entire track. When they signed up, they said they were going to do a folk song about a lonely fisherman.

“This year,” says Mr. Simms, “Mrs. Pollard has

specifically said: *no rude songs*. It's happened too often, and we are onto you." I might be imagining it, but I'm sure he pauses here to stare at me. "If you want to take part, put your name on the music notice board. No auditions. We're all about equality here . . . but definitely *no* rudeness."

I turn to Kat and Bea. "We are going to do *total* rudeness, agreed?"

"Do you remember two years ago," says Bea, "when Beth Fisher sang 'Peacock' and Mrs. P. let it through because she thought it was about wildlife?"

We smile at the memory. "And finally," says Kat, "we can take part because we're sophomores!"

"Let's do some blue-sky thinking, girls," I say, rummaging in Bea's bag for her felt-tips. I write *Rude Ideas* in huge bubble letters across a page in my Dennis the Menace sketchbook.

"Don't be mad," says Bea, "but I can't do anything. I'm going to be jiving with Ollie, and we're only allowed to perform once."

Bea jives, like old-style rock-and-roll dancing, and she's amazing at it. With Ollie, she entered a TV talent show, and since then they jive at every possible opportunity, and sometimes when they really shouldn't be doing it at all. I should have known "Bollie" would be jiving at the Autumn Celebration.

"I do have a *very* rude idea, though," she says gleefully.

I look up from the cartoon rabbit I'm drawing. "My dad's band, the Weirdie Beardies, play hokum, which is old blues music where the lyrics sound all innocent but actually, they're *really* dirty."

"I'm liking it already," I say, abandoning my bunny. "Go on."

"So these songs are all on my dad's last, ahem, 'album.' " She tucks a stray curl behind her ear. "'Let Me Play With Your Yo-Yo,' 'My Pencil Won't Write No More,' and, my personal favorite, 'Hot Nuts, Get 'Em from the Peanut Man.' "

"Yes, I vote 'Hot Nuts'!" screams Kat. Mr. Simms tries to stay cool, but his anxious gulp and glance at the door says a lot.

Suddenly, there's a shriek from the corner of the room. We look over to see Pearl Harris, clapping her hands and screaming in a totally girlie way . . . okay, in a totally *Kat*-like way. Her friends collapse in laughter, then she stares, stone-faced, straight at Kat. A Pearl Harris stare is quite something. She's clearly got it in for Kat at the moment and still hasn't forgiven her for sticking up for Bea last year.

Quickly, I suck in my cheeks and throw her snooty, cold face right back at her, nose stuck up in the air, eyes wide and glaring. She's not quite sure what to do next; after all, I'm imitating her for imitating Kat. . . . Where will this end? She decides to go with mouthing "Skank" at me.

“Now, that, girls,” I say, “is an example of hypocrisy.”

Pink cheeked, Kat carries on, but this time, she speaks quietly. “Betty, I *have* to do a performance as part of my music final. ‘Hot Nuts’ could be it. I’ll play the guitar, which, as you all know, is an awesome skill of mine, and you’ll sing.” She pauses here and looks at me. “You really can sing, Betty.”

“I can, but I don’t. I’m going to play the keyboard, which is a weak skill of mine, and you are going to sing.”

“But I can’t sing and you can.” Kat’s perfectly shaped eyebrows are raised in expectation, and her wide blue eyes are gazing at me. “C’mon, Betty,” she pleads. “It will make up for Jesus.”

Will she ever forgive me for Jesus?

When we were eight, I had a tantrum just before our school nativity and screamed until Miss Hooker gave me the role of Mary and the Jesus doll. Unfortunately, Kat was supposed to be Mary and I was a crappy old star. To be honest, it kind of destroyed our friendship for the next seven years and kick-started the breakup of the Ladybirds.

“You know I don’t like singing, Kat,” I say, making her roll her eyes. My mum was a singer with a band called the Swanettes. She adored the blues singer Bettie Swann and all things sixties, hence my rather *special* name. It’s generally agreed that I’ve inherited her *lovely, beautiful, magical* voice that has the power to reduce my relatives to tears. It’s kind of spooky. “I do like the idea of ‘Hot

Nuts,’” I say cautiously, “but can’t I just play the tambourine or something?”

“‘Hot Nuts?’” says Bea. “‘Hot Nuts’?! No way will Mrs. P. agree to that one.”

“Okay. We do the pencil song,” I say to Kat. “‘My Pencil Won’t Write No More.’ Mrs. P. will think it’s something to do with English.”

“But you *have* to sing so I can play the guitar,” says Kat, looking desperate. “If I don’t do a guitar performance before the end of the year, I have to perform on my own in a sophomore assembly. I’d rather jive than do that . . . no offense, Bea.”

Bea just smiles dreamily and starts to entwine flowers around the large *HOT NUTS* I’ve written across the middle of the page. Kat’s made her think of jive and her *boyfriend*, and it all makes her amazingly happy. I have a little wiggle of my own happiness as I roll the words *boyfriend* and *Toby* around in my head, enjoying how good they sound together. Maybe it’s worth breaking my no-singing rule if it means I get to bewitch Toby with my magical voice.

I make a bold decision. “I will sing hokum at the Autumn Celebration,” I announce. “Sign us up, Kat. We’re a band!”



Kat and I agree to rehearse at her place on Sunday. Then, with the help of Kat and Bea, I spend the rest of the day

stalking Toby. To improve the quality of our surveillance, we go to the sophomore office and tell the secretary that Mr. Simms needs a copy of Toby's schedule. Two minutes later, we know where he is every minute of the day.

