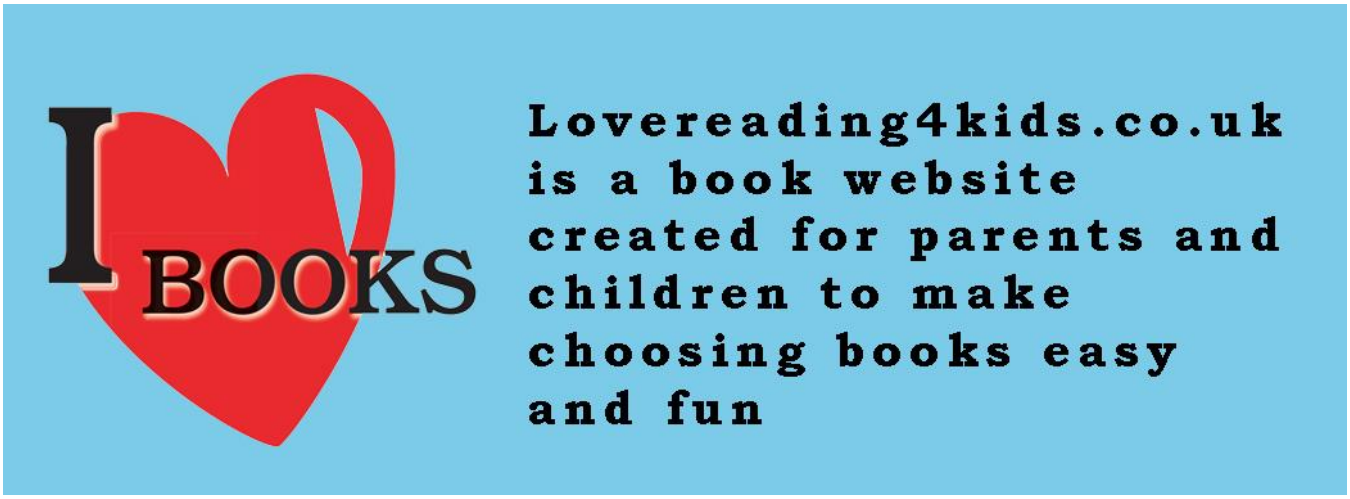

Opening extract from

A Quiet Kind of Thunder

Written by

Sara Barnard

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Millie Gerdavey cheated on her boyfriend again.

But it's OK. No one needs to know, right? And, no, she's not going to *tell* Jack ('*Obviously!*'), and she doesn't want to *be* with Leo ('That muppet?'). It was just a one-time thing. Again.

Imagine the scene where I found out this news. Millie is squashed up next to me on the bench, a tissue wedged in her fist, perhaps, already soaked with her tears and snot. She is all sobs and whispers.

'I'm so glad I have you to talk to,' she says.

It's a nice scene, isn't it? Two friends sharing a secret on the first day of school. Kind of natural. What could be more normal than the heads of two girls bent together, whispering secrets, one in tears, one reassuring? Nothing.

But, oh. See that other girl sitting on the bench? The weedy thing whose shoulders are a little hunched? The one who has her hair in front of her face and a book in her lap that she's not actually reading?

Yeah. That's me. The two girls are nothing to do with me, and they are having this intensely private conversation in front of me as if I am entirely invisible.

At one point, the second girl, whose name is Jez, darts a look at me then says to Millie, 'Um, do you think she heard?'

'Oh, her.' Millie tosses her hair dismissively. 'It's OK. She won't say anything.'

'How do you know?' Jez asks, a little nervously.

'Watch this,' Millie says, and my heart seizes. I grip the sides of my book a little harder. 'Hey! Hey, Steffi!'

Go away. Go away go away go away.

'Steffiiiiii.' Millie's voice has gone sing-songy. 'Steffi Bro-o-o-ns!' She elongates my surname so it somehow takes up four syllables. 'See?' Her voice has suddenly returned to normal. 'She's as dumb as a pane of glass.'

At least I didn't cheat on my boyfriend, I would say, if I could. But it's probably a good thing that I can't at that moment, because it would be a pretty terrible retort. In order to be cheating on my boyfriend, I'd have to actually have one in the first place. And I very much do not.

'She could put it on the internet,' Jez ventures.

Millie is suddenly leaning forward, her head looming closer to mine. 'Brons, you won't put any of this on the internet, right?'

I have a sudden vision of myself sitting at my laptop, sending a tweet out into the ether, **'MILLIE GERDAVEY CHEATED ON JACK COLE #again #lol'** while I laugh maniacally.

