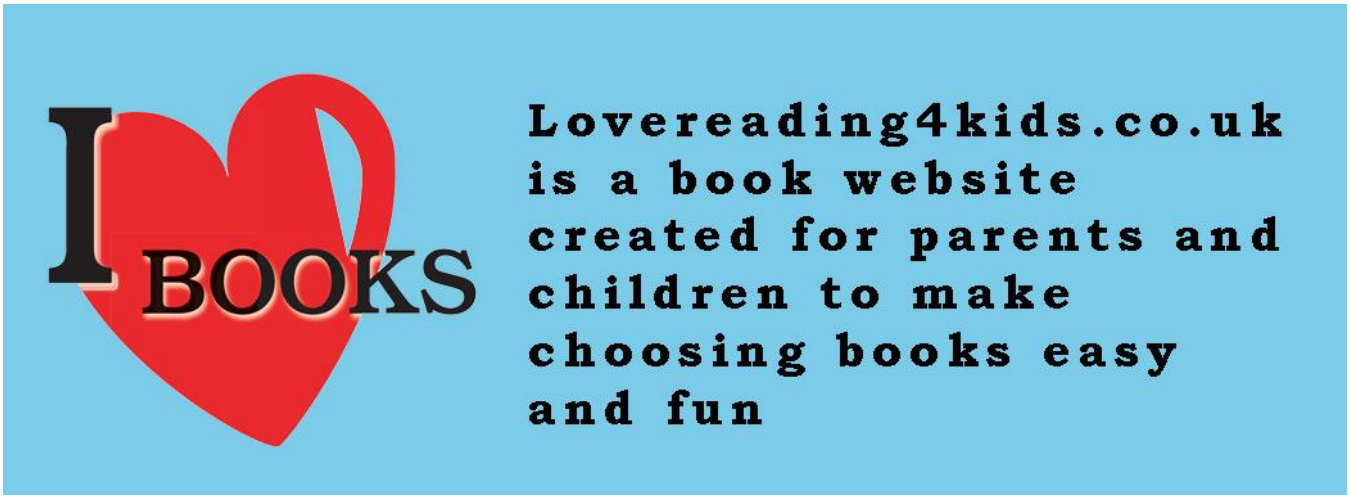


Opening extract from

Girlhood

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CAT CLARKE



GIRLHOOD

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QUERCUS CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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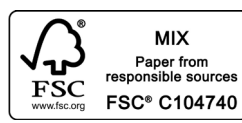
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ONE

We always have a midnight feast on the first night back. Because that's what you do at boarding school, right?

When we were younger, Jenna and I were obsessed with boarding school books. We desperately wanted to be the twins at St Clare's. Almost every night I'd sneak over to her bed after Mum turned out the lights. We'd put the duvet over our heads and take turns reading to each other by torchlight. Two peas in a cosy little pod.

Somehow I ended up at Duncraggan Castle, just like in the stories.

But Jenna's not with me. I had to come here alone.

I wasn't alone for long though.

'Would you rather . . . have muffins for hands or squirrels for feet?' Rowan leans back and crosses her arms, smug as you like.

Lily snorts with laugher while Ama clinks her mug against Rowan's.

'Well, that depends,' says Ama, now mock-serious. 'Do the muffins regenerate? Can I choose what flavour? Can I choose *different* flavours, depending on the day? Oh, and are the squirrels red or grey?'

Rowan's ready. 'They regenerate on a daily basis. You can choose any flavour. Grey squirrels. Those poor little bastards have such a bad rep.'

Lily starts on a rant about the plight of the red squirrel, and I put my hand over her mouth to shut her up.

I think I've decided, but I have a question that needs answering first. 'Can you control the squirrels though? Like, with a tiny pair of reins?'

Rowan gives that some thought. 'Yes. But they don't come already trained. It's a lot of work, you know. Squirrel-training is a very serious business.'

'Then it's easy! I'm Team Squirrel. Ama? Lil?'

Lil votes muffins (as long as they're made with organic flour). Ama goes for squirrels 'because it would be like having pets with you WHEREVER YOU GO.'

I ask Rowan what she'd choose. 'No idea,' she shrugs. 'It's a really stupid question.' I throw a pillow at her head.

'I've got one!' Lily pipes up. 'This one's for Ama.'

'Uh-oh,' says Ama. 'This is never good.'

Lily stands up, between the two beds. She coughs as if clearing her throat. 'Allow me to set the scene . . . It's the night of the Christmas concert. The packed auditorium is hushed. The audience has sat through screeching violins and off-key oboes, but now things are looking up. Ama is set to take the stage, to dazzle and delight with her peerless piano playing . . .'

'Bit overboard on the alliteration there if you ask me,' Rowan stage-whispers.