I spend the next few days trailing him. Soon I find out his favorite drink is grape soda and that he always gets to PE on time and to English late. On Tuesday I discover he likes playing Fruit Ninja on his phone. To find this out, I have to stand very close behind him in the lunch line. My nose actually *touches* his blazer. I could have licked him. All right, I did lick him, but only a tiny bit and just to make Bea laugh.

I'm so busy loitering outside the boys' locker room on Wednesday that I lose track of time, and Toby, and get to science late. I burst into the room to find the class already paired up and dissecting dead fish. In the corner, I see Kat trying to stick scales in Bea's hair.

"Sit with the new boy," instructs Mr. Brooks, barely glancing up from his computer. Mr. Brooks's words have a powerful effect on me. Heart hammering and body tingling, I make my way to the back of the room. Finally, I'm going to get to speak to Toby again.

He is rocking back on his stool, his arm stretched across the lab table, watching me as I walk toward him. His eyebrows are raised as if he's amused by some secret thing.

"Hi," I manage to say as I sit next to him.

"All right?" he says, tilting his head to one side.

Say something, Betty, say something! “It looks like we’re a couple,” I finally manage. Wrong thing! Abort, abort. “I mean, a pair, partners . . .”

“Life partners?”

“Science-experiment partners,” I say desperately.

“Got it,” he says, smiling. Then he pushes a petri dish toward me. It contains a small green fish that’s speckled with yellow spots. “We need to find a worm in its gills,” he says. I take in his dark lashes and high cheekbones, and I notice a small hole in his top lip where he must have taken out a piercing. Suddenly, I realize I’ve been staring at him for far too long.

He catches my eye and his smile grows.

I blush and look away only to spot Bea and Kat watching us gleefully. Kat mouths something, which might be “Oh my God,” then they both shut their eyes and start French-kissing the air. Bea gets really into it, running her hands up and down her body and sticking her tongue out. It’s quite a sight.

Toby catches the end of their performance. He looks at me and frowns.

“My friends,” I say, quickly picking up a pair of tweezers and poking around in the spongy gray flesh, desperately trying to hide the blush that’s spreading powerfully across my face and down my neck. Suddenly, and inexplicably, I say, “I’m coming to get ya, worms!” in a southern accent. Like a cowboy. This is terrible. I. Must. Stop.

Talking. “Where are those critters?” I mutter, still with the accent. Yikes! I glance over at Toby. He’s started texting under the table, possibly ignoring me.

He puts his phone away, and I show him the little worm I’ve found.

“Nice work, Betty,” he says. The sound of my name on his lips makes me melt. “We’ve got to fill this in,” he adds, reaching across the table, his arm brushing against mine.

“Right,” I say, forcing myself to look at the work sheet he’s holding. It looks like Mr. Brooks has asked one of his children to draw a picture of a fish. All around the blobby image are boxes and arrows.

“I think he wants us to write the names of Muppets in the boxes,” I say.

“Definitely,” says Toby, and he starts writing. I glance over his shoulder and help him out when he runs out of names. In box eight he writes *Vanilla Chinchilla*.

“That’s not a Muppet,” I say.

“Vanilla Chinchilla is the name of a legendary band,” he says, his face lighting up. “*My* band!” On the back of the work sheet, he draws his band’s logo for me and explains the Vanilla Chinchilla “sound.” I watch as his beautiful hands move across the paper.

“Who’s in the band?”

“Well, like, no one except me,” he admits. “But I’m auditioning for a drummer and bassist this afternoon. And I’m looking for a singer.”

"I can sing," I say. The words just fly out of my mouth.

"Yeah?" He looks at me and nods his head. "You should totally audition, B-Cakes. Vanilla Chinchilla is gonna be sick." Okay, so *sick* is a funny word to use, but *B-Cakes* . . . I have a nickname. Toby has given me my very own nickname! He rummages about in his bag. "Here." He passes me a rubbery key ring. "Have a bit of Vanilla Chinchilla merchandise. That's going to be worth something one day." He nods seriously.

"Cute," I say. "It's a mouse."

"No. A chinchilla."

"Eating an ice cream."

"A *vanilla* ice cream."

"Got it," I say. I clip the key ring to my bag. "So how come you moved schools?" I think I'm getting the hang of this talking-to-a-gorgeous-boy thing.

"Because," he says, resting his face on his hand and gazing at me, "I did some *bad* stuff."

"Like putting a piglet in your teacher's car?" I ask, deciding to run some of my own "bad stuff" past him. "Or taking your PE class back to your house for snacks during cross-country? Or henna tattooing the new seventh graders?"

"Just stuff," he says, smiling. "Would you like to see an example?"

I shrug. "Sure."

“Look around you, B-Cakes,” he says, indicating all the students sitting in the classroom. “Who do you hate?”

I study the backs of heads spread before me. I don’t *hate* anyone. Toward the front are Kat and Bea, their faces turned away from me. Suddenly, Kat dissolves in laughter, and I wonder what Bea said. Then my eyes fall on Sam Oakley, who is sitting near them. I don’t really like Sam. “That boy with the black hair,” I say, pointing. “He says ‘Rah!’ in little kids’ faces and laughs at my duck backpack . . . it’s got a big beak.”

“I’m gonna destroy him,” says Toby, picking up the scalpel. I’m quite relieved when he bends over the fish and gently presses the fish’s white eye out of its socket. What he’s doing is pretty gross, but such is the power of his handsomeness that all I really notice is how great his forearms look with his sleeves rolled up.