'Brons.' There is a poke at my shoulder and I jump. 'Oh my *God*.' I can hear the sneer in her voice. 'Why are you so weird? It's literally me. Millie. Like, known you since we were both five?' It's true she's known me since I was five, but still she persists, so she clearly doesn't know me very well. 'Remember? You peed in my paddling pool?'

That does it. My head snaps up and I glare at her. Words fizz up on my tongue, then dissolve into nothing.

She grins at me. 'There you are! I know you won't say anything.' She winks, and I want to smack her. She throws her head back to look at Jez again. 'Steffi is a pal.' As she stands up, she gives my shoulder a faux-friendly nudge. 'See you later, pal.'

When they've gone, I am finally, blissfully alone. I allow myself the quietest of mutters: 'You peed in *my* pool, Millie.'

And then I feel slightly better.

*

I'm in the common area outside sixth form, because Mr Stafford, my new head of year, has asked to see me before the first assembly. I am expecting the usual start-of-school pep talk/introductions I've had to endure at Windham for the last five years. I still haven't figured out whether they're meant to be for my benefit or theirs.

A few minutes after Millie and Jez leave, the door to Mr Stafford's office opens and he strides through it, already beaming. I can only assume he practises the Stride & Beam in front of the mirror.

'Stefanie!' he says, his hand coming towards me. For one horrifying second I think he is going to use it to pull me chummily to my feet, but – thank God – he just wants to shake hands. *Thank God*. Calm down, Steffi.

I try and smile back. I start to say, 'Good morning, sir,' but the words die in my mouth halfway through 'morning' when I realize Mr Stafford isn't alone. Dammit. I was so proud of myself for mustering actual words in front of a teacher, already thinking it was a good sign for this year, the first year of sixth form, the year I'm meant to show I can do basic things like talk in front of teachers. I want to go to uni one day, and – according to my parents – I won't ever be able to do that if I can't even talk in school.

Mr Stafford is still beaming. 'Stefanie, this is Rhys.' He gestures to the boy at his side, who is smiling at me.

What fresh hell is this? Now they're parading strangers in front of me to mock my inability to speak in front of them? I can feel a familiar choking panic start somewhere in my stomach. My cheeks are starting to flame.

I look at Mr Stafford, knowing my expression is hovering somewhere between kicked puppy and Bambi.

'Oh,' he says hastily. 'Oh, it's OK. Rhys is deaf.'

My eyebrows shoot up.

'Oh!' he says again, looking mortified. 'I didn't mean . . . I meant it's OK for you to . . . I didn't mean it's OK to be . . . though of course there's nothing wrong with being . . .'

Rhys, standing slightly to the left of Mr Stafford, is waiting patiently. He is still looking at me, but his smile has faded slightly and he looks a little confused. Who is this gormless girl? he is clearly thinking.

'Gosh,' Mr Stafford mutters. 'What a start to the year. Let me try again. Rhys –' He claps a hand on Rhys's shoulder, then gestures to me. As he does so, he turns his head so he is looking directly into Rhys's face. 'This is Stefanie,' he says, loudly. 'STEF-AN-EEE.'

Oh dear Lord.

Rhys's face breaks into a warm, if slightly amused, grin. He looks at me, then raises his hand into a wave. **Hello.**

I wave back, automatically. **Hello.** I let my hands fall into the familiar patterns. **My name is Steffi.**

Nice to meet you. Rhys taps two fingers to his right ear. **Deaf?**

I shake my head, touching the tip of my finger first to my own ear and then to my mouth. **Hearing.** I hesitate, trying to figure out how to explain myself. I could fingerspell 'selective mute', but he probably doesn't know what that means, and it's not really even accurate any more. **I can't** – I begin, meaning to say that I can't talk, but that's not accurate either, because I *can* talk, physically speaking. Oh God, both Rhys and Mr Stafford are staring at me. I can feel my face flaming. I finally sign, a bit lamely, **I don't talk.** Which is the worst response ever.

But Rhys smiles, raising his eyebrows a little as if in appraisal, then nods, and I'm so relieved I smile back.

'Wonderful,' Mr Stafford says, looking like he wants to pass

out with relief. 'Wonderful. Steffi, Rhys is starting at Windham sixth form today. I thought it would be a good idea to introduce the two of you. Rhys will have a communication support worker helping him out, of course, but I thought it would be nice for him to meet a fellow student who knows sign language. So he can feel more at home.'

Oh, he looks *so* pleased with himself. It makes me want to both hug and slap him. I want to tell him that I only know the really basic stuff, but the ability to speak has completely deserted me right now, so I just lick my lips nervously and nod along. The whole this-is-the-year-I'll-speak-at-school thing is really not going very well so far.