'Hush!' Lily kneels down in front of Ama and takes her hand. 'Ama, my dear, very bestest friend in all the world, would you rather . . . play your piece while your parents have sex on top of said piano . . .'

I can hardly hear Ama's disgusted retching over our laughter.

'*Or* would you rather have sex with a person of your choice up on stage, while your *mum* plays the piano?' Lily's 'Would you Rather's are *always* about sex.

The laughter escalates and I'm half worried Miss Renner will come knocking on the door. But last year Rowan somehow managed to find out that Miss Renner listens to *Sounds of the Rainforest* on her headphones to help her sleep. Maddox wouldn't be too happy about that if she found out.

'You are disgusting, Lily Carter. Disgusting and depraved.'

'That may be true, but I'm afraid I'm going to need an answer. You know the rules.'

'I can't!' Ama wails, but she knows we won't let her get away with that. 'OK, OK! I just . . . waaaaaah!'

'Got any supplementary questions *this* time, Adebayo?' Rowan asks, an eyebrow raised.

'OK, first of all, I'm pretty sure my parents never, ever, ever have sex.' Ama grimaces. 'But I'm going to have to go with Option A. There is no way on earth I would ever have sex in front of anyone. ANYONE.'

'But you're perfectly happy for your parents to go at it like rabbits while you play Rachmaninov?' I smile sweetly, but I've crossed the line. Ama hates Rachmaninov.

Our midnight feasts aren't so much 'lashings of ginger beer' as 'whatever booze we can smuggle in'. Sometimes – if someone remembers – we even have food. Tonight, we demolished a whole tin of yakgwa made by Rowan's mum. Whoever invented deep-fried biscuits was a genius, no question.

Lily grimaces every time she takes a sip from her tiny bottle. 'I fucking hate whisky!'

'It's better than nothing!' Ama pouts. She was the one who managed to blag twenty miniatures on her flight back from Lagos.

'Well, you should learn to love it. We are in

Scotland, after all.' I can't stand the stuff either, but loyalty to my country wins out.

'I'll start liking whisky when Ama starts liking haggis,' says Lily with a grin.

'Aw, come on, Lil! It's hardly the same thing! A sheep's innards should stay on the inside as far as I'm concerned. And I know you agree with me, Little Miss *I was a vegetarian before I could even spell the word*.' Ama's not exactly slurring her words, but one more bottle and she will be.

'I'm sure the *sheep* agrees with you,' Rowan says, leaning past Ama to take one of the bottles. She opens it and sniffs deeply. 'Ah, can't you just picture the purple heather in the glens? The noble stag surveying his kingdom . . .'

'Right before he gets shot by some idiot banker who thinks that killing defenceless animals makes him more *manly*.' Lily's voice drips with disdain; it always does when she talks about her dad.

'I bet Sharp-Shooter Kent over here could teach your dad a thing or two. She's fucking deadly.' Rowan jostles my shoulder.

'Clay-pigeon shooting isn't quite the same thing, Rowan. And I'm crap at it anyway.' This isn't strictly true. I'm now approaching the dizzy heights of 'mediocre', although Miss Whaite prefers to describe my skills as 'solid'. Dad was appalled to find out the

activities I signed up for when I started at Duncraggan. *'Shooting?! Why did it have to be shooting? And rock-climbing? What's that all about? Don't they do any normal things there? Like . . . rounders?'* He had a point, but I'd made a promise to myself when I came here. I wanted to do the kind of weird shit you only get to do at boarding school. I gave up on the climbing after a few months, but I still shoot every week.

By two a.m. the whisky is gone and Rowan's eyes are drooping closed every couple of minutes. 'Come on you, let's get you to bed.' I drag her up into a sitting position. 'Tomorrow's going to be brutal.'

We say good night to Lily and Ama and creep next door to our room. The corridor is dimly lit – just enough light so you can find your way to the toilet in the middle of the night. The green 'emergency exit' sign glows incongruously above the door to the stairs. I wish they didn't have to have things like that – fire doors and official-looking signs and strip lighting really don't belong in a building like this one. So many changes and additions have been made over the years that it's only in certain places that the building still feels like a proper castle. Those are the parts that get photographed to death and plastered all over the website. Those are the parts that made me want to come here.

'Home, sweet home,' I say, turning on the bedside lights. Our room is slightly smaller – Lily got the pick

of the rooms after being elected head girl last year. And Rowan managed to convince Hozzie and Sylvana to swap so that we could stay next door to Lily and Ama for our last year at Duncraggan. It felt right. The four of us have been a little unit since Rowan took me under her wing when I arrived.