Next, he walks to the front of the room, scanning the tables as he goes. After picking up a textbook from Mr. Brooks’s desk, he returns to his seat, pausing for a fraction of a second in front of Sam. No one sees what he does next except me. In one swift movement, he drops the eye into Sam’s open water bottle. I don’t know what to think. It’s such a revolting thing to do, but he did it for me. Toby walks back to his seat, smiling a bad smile. When he sees the shocked look on my face, he laughs.

“Put down your pens,” calls Mr. Brooks. “Betty, can you give me your answer to question one?”

I look down at our work sheet. “Fozzie Bear,” I say. Mr. Brooks is not amused and reaches for a “Bad News” sticker to put in my planner. Amazingly, I’m saved by Sam Oakley, who suddenly leaps to his feet and sprays a fountain of water over Mr. Brooks and his stickers. The lab erupts into laughter, and I think of all the times Sam Oakley has laughed at other people, just to make them feel small.

“Nice bad stuff,” I whisper to Toby.



I catch up with the girls at the end of the lesson, and we walk out of school together.

“Like, *wow*, Betty,” says Kat. “He is *into* you!”

“You think so?”

“He really laughed when you said Fozzie Bear,” says Bea.

We stand outside the gates, waiting to go our separate ways. I want to keep talking about Toby, but more than anything I want to be alone so I can run over everything he said to me. “I’ll see you two tomorrow,” I say. “I’m going to go home and lie on my bed and think about Toby . . . and his blue eyes . . . and his muscular chest.”

“*You’ve* got a muscular chest,” says Kat.

I start to walk away. “You’ve got a muscular *face*!” I yell over my shoulder, and then I grin. I grin all the way home as I wonder how I might have got myself into two bands

when I never even wanted to be in one, and I grin as I walk down my road, remembering the way Toby called me B-Cakes.

The sight of my house in the middle of our cul-de-sac, with its purple front door and overgrown yard, makes me even happier. The kids from number seven are climbing on the tree on the shared grass, and they call out to me. I can see their dad playing with his model train set in his garage. Best of all, Dad's yellow bike is resting against the side of our house. Dad's got his own decorating company called Man with a Van . . . but get this, he hasn't got a van. Instead, he's got a bike and a trailer he hitches to it. He says that if he was called Man with a Bike and Trailer, he wouldn't get any business.

I let myself in, find him in the kitchen, and give him a massive hug. I smell coffee and paint thinner, the nicest Dad smell in the world.

"I've got a bit of news," says Dad when I step back. I can tell by the way he says this that he's practiced how it will sound. He's aiming for casual, but he misses, big-time.

"What?" I start to rummage about in the fridge. I think I know what's coming, and I don't want to hear it.

"Just that I'm going out on Saturday night, if that's okay, with a friend." A friend. A friend? Why doesn't he just say it? He means *girlfriend*. I hear the dishes rattle in the sink. "She's someone I met through work," he says. "I painted her yoga studio."

Bill was right, a *hippie* girlfriend. I keep quiet.

“Her name’s Rue.”

Rue? Rue! That is so *not* a name. I know I’m supposed to say something now, something like, “That is so great, Dad!” but I can’t. Instead, I go with staring at a blueberry yogurt in the fridge. I wonder if he was thinking about her when we were eating my birthday cake. . . . Maybe she chose my perfume. I’m throwing it out.

“Look, Betty,” Dad says. I slam the fridge shut and turn to face him. “I knew you’d find this hard. It’s been just the two of us for so long.”

His words make my heart feel like a small, hard stone. I can’t stop the horrible thoughts that pour through me like a film on fast-forward: I see *Rue* curled up on the sofa in my spot, Dad taking *Rue* camping with us, *Rue* making herself breakfast in our kitchen . . . wearing Dad’s painty shirt . . . and *nothing* else.

“It must have been *terrible* for you,” I blurt out. “I didn’t realize you *hated* being with me so much, just the two of us for so long!” Tears appear from nowhere.

“Betty,” says Dad, putting out his arms. Normally I love hugging Dad. He stands there in his faded band T-shirt waiting for me to come to him. Around his wrist he’s wearing two friendship bracelets I made for him when I was seven. He’s never taken them off. Not once.

“I *hate* this, Dad,” I say, turning away and walking out of the room. “I wish you’d never told me!” I run up to my

room, banging the door shut. Then I lie on my bed, hugging Mr. Smokey and making his fur all tufty with my tears. Eventually, he wriggles out of my grasp and sits by the door until I let him out.

I curl up on my bed and stare at the shut door. Now I'm all alone. My eyes fall on a purple envelope sitting on my bedside table. Mum's birthday letter. The last one. I don't know when Dad put it there. I pick it up and feel its weight in my hands. I find a gap in the envelope flap and push my finger into it. Downstairs, I hear Dad's voice talking on the phone. He could be chatting to anyone—Gramps, a customer, one of his mates—but I can't stop myself from thinking *he's talking to her*.

I throw the letter across the room, and it lands in a pile of junk by my wardrobe.

Next, I put on my big green headphones and listen to the Clash. Dad hates this album. I turn the volume up loud until the music makes my insides shake. After a few seconds, I reach over to my ancient hi-fi and pull the earphone cable out.

Now the whole house shakes.

3.

On Saturday morning, Dad goes Poo crazy. That's right, Poo. She is totally asking to be called Poo by having a name that rhymes with it. Usually Saturday breakfast is my favorite time in the week: Dad makes pancakes, I choose some groovy music, Mr. Smokey watches us suspiciously, and Dad comes up with a plan for the weekend. Previous Pancake Plans include:

1. Getting the ferry to France because we realized we were out of Nutella and it's cheaper over there.
2. Taking Mr. Smokey to the seaside so we could see if he liked paddling (negative).
3. Seeing how far we could cycle before it got dark (53.5 miles—Croydon).
4. Visiting six historical properties in one day in an

attempt to take a photo of a ghost (no ghosts, but we ate a lot of cakes).