'I suppose I'll have to learn some sign language too, won't I, Mr Gold?' Mr Stafford turns his head to Rhys only as he says the final bit of this sentence, clearly oblivious to the fact that Rhys will have completely missed all that came before it.

But still Rhys nods cheerfully, and I feel a sudden fondness for him. He must be all right if he lets Mr Stafford act like such a well-meaning buffoon without making things awkward for him. I wish I could be more like that, but I make things awkward for everyone. People just don't know what to do with someone who doesn't speak.

I'm curious about this new boy and my mind floods with questions. What brings you to Windham? What are you studying? Do you like white grapes or red grapes? Would you rather have hair that won't grow or a beard you can't shave? What's your favourite sign? But the thought of speaking these words out loud makes my stomach clench, and my BSL skills were always rudimentary at best. Apparently, with Rhys, I can be useless in two languages.

So I just carry on smiling nervously and wait for Mr Stafford to fill the inevitable silence. He does, bless him. 'Well, on to assembly,

then, the two of you. Steffi, what's the sign for assembly?'

I'm about to obediently make the sign when a spark of mischief lights from nowhere in my mind. I turn to Rhys, keep my expression completely deadpan, then sign **Welcome to the hellmouth**. Rhys's whole face lights up into a surprised grin. Oh yeah, strange new boy. The silent girl is FUNNY. Who knew?

'Excellent, excellent,' Mr Stafford says, oblivious. 'Let's go, then.' He Strides & Beams off down the corridor and I follow, perhaps slightly reluctantly, with Rhys at my side. We walk from the sixth form block all the way to the hall in silence, but for once it's not because of me, silent, awkward Steffi. It's an expected silence. Comfortable. It's nice.

The hall is full of sixth formers, both upper and lower sixth. They're sprawled on the floor and chairs, talking loudly and easily, as naturally as breathing. Do they know how lucky they are? I catch myself wondering. Do they? Of course not. It's probably the same thing someone with cystic fibrosis thinks about me. I guess taking normal for granted is part of being human.

'People, people,' Mr Stafford says, jovial. 'This isn't your living room.'

No one moves.

'Sit on the chairs!' Mr Stafford orders, more sharply and with more than a little frustration in his voice. 'That's what they're there for.'

He walks to the front of the collection of chairs, gesturing to Rhys to follow him. I stand there for a second, dithering, then slide into a vacant seat and slouch down a little.

'Well, now that you're all settled,' Mr Stafford says pointedly, 'let's begin the new year. Welcome back, upper sixth. And welcome to sixth form, everyone else. Most of you have spent

your secondary years at Windham, of course, but we do have some new faces joining us this morning.'

I feel a sudden pang, so sharp it almost makes me gasp. It's part panic, part loneliness. This is the first time I've ever sat in a first-day-back assembly without my best friend. I ease my phone out of my pocket and peek at the screen.

'Come up to the front if you're one of those new faces,' Mr Stafford is saying.

Tem:
How's it going?!
I almost miss those manky halls ;) xxxxx

I grin down at the screen, flooded with affection and relief. OK, so Tem isn't here with me. It's going to be hard. But we're still connected.

Steffi:
Crap. I miss you.
COME BACK!!!! xxxx

'Twelve new students!'

I glance up, taking in the slouching, affectedly disinterested teenagers now standing beside Mr Stafford. None of them looks like they could be a Tem replacement. That's because there is no one like Tem in the world.

Tem:
Just SAY THE WORD, Brons!
Go on. SAY IT. xxx

My eyes slide along the line until they snag at the face of the one

person who is looking back at me. Rhys. When our eyes meet, he grins. I can't help it; I grin back.

Steffi:

DON'T MAKE MUTE JOKES ON MY FIRST DAY ALONE AT SCHOOL! You MONSTER! xxxx

Tem:

You are awesome. Your voice is like a flowing stream on a warm spring day. No one in the world is youer than you. Etc. SPEAK YOUR TRUTH, EVEN IF YOUR VOICE SHAKES!!!

Actually, scrap that. Your voice is so awesome I just want to keep it to myself. DO NOT TALK, Steffi. That's an order.

I'm bent over my phone, smiling at the screen as if Tem is looking right back at me, when my skin starts to prickle. I look up slowly, pre-emptive dread already sliding down my back, and *everyone is looking at me*. Horror of horrors . . . *everyone*.

Panic explodes in my chest, sending sparks through my bloodstream, down my veins, into the tips of my fingers, electrifying my hair. I try very, very hard not to vomit.

'So just speak to Stefanie if you'd like to learn any BSL,' Mr Stafford, devil incarnate, is saying. And then he *points at me*. As if he expects me to stand up and give a speech. Shockingly, I do not.