I think about that day a lot. How I felt when the car pulled up in front of the castle, tyres crunching on the gravel. How Dad patted my leg and said, 'Well, this is going to be an adventure, isn't it?' even though the look on his face said otherwise. How everything seemed so strange and new and not like something a person like me should ever experience.

On my first night, lying awake and listening to the wind rattling against the windows, I wondered if I'd made a terrible mistake. I looked across the gloom towards the other bed and everything about the silhouette was wrong.

Jenna should have been there, sharing everything with me, like always. That's what twins do. That's who we *are*.

We all have our reasons for being at Duncraggan; some are more interesting than others. Most people are just here because their parents are filthy rich, and apparently the first thing you do when you're filthy rich is make sure your children live as far away from you as possible.

Bonus points for remote location in the wilds of Scotland. Terrible weather builds character, apparently.

Ama wanted to come here because of the reputation of the music department, but Lily had no choice in the matter. Rowan, Lily and Ama all have rich parents, but it's not something we talk about. The clues are there if you pay attention. If you look at the labels on their clothes and listen closely for key words like 'trust fund' and 'driver' and 'yacht'. I try not to hold it against them – the fact that money is meaningless to them, no matter how much they try to convince themselves otherwise. They don't care about money because they've never had to think about it.

Rowan's parents moved to South Korea when she was eight years old. Most kids would be upset by that, but apparently she had no fucks to give. She went to another boarding school in London before transferring here for senior school. She stayed here even when her parents moved back to Surrey last year, saying she'd never dream of abandoning us. 'Together till the bitter end,' she said.

Rowan's the only one I talked to about why I came to Duncraggan. I asked her to tell Ama and Lily, because I thought they deserved to know but I couldn't face telling them. It's too tiring, telling the story over and over again. Working so hard to make sure you don't tell the *whole* truth.

I hate talking about it, and the girls understand that. If one of them finds herself veering into dangerous conversational waters, the others will yank her back to safety. Rowan's usually the one to do the yanking; I don't know what I'd do without her. Sometimes I feel bad that I've never told her all of it. The worst of it.

The worst of it is simple. You can strip the excess flesh of the story down to the bare bones. You can shrink it and starve it and whittle it down to almost nothing.

That's what happened to her.

Jenna died of heart failure. Other things too: a perforated ulcer, a collapsed lung. But it was the heart that gave up on her. It couldn't do the job it's supposed to do; it didn't have the fuel.

My twin sister was fifteen years old when she died. She weighed just under five stone.

It had started as a post-Christmas diet.

A diet that was my idea.

TWO

It was my fault she died.

People say that losing a twin is like losing half of yourself, half of your soul. They're wrong. You lose yourself. Everything that makes you *you*. You lose everything you've ever known to be right and true.

But Jenna's death is not the whole story. It's the bit that strangers know about, because it was in the papers. Mum and Dad insisted on going public, so that people could learn from our tragedy, and other parents could watch out for the warning signs before it was too late. I was against the idea from the start. Jenna was *mine*. I couldn't bear to think about sharing her with the world like that. My parents listened to my arguments, patiently and sometimes tearfully, but they did it anyway. Mum said she was sorry, but it was the right thing to do.

It might have been the right thing to do for them, and for all those parents out there – a cautionary tale

they could read about with their morning coffee, dusting crumbs of toast off the paper before turning the page.

But what about me? I couldn't turn the page. Ever. And what about Jenna? My sister would hate the fact that you can google her name and read all the lurid details. She would hate the school photo that ran in all the papers – the one they used to illustrate how lovely and normal and healthy she looked *before*. She's smiling in that picture, even though she hated having her photo taken. When we brought our photos home from school that day, Mum told me off for not smiling in mine. She thought Jenna's photo was 'just lovely' though. She couldn't even see that Jenna's smile was fake. *I* could see, of course, because our fake smiles were identical.

They found the *after* photo on her phone. She'd sent it to one of her 'ana' buddies a couple of months before she died, and this so-called friend had congratulated her on how amazing she looked, sending a photo of herself so they could compare and contrast. The measurements were unfathomably tiny.

There's no way to look at that photo and not be appalled, and the thought that millions of people could do just that by reading the newspaper or looking online was poisonous to me. They would never know her like I did. They would never know the girl who thought

the fact that she was twenty-three minutes older than me made her infinitely wiser. The girl who had tried and failed to save a baby sparrow that had fallen out of its nest. The girl who had cried at the solemn sparrow funeral we held, sacrificing her best shoebox as a coffin. The girl who, in her 'I want to be an archaeologist' phase a year later, dug up the shoebox to examine the bird's remains.

Jenna was a person – a wonderfully messy human being, with faults and hopes and fears – but she'd been reduced to a morality tale.