5. Visiting six historical properties in one day dressed as ghosts (including Nanna and Gramps).

The Poo assault starts the moment the pancakes hit the pan.

“You remember I’m going out tonight?” says Dad.

“Flip it, Dad.”

“So Rue’s going to pop in at six, just to say hello and show her face—”

“Seriously, Dad, they’re burning.”

“—and then we’re going to that veggie Indian place I took you to in Brighton. I think she’ll love it.”

“Have you seen the maple syrup?” I ask, banging the cupboard door shut.

“She’s a pescatarian.”

“I put maple syrup on the shopping list,” I say. “No way am I having honey.”

“*Pescatarian* means she eats fish,” says Dad, putting a new bottle of syrup on the table. “Then we might go to a comedy club, but I’ll be back late. Is that okay?”

“Dad, you’ve got to see this.” I thrust my phone in his face. “It’s a baby sneezing into his birthday cake!”

He takes my phone out of my hands and drops it on the table. “She’s coming over, Betty. I want you to say *hello* and *smile* and be *nice*.”

“Fine,” I say in a normal voice, but I have absolutely no intention of saying hello, smiling, or being at all nice. To punish Dad, I text my friends all through breakfast. He hates this but lets me do it because he’s trying to keep me sweet for this evening.

This is what I send:

Just found out dads got a heinous hippie girlfriend am supposed to meet her tonight YUCK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Here’s what I get back:

Kat: **Babe you wanna come here and go in the sauna?**

Luv Kitkat

Bea: **Poor Betty ☹ Jiving tonight can you come?**

Xxxxxb PS Just made a yum lemon drizzle cake!

Bill: **Big news . . . you ok? Come over to mine after windsurfing?**

None of these suggestions are satisfactory. If I leave the house, Dad might sneak Poo in. Instead, I decide to do something which is definitely very sane and normal. I barricade myself in my bedroom by pushing a chest of drawers in front of the door. I make sure I’ve got supplies—juice, crackers, and a banana—and I also take in a jug in case I need to pee. Then I sit on my bed and wait.

My bedroom matches my mood. Being a decorator’s daughter, I was allowed to paint my room any color I wanted, and I went for blue. My ceiling is Inky Pool 3, my walls are

Skylight, and my door is Blue Lagoon. And it's messy. Mugs, abandoned cereal bowls, magazines, and clothes are scattered across the floor. I'm sitting in a big blue mess.

Just as the sky becomes a fraction darker than Inky Pool 3, a car sweeps to a stop in front of our house. I duck away from the window, turn my music up loud, and bury myself in my bed. As the doorbell rings, I pull a pillow tight round my head so I don't even know if Dad calls me.

After I've checked they've gone, I creep downstairs and make some cheese on toast. Then I sit among the junk in my bedroom and eat my crappy dinner. All I can think about is Dad and Poo nibbling on crispy pakoras, trying each other's sweet stuffed naan, and laughing about what a "terrible teen" I am.

Even thinking about Toby doesn't cheer me up. I've gazed at him a lot this week and even managed to speak to him a couple of times, but nothing has satisfied my monstrous Toby cravings. In fact, the more I have to do with him, the worse they get.

Among the tangle of clothes pouring out of my wardrobe is the newsie cap the old man gave me. I'm sure that wearing it will cheer me up. I tug at it and a landslide of sweaters, scarves, jeans, and bras spill onto the floor. Then I discover I'm holding a sock, not the newsie cap. I rummage through the clothes, and before I know it I'm organizing things into piles. I even have a trash pile and a charity-shop pile. One pile is particularly rectangular and

purple, my Dead Mum letter pile. The deeper I get into my wardrobe, the more letters I find.

It's only when I've put everything back in the wardrobe, hung my three dresses on hangers, and thrown out the trash that I realize I still haven't found the newsie cap. Never mind. I haven't thought about Dad and Poo for at least an hour.

The only things left on the carpet are the letters.

I decide to arrange them in date order. I have fourteen. The first one I ever got has been read so many times, it's falling apart. The letter on the top of the pile is *the last one* and the only one I haven't opened. I turn it over and over. It seems heavier than the others, and the edges are crisp and sharp. Why did she draw a heart on this one?

I put the rest of the letters in the Puma shoe box that's been lying on my floor since my birthday, and then I climb into bed with the unopened letter.

Taking a deep breath, I run my finger under the seal and peel open the envelope. I pull out three sheets of paper.

Dear Plumface,

Today you are 15, but as I write these words, you're one and a half and a lunatic. Seriously, you eat flowers but only yellow ones. The only time you aren't being crazy is when you are asleep, like right now.

I've just done some math in my head—which is impressive as I only scraped a C in my math final—and

I've discovered something frightening. Something as frightening as finding a drooling orc under my bed who is panting and wants to eat me. If, by some miracle, you are unfamiliar with Dad's favorite book, The Lord of the Rings, orcs are sentient beings bred for evil. So I've discovered something terrifying, and if you bear in mind I have terminal cancer, you'll realize I have a good grasp of frightening situations.

A year ago, Dr. Harper told me that in a "best-case scenario" I might have "twelve months to live." Then he did a wincey face that seemed to say, "Don't go booking any vacations for next summer!" Today, my twelve months are up, so it looks like my plan to write you a letter for every birthday of your life was unrealistic. I was going to do 120, in case you eat loads of raw veg and live to be ancient. So far, I've written fourteen.

In the words of Dad when I told him I was pregnant: crapola.