Someone mutters, '*Speak* to Steffi?' and a low laugh ripples across the room.

'Or you could just talk to me,' Rhys says. His voice is a surprise, thick and slightly drawled, like he's speaking with his mouth full. The volume is slightly off, a little too loud at the beginning and then fading towards the end. He grins. 'I don't bite.'

The faces that had been turned to me all jerk towards him, meerkat-like, when he speaks.

'This is hello,' Rhys adds. He lifts his hand into the BSL wave of greeting. He puts a hand to his chest. 'Rhys.'

And to my total surprise almost everyone in the room lifts their hand in response. He has the sixth form saying hello to him and I am simultaneously impressed and jealous. And also, weirdly, a bit betrayed. *He* can talk? That's just not fair, is it?

'Wonderful,' Mr Stafford says. He looks thrilled. 'Now we have the introductions out of the way, let's get on to housekeeping matters.' He claps his hands in a way that makes me think that's how he thinks heads of sixth form are supposed to behave. 'The common room is open to you at all hours of the day, though we ask that you work to keep it clean and tidy. Any breakages will be paid for.' He waits for a laugh, which doesn't come. 'Your free periods are yours to spend as you please, though we do advise that you use them for studying.'

I stop listening, my eyes sliding back to Rhys, who is watching Mr Stafford's face intently as he speaks. Every time Mr Stafford turns his head or moves out of Rhys's eyeline, I see him tense. It makes me want to run up to the front of the crowd and grab Mr Stafford so I can yell, 'Just keep your head still! Can't you see he's trying to *read*?'

But my name is Steffi Brons and I don't speak, let alone yell. I move slowly so people won't notice I'm there, because running in public is as loud as a shout. I like to wear jumpers with long sleeves that go right down over my wrists and hands and fingers. Meekness is my camouflage; silence is my force field.

So I don't.

The ten stupidest things people say to you when you don't talk

10) What if you were, like, dying or something?
9) What if *I* was dying?
8) Can you talk if you close your eyes?
7) OK, but what if I close *my* eyes?
6) Cat got your tongue?
5) Just say something. Really, just anything, I don't care.
4) Is your voice really weird or something?
3) You should just have a glass of wine.
2) Just *relax*.
1) You're quiet!

2

Here are three separate but similar things: shyness, introversion and social anxiety. You can have one, two or all three of these things simultaneously. A lot of the time people think they're all the same thing, but that's just not true. Extroverts can be shy, introverts can be bold, and a condition like anxiety can strike whatever kind of social animal you are.

Lots of people are shy. Shy is normal. A bit of anxiety is normal. Throw the two together, add some kind of brain-signal error – a NO ENTRY sign on the neural highway from my brain to my mouth, perhaps, though no one really knows – and you have me. Silent Steffi.

So what am I? I'm a natural introvert with severe social anxiety and a shyness that is basically pathological. When I was a kid, this manifested as a form of mutism, known as selective mutism. The 'selective' part sometimes confuses people, because it makes it sound as if I had the control over when to 'select' my speech, but that's not the case. Selective means it's out of my control. Progressive mutism is when your childhood mutism gets worse as you get older.

I don't have progressive mutism, for the record. I've been able to talk – with difficulty – in places like school for a few years now, though the difficulty is more to do with social anxiety and shyness than mutism. This is incredibly hard to explain to people, which is why I usually don't. 'I couldn't talk but now I can, sometimes, but sometimes I can't. No, I don't know why, sorry' isn't really that illuminating, as far as explanations go. And people *really* like explanations.

They like explanations and recovery stories. They like watching *House* and knowing a solution is coming. They like to hear that people get uncomplicatedly better. They love the stories of childhood mutes who meet an incredible speech therapist and recover their voice by the end of an hour-long documentary. Kids like me, who struggle through their childhood years, juggling various diagnoses that try to explain their silence to their frustrated parents, who graduate from 'mute' to 'severe anxiety' but still can't speak to shop assistants or call anyone on the phone, just confuse things. Forever in the grey area, in the question you see behind the eyes of teachers and family friends: 'Is she just putting it on?' 'It's not a real thing, is it?' They say, 'It's all in your head.' They say, 'It's not real.' And I think, What is more real than that? I think, therefore I am, right?

So, no, I'm not putting it on and, yes, it is a real thing. It just happens to be a real thing that a lot of people haven't even heard of, let alone understand.

What are you thinking, Steffi? What are you thinking? Everything, all the time.

You're so quiet, Steffi. Why are you so quiet? But in my head it's so loud.

I'm sure everyone has an inner monologue, but I doubt many are as wordy as mine.