The only blessing was that my parents managed to keep me out of it. They did four interviews in all, with journalists coming round to our house and sitting on our sagging sofa, beady eyes no doubt darting around the room to take in the family photos on the mantelpiece, the stains on the carpet, the ancient TV. My parents told them that Jenna had a twin sister, but that was it. When the journalists inevitably asked to talk to me, my parents refused. My dead sister was fair game but I was off limits.

The newspaper stories mentioned that my sister's anorexia had seemingly started with a 'harmless New Year's resolution' to eat better and exercise more. They didn't know it had been my idea, and that I'd pressured Jenna into doing it with me. I knew if I did it by myself I would give up after a few days. I told her it would

be fun, something we could do together. She wasn't overweight, not even close. Neither was I for that matter, but I was a little heavier than her and I couldn't accept that. Identical twins are supposed to look the same.

Mum knows it was my fault. She saw me persuading Jenna to get off the sofa and come for a run with me on New Year's Day. She saw me raising my eyebrows in disapproval when Jenna overfilled her cereal bowl in the morning.

We've never talked about it. Mum has never actually come out and said that she blames me. Perhaps because she saw me doing all those things, and she did nothing to stop it.

I did my research, when things started to get really bad with Jenna. It was months after I'd lost interest in watching my weight, and my sister was steadily shrinking away. I was scared. It turns out that twins are more likely to be anorexic. I didn't need further confirmation of my culpability, but there it was on my laptop screen. My very existence was to blame for Jenna's illness.

The rest of the story is supposed to be the yin to the yang of Jenna's death. It's so ridiculous and painfully ironic that people don't know how to react when you tell them. You can see their eyes flicker in a sort of

panic, because they can't react in the way they would normally react to such news.

It happened the day after my sister died, but we didn't find out until the morning after that. Dad had switched his phone off because he couldn't face talking to anyone. It was all down to Mum, ringing people to tell them that Jenna was dead. She didn't say 'dead' though; she said 'gone' or 'passed away'. 'Dead' feels more honest to me. The word itself sounds final, like a full stop.

We were having breakfast – or rather, sitting at the breakfast table, drinking coffee, eating nothing – when Mum's phone rang. 'Don't recognise the number,' she muttered. Dad told her to leave it, but she picked up.

After a moment or two she held out the phone towards Dad. 'It's Jan,' she said. Jan worked with Dad. No one at the sorting office knew about Jenna yet. He'd taken the week off when it was clear that she didn't have much time left.

He sat up straight, cleared his throat and took a deep breath, as if he was summoning all his strength. 'Hi. Jan. How are things?' His voice sounded unnatural.

Then Jan talked – a lot. Dad said 'OK' and 'I see' a few times before hanging up. His facial expression didn't alter once during the exchange.

He put the phone down on the table and took a sip of his cooling coffee.

'What did she want? You really should have told her, you know. You'll have to call your boss today. I think we should see if we can arrange the funeral for next Friday. That way people can stay over and travel home on the Saturday. What do you think?'

Dad's fingers were tracing the pattern of the worn wood on the kitchen table. His thumb grazed over the place where Jenna had carved her initials when we were ten years old. I'd carved mine too, but on the underside of the table. Mum was furious, shouting at Jenna for ten minutes straight before sending her to our room. She never told though – that I'd done the same but been a bit more subtle about it. She never told.

'Sam?'

'What?' He looked up into Mum's eyes and she must have realised that it was something major. But the worst thing that could ever happen had already happened, and we were still there, sitting at the table, trying to not to look at the empty chair next to the window.

'We won,' he said.

'What are you talking about? Won what?' Mum was clearly exasperated and I had a sudden, horrible thought – a premonition? – that she wouldn't stay with him. They would get divorced. Maybe not soon, but one day.

'The syndicate.'

Mum sighed and leaned back in her chair. 'What is it this time? A hundred quid? Because in case you hadn't noticed we have more important things to worry about, and I could really use your help.' She stood and picked up her mug and mine. I'd only had a couple of sips; the coffee sloshed over the edge of the mug, fat splashes of brown landing on the table. 'Shit! SHIT!'

Mum was losing the plot, anyone could see that.

'Twenty-one million. Just over.'

He had to repeat the figure three times before Mum finally understood. She sat down at the table, ignoring the coffee dripping on to her shoes.

'Oh,' she said.

He'd been a member of that syndicate for eight years, along with six other postmen and women. Jan was the one who'd set it up years ago. The most they'd ever won before was £144. This time they won £21.2 million. Dad's share was just over £3 million.

My father became a millionaire. The day after his daughter died.

THREE

The whisky hangover is almost exactly as bad as expected, but it's the kind of hangover that needs food so I hurry down to breakfast, my hair still wet from the shower.

'How many pieces of bacon is too many?' I ask Rowan.