Admittedly, when I decided to write 120 letters, I was taking a lot of drugs (prescribed), and I also decided to release an album and run the New York City Marathon.

I haven't sung with the Swanettes for months, and the last time I ran—from the kitchen to the living room when you bit Dingo's tail—I ended up on a drip. Every day I sleep for a few more hours, and this morning I couldn't eat my toast.

Betty, I love toast.

I am just so tired. I don't know how long I can keep going, even for you, my beautiful, wild baby.

So I have a plan. I'm going to hide some letters up in the attic in my Remington Super Smooth Ladies' Razor box. If you want to read them, you know where to look. If you don't want to read them, that's okay. I wasn't interested in anything my mum had to say when I was 15 (or 18, or 23, or 26). Either way, there's a good razor up there.

These letters are going to be different from the birthday ones. To be honest, I was running out of things to write, and sometimes it was difficult thinking of jolly things to say when my mood was really rather somber. Imagine it: Hey, Plumface, You are three! Just had chemo, and I've got rampant diarrhea, and my mouth is stuffed full of painful ulcers!

The letters in the attic are between you and me. I'm not even going to tell Dad they're up there, but I've made him promise to leave some boxes of stuff up there for you. They will be stories. Stories about me when I was your age. Stories about me doing all the things you are probably going to do. Stories even Dad hasn't heard . . . including the one about my first-ever kiss, history boy, and my scalp spot. There. That's called "a teaser." You see, even though your dad is quite simply the best, he doesn't know what it's like to be 15 and a girl.

For me, the most frightening thing in the world isn't a drooling orc under the bed, or even dying. It's knowing that I am leaving you, my baby, which is really the worst thing any mum can do.

If you would like to read my stories, Betty, they are my 15th birthday present to you.

Love you always,

Mumface xxx

Everything is silent in the room. I sit and stare at the letter. I know what Mum looked like; I've seen loads of photos—huge smile, swinging blond hair (dyed), freckles like mine—but, just now, I almost *heard* her. Usually when I read my birthday letters, they come from the past, but these words were whispered in my ear. Hairs prickle on my arms, and my throat feels sore.

I look up at the ceiling. Are Mum's letters in the attic waiting for me? Part of me wants to rush up there and find out, like I'm doing a treasure hunt, but something holds me back. What if she never managed to write them? What if Dad threw them out by mistake? Instead, I bury myself farther into the bed and read the letter one more time.

I want to have a mum again, just for a few minutes.

4.

I get to Kat's house early and discover her family doing squats in the garden. Seriously. Her mum, dad, and big sister are all exercising in skintight running spandex first thing on Sunday morning.

"Betty!" yells her dad, jogging over to high-five me. His slap is so enthusiastic, I fall off my bike. He helps me up. "We're competing in a Tough Mudder today!"

"Tough *what*?" I say.

"Mudder," says Kat's mum, panting. "It's the hardest endurance test *on the planet*."

Kat snorts. She's appeared at the front door. "It's jogging in *mud*, Betty." She's wearing shorts and a bra and holding a can of Coke. Kat may not share her family's love of exercise, but she certainly shares their love of hanging out naked. She claims they are "physically at ease" because

her mum's Swedish, but her dad also seems to be a fan of nudity, and he's from Portsmouth. Last time I was round, he was doing tai chi in *very* loose yoga pants.

"Any chance I can persuade you and Kat to join us?" he asks. He straightens up and then starts touching his toes. "There were still a few places yesterday. . . ."

"As if, Dad," says Kat, rolling her eyes. "I told you. We're rehearsing."

"Don't whine, Kat," he says. His head appears between his legs. "Kids whine."

"Whatever," she says, turning round. "Come on, Betty. Let's leave these losers to it."

Her mum laughs as if Kat's just said the cutest thing, and then they all pile into a Range Rover the size of my bedroom.

"Help yourself to cinnamon buns, Betty," calls her sister as they pull out of the driveway. "I baked them this morning."

Kat's family is awesome. I leave my bike by the front door and follow Kat inside. I crept out early this morning, making sure I didn't wake Dad, then cycled along twisty lanes into the countryside. The crisp air and perfect blue sky made me forget all about Dad and Poo.

Kat's house is made entirely of pale wood and decorated in shades of white. I feel as if I make the place messy just by being in it, like an inky smudge on a sheet of paper. I run my finger along the edge of a smooth vase shaped like

a drop of water and stare at a beautiful picture of the sea. Kat's mum painted it.

Kat settles in the den, slumped in a huge beanbag with her guitar across her knees. She's pulled on a sweatshirt. "Ready to do this, Betty?" she asks, strumming a few chords. "Let's nail this pencil song!"

And we do. Kat starts playing—she's obviously been rehearsing—and I pull out my lyrics. Right from the start, we sound good together. We practice for ages, having a few cinnamon bun/Toby analysis/jukebox breaks. That's right, Kat has a *jukebox* in her den, along with a pool table, a dance pole (her mum's), and, tucked away behind some sort of indoor tree, a sauna. This is the only den I have ever been in, but I think *den* must mean tons of cool stuff in one room.

The two of us make a good band, and by lunchtime we've come up with an arrangement we like.

"Let's run through it one more time," says Kat. "Then we can go into town and get KFC."

By now we're both standing, and I belt it out. Kat's plugged her guitar into an amp and starts improvising. To be honest, we forget all about the weenie jokes and get into the song. It's full of soulful chords, and the pitch suits my voice. Kat ends the song with a mad crescendo of strumming, and we do lots of whooping and *yeahs*!

After grabbing a couple of juices from the mini fridge, we crash on the beanbags.