So here I am, sixteen and silent on my first day of sixth form. True to form, I make it to lunchtime without speaking to anyone. This makes me feel weak with relief at the time but then, sitting by myself at a picnic table outside the sixth form block, horribly depressed. It is clearly not normal to go four hours surrounded by peers without talking to any of them – and then feel happy about it.

Plus, there's the whole year-I-prove-myself thing. So far, I haven't.

I miss Tem.

No, don't blame this on missing Tem. If she was around you still wouldn't have spoken to anyone else.

But –

I'm interrupted by the sudden appearance of a boy, who slides himself casually down on to the bench opposite me and throws me a lazy grin. **Hello.**

I stare at him. Rhys squints. There's a pause.

Hello?

I pull myself together, regain my sense of movement and answer him. **Hi.** I resist the urge to ask him what he's doing sitting with me, because that seems a bit rude even though it's what I really want to know, and sign instead, **How's it going?**

Rhys beams at me, looking far more happy than my delayed reaction deserves. **Great, thanks. I think . . . school . . . bald teacher . . . computers . . . BSL . . . tennis.**

Oh God, this is hideous. I can feel a flush working its horrible way up my neck and across my face. I can't follow what he's signing. He's too fast; too good; too relaxed. I have no idea what he's saying to me. Why would he be talking about tennis, for God's sake? Come *on*, Steffi. You can do this.

Rhys's hands still and he smiles at me, expectant. The happy, hopeful expression on his face makes me feel awful. That's why he wanted to sit with me – because he could have a conversation without reading anyone's lips or worrying he was going to miss something vital. And I've ruined it for him.

I swallow down the bubble of panic that the expectation of conversation always produces in me – even, apparently, silent ones – and force myself to smile. He is not inside your head, I remind myself. He doesn't know you're such a mess. **Little slower?**

I ask. I roll my eyes, gesturing to myself. **I'm rusty.**

He grins. **Hello, rusty.**

I laugh, so spontaneously and easily it surprises me. **Dad joke.**

Rhys shrugs, still grinning, looking absurdly pleased that he's made me laugh. His hands start to move again, careful and slower this time. I watch, trying to follow what he's saying. This time, I at least catch more of it, but it's still not anywhere near enough to carry a proper conversation.

Sorry. I feel tight with frustration. **It's been a long time.**

He flicks his hand in the universal 'no worries' gesture, then digs into his bag and retrieves a notepad. Flipping it open, he scribbles for a few seconds, then spins it around to me. He writes in quick, brisk capital letters. It is the clearest boy handwriting I've ever seen.

I THINK ALL SCHOOLS ARE THE SAME REALLY. DO YOU KNOW THE COMPUTING TEACHER? THE BALD ONE. HE'S MY FORM TUTOR TOO – HE KNOWS BSL! SO THAT'S ANOTHER PERSON I CAN TALK TO ☺

Nothing about tennis. I must be even rustier at BSL than I thought if I invented 'tennis' and missed 'person'. I hesitate, trying to formulate a proper reply. It feels like when I had to sit my French oral exam at GCSE and I had to just throw the right individual words together and hope they made some kind of sense as a sentence.

Here is what I mean: What school did you go to before? Yes, Mr Green was my IT teacher for years. He's probably easier to talk to than me!

Here is what I sign. Probably. **School earlier? Yes, Mr Green teacher computer ages. He signs better.** Pause. **Sorry, I am crap.**

Rhys is patient and if he's amused or frustrated by me he doesn't show it. He signs slowly, returning to his notepad when it

is clear I can't understand him. The two of us make a patchwork conversation, knitting together sentences with our hands and his pen. I am concentrating so hard I don't even notice the silence, usually so heavy around me. At no point does he say, This would be easier if you would just speak.

We establish the basics. Rhys wants to be a games developer and so plans to go to university to study computer science. You don't have to have a degree to be a games developer, he tells me – practical experience is more important – but his parents are insisting. **They don't think I'll actually make it in the games industry**, he explains, and though he rolls his eyes I can see that he's too fond of them to be irritated. **They want me to have a degree as a back-up.**

We have just one subject in common – maths – and I tell him that I want to study animal behaviour. *If* I make it to university.

Why wouldn't you? he asks, confused.

I hesitate, then attempt to explain with my limited skills. **My parents don't want me to go. They don't think I can . . . manage.**

Manage what?

Thankfully, that's when the bell rings. Even if I could talk normally or we were communicating at the same ability, I'm still not sure I could explain the whole thing about my parents and university and me. How it seems like they disagree about everything except my future, which, I'm sorry, shouldn't really be anything to do with them. How they seem to think that because I don't talk much I won't be able to deal with university. How this is the year I have to prove to them I'll be able to handle it.