'No such thing as too much bacon this morning. There's not enough bacon in all the world for how I feel right now.'

The queue moves far too slowly; there should be an express queue for emergencies like this one. I'm almost at the front when Rowan nudges me. 'Looks like we've got ourselves a newbie this year after all.' I turn to follow her gaze and see a girl I don't recognise, sitting at a table with the kind of girls who got an early night last night because lessons start today and this year is IMPORTANT.

I subtly check out the new girl. She looks normal

enough, which may mean that she's sitting at exactly the right table with exactly the right people. But you never know, people have hidden depths. You can't necessarily tell where someone belongs just by looking at them. Lily, Ama, Rowan and I aren't exactly homogenous; Ama reckons that we look like the world's worst girl band.

Over breakfast, Lily tells us that the new girl is called Kirsty Connor. She arrived late last night after her flight was delayed. She's in our year and in the same house as us, which means she'll be living on our corridor.

'So, Lil, what do you make of your first victim? Reckon she can hack it?' I ask Lily, who seems to think that granola and natural yoghurt is enough to banish her hangover.

Lily stares unashamedly at the new girl. 'Hard to say. It'll be good to have someone to practise on before we officially get started next term though. Antonia left me notes but I reckon I'm going to shake things up a bit. Make it my own, you know.'

Rowan, Ama and I share amused glances. It's typical of Lily to want to put her own spin on the head girl's most important duty. 'Don't worry! I promise it will be just as traumatic as it was for us lot.' She casts her eye over the new girl again. 'Let's do it tonight.'

We try to talk her out of it – especially Rowan,

who thinks the whole thing is barbaric – but Lily says rules are rules. It's strange to hear those words from her mouth. Maybe being head girl is going to transform her from anarchic eco-warrior into . . . God knows what. Power can do strange things to people.

'Will you and Ama help? Might as well get it over with, don't you think?'

Ama shrugs but I waver for a second or two. I have to help at some point, so it may as well be tonight. With someone I don't know. I'd feel worse doing it to one of the girls in the year below. Starting next term, each and every Year 12 girl will be victimised in turn. It's only fair that new starters in our year get the same treatment.

The head girl picks two deputies each time. By the time the year is over everyone in our year will have had a hand in it, and some people will have helped twice. It means that everyone is complicit. Everyone is equally guilty, so if the teachers ever found out, no one individual would take the blame.

The new girl passes by our table on the way out of the dining hall. Her eyes meet mine but I quickly look away. I feel terrible; she has no idea what tonight has in store for her.

We didn't go public after the lottery win, obviously. None of the journalists who came to interview my

parents about Jenna knew anything about it. No fur coats or chandeliers or giant plasma TVs in our little terraced house. If they'd found out, the story would have been huge: *tragic irony . . . twist of fate . . . the Kents would give up every penny if it meant they could have their daughter back*.

Things were bad after Jenna died. Very bad. The money made no difference. It sat, untouched, in a special bank account that Dad's financial advisor had told him to open. The fact that Dad now had a financial advisor was the only noticeable change. He was the only member of the syndicate who didn't quit their job. Jan booked herself on a three-month round-the-world cruise before the cash had even hit her bank account. Meanwhile Dad still trudged off to work at five every morning.

Mum didn't give up her job either. She became obsessed with 'keeping busy'. She went into this bizarre frenzy of doing stuff *all* the time. Before, she had her little morning ritual of a cup of coffee on the bench in the back garden – no matter the weather. She'd sit out there huddled under an umbrella, wearing one of Dad's big coats. She called it her thinking time. There was no more of that after Jenna died. Thinking time was to be avoided at all costs, because the only thoughts now were sad ones, waiting to swamp you when you least expected it.

When I finally went back to school, I didn't tell

my friends about the lottery win. I didn't have a best friend, like all the other girls seemed to. You don't need a best friend when you're a twin, because you have something better and closer and unbreakable. But it turns out there's no such thing as unbreakable.

It wasn't even hard to keep the secret. People thought the only thing that was going on with my life was grieving. The only questions they asked me were 'How are you doing?' and 'Do you want to talk about it?' (The answers being 'Pretty fucking terribly, thank you,' and 'Not with you.') I wanted to talk to Jenna about it, to say how messed up it was that girls who'd never even talked to her were claiming to have been her friend. It would have amused her, I think. She'd have laughed and said that it didn't matter, not really. Because *we* knew the truth. She'd have told me to let them say whatever they wanted if it made them feel better about themselves. Jenna always did have a bigger heart than I had. It shouldn't have broken like it did.

School without Jenna was unthinkable and unbearable. It took everything I had to get through each day without screaming. I pictured doing it: standing up in Maths or English and opening my mouth and screaming and screaming until my throat bled raw.