“We weren’t bad, were we?” she asks.

“Possibly, just possibly,” I say, grinning at her, “we were *good*.”

I roll off the beanbag and wander over to the baby grand. Did I mention the piano? Music is scattered across it. Kat’s sister is an advanced piano player, which kind of puts Kat’s intermediate guitar playing to shame. Suddenly, I spot a faded yellow music score. “No way!” I say, picking it up. “‘Then You Can Tell Me Goodbye’ by Bettye Swann. My mum and dad named me after this singer.”

“I can play that,” says Kat, coming over.

“My mum was singing this song when Dad first saw her.”

“Tell me,” says Kat, sitting on the piano stool. “I love getting-together stories.”

“Well, my mum was doing a mini tour with her band, the Swanettes, during her college vacation.” Kat is watching me, wide-eyed. “So it’s this warm summer’s evening, and the Swanettes are singing at this pub, deep in the countryside and—get this—the pub is called the Falling Star.” Kat sighs deeply. “My dad is sitting in the garden when he suddenly hears this beautiful voice drifting out on the rose-scented air. He follows the voice inside and discovers it belongs to an angel, otherwise known as Lorna. Their eyes meet, and she sings the song to him, as though no one else is in the room. Afterward, he buys her a pint of Harveys and some pork rinds, and

they talk for hours as the sun sets over the fields . . . and the rest is history.”

“That is soooo romantic,” says Kat. “Except for the bit about the pork rinds. C’mon, let’s recreate it.” Kat sits down on the piano stool and opens out the music on the stand. She picks at the strings on her guitar, then starts to play the song that is so familiar to me I can’t remember a time when I haven’t known the words. It seems only natural to join in.

“Wow,” says Kat, after the final note has faded out. “Are you sure you don’t want to sing that at the concert? That was good, Betty. “

“No way,” I say. “My dad would have a cow. It would be like the ghost of Mum had just been zapped onto our school stage.”

“We’d better stick with the willy song, then.”

We grin at each other, and I think how great it is to be here, with Kat, talking about willies. I gaze around the room. The walls are covered with photos of her mum from her modeling days in the eighties. You can see where Kat gets her cheekbones and lanky legs from.

“Have you ever seen such ugly clothes?” asks Kat.

“Is that a *plastic* dress?” I ask.

“Yep,” says Kat. “And look at this. It’s a *gold* shell suit.”

“What’s a shell suit?”

“Like a tracksuit made of silky underwear material. Mum got loads of freebies from designers. There’s a room

upstairs full of them: lace gloves, rah-rah skirts, Keds, boleros, shortalls, leg warmers. . . .”

“I don’t know what all those things are.”

“She’s even got *ladybird* stilettos. C’mon. I’ll show you.”



Two hours later, we’re heading toward Bea’s house, eating fries and dressed as eighties supermodels.

“Fashion!” I yell, and Kat spins round and strikes a pose. Each time she does this, her poses get weirder. This time she’s crouched down on the ground, pointing her milk shake up at the sky.

Somehow, Kat’s managing to carry off the eighties look better than me. She’s wearing a neon-pink jumpsuit, leg warmers, and the übergorgeous stilettos. Essentially, she looks like an eighties supermodel. I’m wearing gold rapper pants, a sweater covered with colorful licorice, and red pixie boots. Essentially, I look like a loser. Kat took some persuading—unlike me, she isn’t familiar with the joys of parading around town in fancy costumes—but she knew she looked good and couldn’t resist showing off her new look.

“Do you think Bea will want to hear our song?” she asks.

“Definitely,” I say. I should add that Kat also has her guitar strapped to her back, and I’m riding my bike, very slowly. “It was her idea in the first place.”

“We could go and sing to Bill,” says Kat. I look sideways at her. She grins, then takes a long suck of her milk shake.

“Why do you want to show Bill?”

“C’mon, Betty. Bill’s cutesome. He’s a nine out of ten . . . maybe more.” She gives me a shove, making me wobble on my bike.

“*Nine* out of ten? No way. Seven would be generous . . . and what’s *cutesome*?”

“*Cute* plus *handsome* equals *cutesome* . . . equals Bill.”

“Nope. . . .” I picture Bill’s serious face, his messy sun-bleached hair. “I don’t see it, Kat.”

“Then you’re blind.”

“Fashion!” I yell, and Kat spins round, then peers at me over her shoulder, three french fries sticking out of her pouting lips.



We ring Bea’s doorbell and smile in anticipation. Although her house is in darkness, we can hear jivey music playing somewhere. Suddenly, there’s a patter of footsteps, and a small pink shape appears behind the glass. The mail slot is poked open by Bea’s little sister.

“Who that?”

“Hi, Emma,” says Kat, crouching down. “It’s us. Can you open the door?”

“Okay,” she says, then disappears. Several minutes

later, she returns with a collection of books. She starts to build them into a tower.

I shove Kat out of the way. Three-year-olds have no sense of urgency. “Hurry up, Emma,” I say through the mail slot. “We look really stupid and it’s cold.”

“I’m too small,” she says. I watch her add a few more books to her teetering pile, and then she climbs up. “That’s better. I can do it now!” Her hand reaches toward the door handle, but then she stops. “Uh-oh.”

“What?”

“I need to pee!”

And she’s gone again. When she finally reappears, she’s dressed as Iron Man.

“You look tough,” I say when she finally lets us in.

“You look stinky,” she replies. Ouch. “Bea and Ollie are in the kitchen,” she says as she scampers back upstairs, karate chopping the banister and yelling, “Die! Die!”