Rhys stands, gathering his books and crumpling up his empty sandwich wrapper. With one hand, he waves a goodbye.

I smile and mouth, *bye*, and it makes me feel nice to think that, as far as he knows, I said the word out loud.

'Bye, Stefanie,' he says out loud, his voice husky, the words

like confetti, light and soft in the wind between us.

'It's Steffi,' I say, surprising myself.

He pretends to doff an imaginary cap at me, which makes me laugh. 'Steffi,' he repeats. He has the friendliest smile I've ever seen. He waves again, then turns to jog away.

My favourite sound in the world is the bell ringing at the end of the school day. I may be a sixth former now, but that hasn't changed. I am out of my seat and heading to the door before the bell has even finished ringing.

'Did you get the chapters, Steffi?' Mrs Baxter calls to me. She's been my teacher three times since we first met in Year 7, so I give her a thumbs-up rather than reply, knowing she won't mind.

As soon as I walk out of the school gates, I feel my shoulders untense, my muscles loosen, my bones relax. Oh, hello, freedom. Sweet, sweet, freedom.

And, best of all, 'Hello there!'

Tem. My favourite person in the world, standing just outside the gates, balancing two Starbucks cups in one hand and holding a paper bag in the other. September Samatar, best of the best.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. The stress of the day has taken my voice away, and I know that there's nothing I can do but wait for it to come back right now. Tem grins at me, understanding, and gestures with her head down the road. I nod and we turn to start walking together.

'Nice outfit choice,' she says, eyeing me sideways as we go. I am wearing dark jeans, a plain black T-shirt and ankle boots. 'I can see you're channelling the Background look. That's very on trend, I hear. A wonderful choice for the Don't-Look-At-Me crowd.'

I can't help smiling, even as I reach out and flick one of her black curls. This is what Tem does. She fills my silences.

'I brought sweet treats,' Tem continues as we approach the corner. A crowd of Year 10 boys runs past us, jostling us both as we go.

'Oi oi, sexy!' one of them yells at Tem, thrusting his crotch at her. She bursts out laughing. The boy, momentarily devastated, rights himself, swaggers his shoulders and runs off, flicking us both the finger as he goes.

'What a catch,' Tem says, deadpan. 'He's going to make some girl very happy. For thirty seconds.' She is wearing a black cotton dress with short sleeves and some kind of gold patchwork at the hem, beaded sandals on her feet, bangles on her wrist. I can see why a Year-10 boy would call her sexy. I'd call her Temmish.

We cross the road and head right down one of the avenues, away from the school uniforms and noise, into the quiet.

'Oh my God,' I say, and it feels so good. The sound of the words coming out of my mouth, the way my jaw moves, like it's getting exercise for the first time all day. I let out a breath and grin. 'Hi, Tem.'

She grins back, leans over and kisses me on the cheek. 'Hi, Steffi!'

Tem and I have been best friends since we were toddlers. This was basically decided for us by my mother, which is pretty much the best decision she's ever made, especially when it comes to me. Mum was working for the Refugee Council at the time, which is how she met Ebla, Tem's mother. When she found out that Ebla had a daughter the same age as me, she suggested we meet. And that was that.

Over the next few years – which included my parents' divorce and respective remarriages; my sudden, total silence; Clark's death; and so much else – we bonded so tightly we are like part of each other. Steftember, my dad used to call us. Through so

much confusion and turmoil in our lives, we have always had each other.

'So tell me everything,' Tem says, leading me into the children's playground – deserted as always – and taking her usual seat in the middle of the merry-go-round. She arranges the two Starbucks cups in front of her and opens the paper bag, pulling out some kind of cake and splitting it in two with her hands. She looks up and throws me a quick grin.

'Millie Gerdavey cheated on Jack Cole again,' I say, taking a sip from my cup and smiling. She's delivered me a caramel mocha. Extra sugar, extra caffeine. She *must* be worried about me.

'Good for her,' Tem says, shrugging. 'Anything actually interesting?'

I laugh. Tem is basically immune to gossip, which is one of her best and worst traits.

'OK, well, not really.'

'Oh, no way!' Her face drops. 'All these years looking at the sixth formers and wishing we were them and now you're telling me it's not actually interesting?'

'It's not. It's like the rest of school, except we don't have to wear uniform. Which is a bonus, obviously. But still. Today was mainly intro stuff, anyway. Like, getting reading lists and timetables and stuff.'

'How many words did you say today?'

I think about it. 'Less than twenty, more than ten.'

'Hmmm.' Tem makes a face. 'I guess that's OK for your first day without me. I thought it might be less. Or, like, none.'