Home was even worse than school. As soon as I put my key in the door I could feel it. A heaviness, as if the air inside was filled with a dense cloud of poison.

It was hard to breathe in that house, but somehow the three of us kept on inhaling and exhaling, our hearts pumping blood around our bodies. We kept on living, which didn't seem right. How could we live in a world without my sister in it?

Dad's workmates all moved into fancy new houses, because that's what people do when they win the lottery. But my parents wouldn't hear of it. It was as if they thought Jenna might come back to us one day and would need to be able to find her way home. They didn't ask my opinion. They didn't ask what it was like for me to lie awake at night staring up at the ceiling, doing everything I could not to look at the empty bed on the other side of the room. The bed was neatly made up, with the corner of the duvet folded back. I don't know who folded the corner, or why, but I wish they hadn't. It was as if the bed was waiting for her.

Four months after Jenna died I sat my parents down at the kitchen table and told them I wanted to go to boarding school. The plan had been brewing in my mind for a while, but I'd been waiting, biding my time to see if things would get better. I wasn't expecting miracles – just a tiny sign that life wouldn't be this unremittingly awful for ever. But if the signs were there, I must have missed them. I couldn't help feeling that my parents weren't even making an effort. I felt crushingly guilty for thinking that, and I tried

not to think it, but it was futile. They still had one daughter left, but it felt like they'd given up. As if there was no point in trying to be a family any more.

Mum was more shocked than Dad, especially when she saw how much research I'd done. I had all the facts and figures at my fingertips, all the answers to every possible question. They had *a lot* of questions, but only one that really mattered: why?

If I'd told the truth it would have broken them. I couldn't bear to be around them any more. I could not stay in this house without Jenna – not when they could afford to send me away.

Instead, I talked about the opportunities that a place like Duncraggan Castle would provide. The extracurricular activities and academic excellence. I said that I wanted to reach my full potential, whatever that was. I talked about my future.

Dad couldn't get his head around it. '*Boarding* school though? Why boarding school? There are plenty of good schools around here.'

It was true, and I floundered. Mum came to the rescue, much to my surprise. 'Oh, you remember, Sam . . . the girls used to love those boarding school stories when they were younger, didn't they? Jolly hockey sticks and all that.' The faintest smile flitted across her features at the memory.

Dad shook his head. 'But this is real life – not

some kids' book. I don't know why you'd . . . I don't want to lose . . .' He shook his head and I was glad he didn't finish that sentence.

Mum patted his hand, but she was focused on me. 'Is this what you really want, Harper?'

I ignored the tidal wave of doubt and said yes. Then I delivered the final blow. 'I want to do this for Jenna. Have new experiences and meet new people and do all the things that she can't.' Dad flinched, as if I'd struck him. 'I feel like I owe it to her.'

I worried I'd gone too far, that they might not buy it. But Mum nodded thoughtfully. 'Still, you have to do what's right for *you*.'

I kept quiet! The wrong words now could ruin everything.

Mum said that they would need to talk it over, and find out more about Duncraggan. She said it was quite a long way away, and that it was just a bit of a surprise, but they *did* have the money now, didn't they?

That was when I knew I'd won. I felt faint with relief.

We left for Duncraggan a few months later. We stopped at a motorway service station for lunch and Mum cried. That was the only time I wavered and wondered whether I was doing the right thing. I suddenly felt like I was abandoning ship, leaving them to drown in their sadness.

‘Are you two going to be OK?’ I whispered, hugging her even tighter.

‘Don’t you worry about us, love.’

She hadn’t really answered my question, but I didn’t ask again. It was too late for that. I didn’t want to drown.

FOUR

The Hole is not as bad as it sounds. In the grand scheme of things, it's definitely not a big deal. But it's a tradition, and traditions *are* a big deal in a place like this.

And if, to an outsider, it sounds a little bit like torture, all I can say is that boarding school can be a bitch.

The teachers would flip their lid if they ever found out, but that's never going to happen. Even when things go slightly wrong, there's a code of silence surrounding the Hole. Ama was the first one of us to be chosen, and she told us exactly what to expect – in excruciating detail. It didn't exactly put our minds at rest.

It was my turn a few days later. I'd thought boarding school was going to be all mugs of hot chocolate before bedtime and hockey games on crisp winter mornings. I should have known better. I should have known that the cruelty of girls is intensified here, living together 24/7, hundreds of miles away from

home. Everything feels more concentrated, like orange squash that hasn't been diluted with water.

It's close to midnight when Rowan hands me a tiny torch.

'Thanks, but I've already got one.'

'It's not for you. It's for the new girl.'

It takes a second for me to catch on. 'But how am I supposed to . . .?'

'You'll find a way. Just make sure Lily doesn't see. Or Ama for that matter. I've put fresh batteries in so it'll definitely last the night.'