Kat and I head toward the thudding of “Bim Bam Baby.” As we get closer, we can hear panting and gasping. Now, if it were any other teenage couple behind that door, we might have knocked, but it’s just Bollie—so we walk straight in.

Ollie is holding Bea up in the air in a position I can only describe as a double-hand butt grab. Next—I can’t really tell how it happens—Bea is sliding between Ollie’s legs and popping out the other side. The music stops and we clap. Bea looks so happy, her rosy cheeks could burst. Even

though she's been applauded loads of times for jiving, she still loves it.

"What do you think?" asks Kat, spinning round.

"You look so cool," says Bea, examining the stilettos.

"Oh no, you don't," says Ollie, laughing.



Soon Bea and Ollie are sitting on the sofa with Emma wedged between them. Kat and I are ready to perform.

"Okay, Emma," I say, "this is a song about a pencil that doesn't want to do any more writing." I glance over at Kat and she nods. I take a deep breath, swallowing the last of my singing-aloud fears. Kat hits the first chord and we're off.

It doesn't sound quite as amazing as it did in Kat's den with her amp and the big acoustics, but our audience seems to enjoy it, and when we finish, Emma yells, "Again, again!"

We play it one more time, then Bollie show us a few new moves, and Emma sings a song about a "naughty gruff" which may or may not be about the Gruffalo. We all agree it should definitely be in the Autumn Celebration.

It's starting to get dark when Kat and I head home. We stand at the edge of the park, ready to go our separate ways.

"Thanks for singing with me, Betty."

"It was loads of fun," I say. We look at each other. It's so good to be back where we were before I stole Jesus. "Hey, I've got a question for you, Kat. It's a bit surprising."

“Go on.”

“How do you kiss?”

Kat laughs. “You’re right. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“It’s just I think there’s a chance that I might kiss Toby one day,” I say, “and I don’t want to look stupid.”

“My sister told me that you just shut your eyes and let it happen. But you could practice on an apple with a wedge cut out of it.”

“Really? That doesn’t sound right. Isn’t that just eating an apple?”

“You don’t eat it—you *kiss* it. Mum recommended it. She’s kissed loads of people, so she should know.”

“It sounds a bit crunchy,” I say, pushing off from the curb. “Later, Kat!” She does a final “Fashion!” pose, and I cycle down the road. I can smell wood smoke, and my breath puffs out in front of me. “I’m going home to snog an apple!” I yell over my shoulder. Then the road dips, and I zoom down with a massive “Wahooooo!”

5.



The next morning, I “accidentally” run into Toby outside his homeroom.

“Oh, hi,” I say, all surprised.

“Well, hello, Betty.” He leans against the wall and fixes his eyes on me. We are standing close enough for me to notice that he has a darker circle of blue around the edge of his pale iris. I try hard not to stare. “You need to come to the hall after school to audition for Vanilla Chinchilla,” he says.

“Really?”

“You’ll be perfect. I’ve asked a few other girls to come along.” *Other girls?* What does a few mean? Two other girls? Seven? Thirty-four? “Don’t worry,” he says, resting his hand on my arm, “I know you’ll rock, B-Cakes. The moment you said you could sing, I wanted you in my band.” He smiles and everything inside me trembles; then he lets

go of me and strolls into his classroom, leaving me with a deliciously tingly arm.

I want to follow him, grab his hand, and put it right back on my arm, but even I have some dignity. I drift toward my homeroom, and slowly my arm returns to normal. My body has had a life of its own recently. Just this morning, when I walked past the attic hatch, the hairs on my arms prickled as I thought of Mum's letters hidden up there, and then, at breakfast, a hole appeared in my stomach when Dad made me promise to go to Pizza Express with him and Poo on Wednesday. I give my arm a final shake, and Toby's touch disappears.



I manage to make my body behave until the end of the day. I don't mention the audition to Kat or Bea—it feels wrong to be trying to get into another band when I've only just formed one with Kat. But as I pull open the heavy door to the hall and push my way through velvet curtains, I wish one of them was with me.

The rock music hits me immediately, and so does the sight of Pearl, standing on the stage next to Toby and belting out the words to a song I know but don't particularly like. Pearl can sing and she knows it. Spotting me, she stares at me, and a smile creeps over her face. She seems to be wearing more makeup than ever these days—her eyes are covered in black mascara and eyeliner, and her hair is

a tangled mess. Unfortunately, she looks amazing and, of course, she knows it.

I walk toward the stage, my eyes following the long ladder that runs up Pearl's black tights and disappears under her rolled-up skirt. Standing next to Toby, his hair flopping into his eyes as he thrashes his guitar, she looks like she belongs in this band. She looks like she belongs with Toby—two dark angels making a dark noise together . . . oh, and Frank and Dexter from the eleventh grade.

No one else is in the hall. It looks as if Pearl and I are the only ones auditioning. The song finishes and, being the only member of the audience, I feel I have to clap. I don't put much effort into it. "Hi, Sweaty," says Pearl into the microphone. Her words echo around the hall.

So *funny*. Pearl likes to make out that I smell. That's her thing with me. Pearl's got a thing with most girls in our school.

"Is it my turn?" I say, throwing my bag on a chair and standing as tall as my yellow Dr. Martens will let me. *Bring it on, Pearl*, I think as I walk up the stairs at the side of the stage. If I wasn't sure about being in the band when I walked into the hall, now I want it more than anything.

Pearl and I swap places, shrinking away from each other as we pass by Dexter's drum kit. I take my place next to Toby, and she slumps in the front row and gets out her phone.

“Here you go, B-Cakes.” Toby smiles and hands me a sheet of lyrics.