'I met a boy,' I say.

She is instantly alert. I swear her whole body snaps to attention. 'What?'

'I met a boy,' I repeat, just to annoy her.

'Stefanie!' She flaps her hands at me. 'Tell me everything. And

I mean everything. Immediately. And – God – I hope some of those less-than-twenty-more-than-ten words were said to him.'

'Actually, they weren't,' I say, enjoying the opportunity to wind her up for once. 'I was entirely silent. So was he.' I consider, then add, 'Almost.'

She squints her face into a frown, like she's trying to see inside my head. Finally, suspiciously, she says, 'But you *met* him?'

'He's deaf,' I say, and her face unfolds.

'*Oh*.' Understanding lights in her eyes. 'Cool! So you were signing? That's so great, Steffi. I always thought you should've carried that on.'

I ignore this, because the whole should-Steffi-sign-or-not issue was bad enough the first time round, and take a bite of the cake she's brought. It's some odd mix of doughnut and apple turnover, and it tastes like joy. 'His name's Rhys,' I say. 'Mr Stafford introduced us because I know some BSL.'

'That makes sense. So? What's he like? You know I want the details.'

'Nice,' I say. 'Friendly. Really friendly, actually.'

'I meant visually,' Tem says, waving her hand. 'Obviously.'

I smile. 'Also nice to look at.'

'Give me something to go on! Eyes? Hair? Teeth?'

'Brown eyes. Short hair. Very nice teeth.' I think of Rhys, smiling at me from across the table. 'His skin is a light brown – I think he's mixed race?'

'I like the sound of him,' Tem says, nodding. 'I approve.'

I smile. 'You don't need to approve anything. He's just a new guy at school.'

'*Sure* he is,' Tem says, drawling the words. 'And you "just" wanted to tell me about him. And describe him. And make those doe eyes.'

'I wasn't making doe eyes!'

She raises one perfect eyebrow at me and takes a sip from her cup, a smirk on her face. 'I think it should be your mission to kiss him. I'll give you until . . . Bonfire Night.'

I laugh, half amused, half panicked. 'Tem, I literally just met him today. We're not even friends yet. Slow down.'

'Why should I?' she asks, shaking her head. 'Why *wouldn't* a handsome young fellow want to kiss you? That's the question you need to be asking yourself.'

I open my mouth and her hand shoots out to cover it. 'That was a rhetorical question, Brons. I wasn't asking for a list.'

I wait till she removes her hand and answer her anyway. 'Guys like to kiss girls who can talk.'

'Um, so clearly not true. You've seen *The Little Mermaid*. There's a whole song about it.'

I roll my eyes. 'That song is about trying to *get* them to kiss, but they don't.'

'Whatever.' She waves her hand. 'My point is you're obsessing way too much over a tiny little detail. So you don't talk much – who cares? You can talk with your hands.' Her face lights up with a mischievous grin. '*Talk*. With your *hands*.' She splays out her hands around her face and mimes kissing, eyes closed, mouth agape. This is presumably meant to represent some kind of kissing-related sign language from someone who has never spoken any sign language in their life.

'Oh, stop it,' I say, laughing despite myself.

'Fine, fine. Hey, do you want to come for a run with me tonight?' she asks. She grins. 'I promise I'll go slow.'

'How slow?' I ask, suspicious.

Tem is a runner. Technically long distance, but she has a habit of lulling me into a false sense of security by jogging for thirty seconds and then sprinting off into the distance, just because she can.

'A jog,' Tem promises. 'You'll barely even sweat.'

'As tempting as *that* is,' I say (I am not a runner), 'I can't. I'm at Dad's.'

'Oh,' she says. 'That came around fast.'

I smile. 'The summer's over for me. I moved my stuff in last night.'

Even though they are divorced and have both remarried since, my parents live in the same town, for my sake. This was an agreement they made years back so I could alternate living with them both but also not have to do anything annoying like move school or get three buses in the morning. They live on opposite sides of town – Windham is pretty much in the middle, which is useful – and I move between them. Since I started secondary school, I've stayed with Dad during term time and Mum during the holidays.

The main downside to all this, at least during term time, is that Tem lives a two-minute walk from my mother and a ten-minute *drive* from my dad, so it's less easy for us to see each other.

'I can still come over to you,' Tem suggests. 'I don't mind.'

I shake my head. 'Maybe this weekend, but not tonight. I'm pretty tired and I promised Dad I'd make dinner.'

She sighs. '*Fine*. But you're just missing out on my company.'

'Call me tonight, OK?' I say. 'It'll be just like I'm there.'

She smirks. 'Hearing your voice is weird enough, let alone if I can't see you at the same time.'