'I don't see why she should get help. No one helped *us*.'

'Give the girl a break, Harper. She doesn't have anyone to tell her what to expect.'

I sigh and take the torch. I know it's the right thing to do. Rowan *always* does the right thing; it's massively annoying.

When Miss Renner showed me to my room that first evening, I had no idea what to expect. Duncraggan students are divided into three houses: Fairclough, Balmedie and Roundhouse. I'd been put in Fairclough, which meant my room was in the castle proper, rather than one of the newer annexes. Miss Renner explained her role as house mother, and showed me her apartment

at the end of the corridor on the third floor. She had her own little sitting room with two comfy sofas and a tatty old armchair that reminded me of Dad's. Miss Renner mentioned the monthly pizza parties she hosts for Fairclough girls.

'I like pizza,' I said, for want of something better to say.

'Who doesn't?' she laughed. But then she got that look on her face, and I knew what was coming. 'If you ever want to talk – about anything – or if you're having any problems or difficulties, my door is always open. It's important that you know that.' She seemed almost embarrassed, as if she knew full well there were things I would never think of discussing with her. At least now I was sure that she knew about Jenna.

I liked Miss Renner straightaway. Her granny-style glasses made her look friendly, and she was dressed casually in jeans, flip-flops and an oversized jumper. As she led me along the corridor, I glanced through doorways to see girls sitting at desks amid piles of books. Miss Renner explained that it was homework time, or 'banco' as they called it. She laughed at my confusion. 'Sorry, we have our own little language here at Duncraggan. It takes a bit of getting used to at first!' She wasn't kidding about that – I'm still not used to it.

Every girl turned to look when we passed, apart

from one who had a pair of giant headphones on. I felt scrutinised. Judged.

All I knew about my new roommate was that her name was Rowan Chung-Black and her previous roommate had moved to Switzerland over the summer. My hopes were reasonably low: I wanted my roommate not to hate me, and I wanted to not hate her.

She was standing at the window with her back to the door, definitely not studying or banking or whatever. Miss Renner had to cough to attract her attention. When she turned round I saw that she'd been looking through a pair of binoculars.

'Arctic terns,' she said, as if that meant something to me. She was East Asian, with short black hair that could politely be described as haphazard. She was slightly shorter than me, and curvier underneath her *Star Wars* T-shirt and board shorts. She wore furry green slippers that looked like monster feet. It was quite the first impression. 'They're migrating south for the winter. To the Antarctic. You have to wonder why they're not called *Ant*arctic terns, don't you?'

Miss Renner introduced us. 'Rowan's our resident ornithologist, not to mention the owner of the most unusual collection of slippers in Fairclough.'

'Aw, Miss, I bet you say that to all the girls.'

I accidentally snort-laughed, and Rowan smiled at me. Miss Renner looked from Rowan to me and back

again and said she'd leave us to it. 'I have a feeling you two are going to get along just fine.'

When the door closed behind her, Rowan sat down on one of the beds. The right side of the room was plastered in posters and fliers and photos. The left side was bare.

'We can swap sides if you want.'

'This is fine. Thanks though,' I said, even though I'd have been grateful to swap. I always slept on the left side and Jenna slept on the right. I wanted things to be different here.

I manoeuvred my way past my suitcases and sat on the empty bed.

'OK, some things you should probably know . . . I like to keep the window open as much as possible – fresh air helps me think clearly. I only listen to music on my headphones. I've been told that I snore like a mammal of considerable size – but that's only when my allergies are playing up. What else? Oh yeah, I'm a lesbian, so if you're not cool with that, you might as well say so now.'

I focused on the interesting bit. 'Do I look like someone who wouldn't be cool with that?'

She narrowed her eyes as if I was trying to trick her. 'I'm not sure what you look like yet.' She paused. 'But people can be assholes, even when they don't look like assholes. My last roommate freaked out when she

found out – reckoned I was going to jump on her in the middle of the night . . . can I just say she *wished*! Anyway, so I thought this time I'd go for full disclosure. There's just no easy way to drop it into conversation, is there?' She stopped and took a breath. 'Sorry. Too much, too soon?'

'Full disclosure works for me. I'm bi.' It was only the third time I'd said it out loud. As Rowan said, it's not something you just drop into a conversation.

Rowan's eyes lit up and she pumped her fist. 'Excellent! Duncraggan's queer quota was badly in need of a boost. I'm president of the LGBTQIA+ Society if you want to join? No pressure. Actually, fuck "no pressure". You have to join Queer Soc. It's your roommately duty.'

'I don't know . . . I've never really been into societies or clubs or whatever.'

'How about you join just so I can prove to Miss Maddox that it's not a pointless waste of time? You don't have to come to meetings.'