I wave it away. “I know them.” Even though I don’t like the song, I’ve heard it often enough to pick up the words. I can always do that with songs. Staring straight ahead, I take a deep breath and try to feel soulful and confident. The last time I sang on a stage, I was in the Brownies and I was dressed as a pumpkin . . . and I was rapping.

The band starts. They’re shaky, but Toby holds them together. Dexter’s passionate drumming thuds through my body, and Toby nods me in. Facing the back of the hall, I start to sing. Pearl’s *sweaty* comment burns in my voice, and all I think about is beating her and wiping the smile off her face.

The song stops abruptly, although Dexter can’t resist finishing with a series of drum fills. Toby takes the mike off me. “Betty’s in,” he says, looking down at Pearl. Then, as an afterthought, he adds, “Sorry.”

I can’t resist it. Looking down at her, I smile and do our Ladybird wave—thumb tucked in and four fingers wiggling. Pearl invented that wave, and we used to do it to each other all day, driving our nursery teacher mad. Pearl stands up, grabs her bag, and strides down the center of the hall, one finger raised behind her back. That’s not our Ladybird wave.

She lets the door slam shut after her, and my hand

drops down. My feeling of satisfaction evaporates into the huge, echoing room.

“You totally rocked,” says Toby, looking slightly amazed. The rest of Vanilla Chinchilla nods enthusiastically, Frank’s red curls bobbing up and down. “Where did that big voice come from?”

“Me!” I say, laughing.

“Well, look after it because our first rehearsal is at my place on Friday.”

As Dexter and Frank pack up, Toby walks me off the stage. “We could hang out together afterward,” he says, “but only after we’ve rehearsed. We’ve got a lot of work to do if we’re going to be ready for the concert.”

“What?” I pick up my bag, an icy feeling growing in my stomach. “We’re doing the Autumn Celebration?”

“That’s why we need to rehearse.” He leans against the back of a chair and studies me. The icy feeling spreads until I start to feel sick. I know the rules of our school performances: We can perform only once in the evening.

“What’s the matter?” Toby glances to the back of the hall, to the door Pearl has just stomped out of.

I have to choose: sing with Kat, or sing with Toby. If I sing with Kat, Pearl gets Toby. I saw them together. I know that’s what would happen.

I look up at him. “Nothing,” I say with a smile. “Just looking forward to Friday.”

As I walk down the central aisle, my stomach churns,

big-time, and part of me seems to drain into the scuffed wooden floor.

Kat is going to kill me.



I walk home in the rain. Black leaves stick to my boots, and the street lamps leave oily reflections on the pavement. A couple of times, I go to call Kat, but I can't do it. I can't think of the words that will make what I've done okay, because it's not okay.

When I get to my room, I turn off my phone and shove it deep in my bag. Then I let myself into a cold house. Dad's not in. He hasn't left a message, and it doesn't feel like he's been back all day. I love it when I get home and hear his music blaring out from the kitchen, the crash of plates as he unloads the dishwasher and the smell of fresh coffee. I can't remember the last time I smelled coffee when I walked in.

The house feels very empty.

It's true when I say I don't miss my mum. How could I? I can't remember anything about her. But sometimes I feel as if something is missing from my life.

Without realizing what I'm doing, I head upstairs and stare at the attic hatch. My heart thuds. What do I think is up there? A ghost Mum sitting on a suitcase, waiting for me to appear? I get the silver pole from the top of Dad's wardrobe and use it to twist the attic hatch open. After clipping

the ladder in place, I climb up, the metal icy and damp under my fingers.

Just as I stick my head into the dark space, a *tip tap* makes me turn round. Mr. Smokey has his paws on the bottom rung of the ladder and is staring up at me.

“Go away,” I say. “Cats can’t climb ladders.” But then I realize it would be nice to have him up here, so I go back down, scoop him under my arm, and carry him up.

The dim yellow light reveals paint cans, toys, and overflowing bags piled high in every inch of space. I put Mr. Smokey down, and he disappears in a flash. I go to Mum’s corner, treading over Disney Rollerblades and a pile of Dr. Seuss books. The things in Mum’s part of the attic are more organized, and each box is labeled with her familiar handwriting. I quickly find what I’m looking for: a pastel blue box with a photo of a lady caressing her silky legs.

I sit on a trunk of Swanette costumes and peer inside the box. At first, all I can see is the electric razor, smooth and white like an egg, but then I spot the familiar lilac envelopes tucked behind the polystyrene packaging. I pull out a handful of letters.

There are four, but they are thick, and each has a different title. There’s *The one where I have my first kiss*, *The one where my mum gets a boyfriend*, *The one where I fall in love*, and, at the bottom of the pile, *The one where my heart is broken*.

I guess Mum was a *Friends* fan. I love *Friends*.

Rain falls on the roof, and downstairs I hear the central heating click on. It's so cold up here, I can see my breath. I long to hear Dad's key in the front door, but at the same time I don't want to know that he's been with Poo, and I definitely don't want him to find me up here. Mum's right: This is between her and me.

I hold *The one where my mum gets a boyfriend*, but I don't open it. I'm almost scared about what's inside, and the shadowy attic and howling wind aren't helping.

Suddenly, Mr. Smokey lands on my lap, squashing the letter. I scream and then laugh. "You scared me," I tell him.

I climb down the ladder with Mr. Smokey and the letters. I still have a cold ache inside me when I think about what I've got to tell Kat and the fact that Dad's probably doing a "downward dog" with Poo, but the ache has shrunk from the size of a pineapple to the size of a pear.

"Come on," I say to Mr. Smokey, rubbing my face against his pointy chin. "Let's give Dad a heart attack and unload the dishwasher. I think we can do it in two minutes and beat his personal best."