I glare at her. 'No mute jokes on my first day back! You promised!'

'No, I didn't. You asked and I made a joke about penguins.'

I roll my eyes. 'You're impossible.'

'I'm *wonderful*.' Tem throws open her arms and beams at me. She looks so ridiculous I have to laugh.

What I mean to say through all this is that however hard it is

to be the girl who doesn't talk, the girl who dithers in the corner then shrugs a reply, I have Tem. And if there's only one person in the world I can talk to I'll choose her every time.

The top five worst times to be mute

5) When you need the toilet
I am six years old and Tem is off school with suspected mumps (it will turn out to be the flu). I navigate my silent day alone, without my trusty interpreter, who pays as much attention to my needs as she does her own. Everything is fine until I realize I need to pee. I cannot say so. I can't even lift my hand to gesture at the door. I sit, rigid, staring at my worksheet. I wet myself. 'Ewwwwww!' the class screams in delight.

4) When you're bleeding
I'm eight years old. We're on a school trip at a family farm. We've been divided into smaller groups – I'm a Giggly Goat, Tem is a Happy Hen. I catch my hand on a barbed-wire fence and rip an impressive hole from the pad of my thumb all the way across my palm. I try to figure out how to tell the staff member looking after us – Julie – without making too much of a fuss, and end up cradling my hand to my chest for the next twenty minutes until Julie cheerfully asks me what I'm hiding. I show her my hand – now a bloody, fleshy mess – and she screams, backs away and faints.

3) When you need a new pencil
Eleven years old. SATs. We are ten minutes into Maths Paper 1 and the end of my pencil snaps clean off and goes skittering across the floor. I know I am supposed to put my hand up and ask for a spare; I know my teacher, Miss Kapsalis, will give me another if I just ask. But it is not only my mouth that has frozen shut –

my limbs have gone rigid, my wrists scratching the splintered ridge of my exam desk, the pencil in my clenched fist. I can't even move. I sit, panicking, for twenty minutes until Miss Kapsalis, who is walking up and down the aisles of our desks to check for cheating, finally notices. She lets out a noise that is groan, gasp and horror all in one and drops to my side.

'Steffi!' she whispers, even though she's not supposed to talk to us during the exam. 'You need to answer the questions.'

I uncurl my fingers and the broken pencil drops on to the table. I'm given a new pencil with fifteen minutes to go. Needless to say, I don't exactly come top of the class.

2) When you look a bit suspicious

Twelve years old. Tem and I are spending a Saturday afternoon together mooching around town. We're in one of those bit-of-everything shops that sells clothes, twee gifts and cushions. Tem is trying on a vintage prom dress and I am standing in the corner, gazing at a shelf full of candles. The woman who owns the shop is suddenly at my side, asking me in a threateningly gentle voice what I think I am doing. I stare at her, confused and panicked in equal measure. What could have been a polite 'I'm just browsing, thanks' exchange turns into her getting increasingly irate and me getting more and more frozen. No amount of ardent head-shaking is enough for me to convince her I'm not stealing anything. She is threatening to call the police when Tem comes parading out of the changing room wearing a black-and-white polka dot dress, announcing, 'Just *tell* me how beautiful I am!' before she sees us both, clocks the situation in less than a second and hurries across the shop floor to smooth things over.

1) When your best friend needs you

Thirteen years old. I am in a stadium, watching Tem run the

800m final of the County Championships. She wins the race and is crackling with electricity and endorphins, leaping all over the track, hugging me, letting go, bouncing, cartwheeling. It's the first county race she's ever won. She's just collected her medal and is standing in the crowd, beaming down at it. And that's when a woman, the mother of one of Tem's competitors, says to someone – to this day I don't know who exactly she was talking to – 'They shouldn't let those ones compete; everyone knows their bodies make them faster. It's not fair on our girls.'

For one clueless moment I don't even understand what she means, but something about the sudden slackness in Tem's face makes it clear. There's no hidden meaning, no nice liberal understanding or context. The woman is being just plain racist about my beloved Tem, right in front of her. And this is it: the most shameful moment of my life. Because I don't say a word. I just stand there, even as I see the light leave Tem's eyes, even as she looks at me for just a second, even though she spends most of her days looking after me. No one else says anything either, but I know it is my silence that is the worst. My silence that is unforgiveable.

Later, when I try to apologize – awkward and tongue-tied – she waves me away, tells me she understands that sometimes my words just don't come, that she knows I would have spoken if I could have.

So here's the thing: this was the worst time to be mute, but in a way it also saved us both. Because she didn't have to find out whether I would have been brave enough to stand up for her. And neither did I.