'Deal.'

'And if you could wear a pair of rainbow shoelaces every once in a while, that would be great. And a badge.'

'There are badges?'

Rowan pointed to her chest but I wasn't close enough to read it so I had to lean forward: 'Do I look straight to you?' was written in rainbow letters.

I laughed, and Rowan smiled. 'And if you don't like that one, there are a few other options . . . I may have got a bit over-enthusiastic when I found the website,' she said sheepishly.

She reached under her bed and pulled out a cardboard box full to the brim with round metal badges. After much deliberation I picked one with the bisexual pride flag on it. 'You can take a unicorn one as well, if you like? I think there are a couple left – everyone likes fucking unicorns.'

'Really? I always find their horns get in the way. They can take someone's eye out if you're not careful.'

Rowans laughed for longer than the joke deserved. I was surprised; it usually took me a lot longer to be myself around people. But Rowan was blunt and weird and like no one I'd ever met before. I didn't know it then, but she would turn out to be exactly what I needed.

FIVE

At 11.50 p.m. I head to Lily and Ama's room with the torch tucked into the back pocket of my jeans. I open the door and stifle a scream at the leering clown face in front of me. 'Get your mask on, Kent. I want to take a photo . . . for posterity,' says Lily, voice muffled under the plastic.

The three of us pose for the creepiest selfie ever: a clown, a zombie and, most terrifying of all, Donald Trump. I was actually glad I got the Trump mask, because it meant I didn't have to look at it.

We creep along the corridor to the turret room – the only single on our floor. The door creaks when Lily opens it. We tiptoe over to the bed and look down at our victim, curled up tight like dormouse. Kirsty Connor is frowning in her sleep and making these strange little distress noises. Perhaps she'll be glad of the wake-up call.

Lily switches on her torch and shines it in the girl's

face. She taps her on the shoulder and waits for the eyes to open. I've never asked the others, but I'd imagine most people's reaction would be to scream, or at least try to. I did, when it was my turn. A hand was placed over my mouth to stifle it. The hand smelled of lotion – coconut and lime. It's strange, the things you notice when you're scared out of your mind. Kirsty doesn't try to scream, although her eyes nearly pop right out of her head in shock.

Lily starts the spiel, about Duncraggan's long and illustrious history and how when the time comes, every girl must prove herself. 'Tonight, you are the Chosen One. Rule One: no talking. Rule Two: no screaming, shouting, struggling or biting. Rule Three: no crying to the teachers tomorrow morning. Understood?'

The new girl nods. We whip the duvet off her to see that she's only wearing a T-shirt and a little pair of shorts. 'Give her a dressing gown at least – she'll freeze,' I whisper to Lily.

Lily's leering clown face turns to me. 'Did YOU have a dressing gown? Look, I didn't make up the rules. She'll be fine.'

It's Ama's job to do the blindfolding. Tonight's blindfold is one of those eye masks you get in First Class on a plane (apparently). Kirsty doesn't look particularly scared or worried. Her face is curiously blank. It occurs to me that maybe she thinks this is a dream.

We propel Kirsty through the castle with no problems, other than Ama banging her elbow against the suit of armour at the end of the corridor. (Rowan loves that suit of armour; she calls it Ralph in homage to Judy Blume, which is doubly weird because Rowan definitely does not like penises.)

The three of us let out a sigh of relief when we close the library door behind us. The library is one of my favourite places. It looks like the set of a costume drama: rich red velvet curtains and Persian rugs and fancy old furniture. I even like the slightly fusty, musty smell. Only senior students are allowed in – Maddox says it's a privilege for us to be in the midst of all these boring old books about nineteenth century flora and fauna of the Western Isles and biographies of the Earl of this and the Lord of that. The books that anyone might ever want to actually read are kept in the other library, in the east wing. The best thing about this room is the enormous fireplace. I like it best when it's just me and Rowan in here, sitting on either side of the fire like characters in a gothic novel. We manoeuvre the new girl over to my favourite chair – one of those green leather wingback ones that make you feel like you should smoke cigars. Ama sets her torch on a side table and angles it to face one of the bookcases.

Lily and Ama leave me to guard the prisoner while they get to work on the bookcase. I tuck the torch

into the waistband of Kirsty's shorts. She flinches at my touch.

The bookcase is supposed to slide away from the wall but the girls are struggling. 'Well, don't just stand there! Give us a hand!' Lily the Clown sounds stressed.

I grab a shelf and pull. When the bookcase finally starts to move, Lily elbows me in the side. 'We totally loosened it for you.' She runs her fingers around wooden panelling on the wall, until her fingers find the catch that loosens the middle panel. She removes it and sets it aside, revealing an alcove carved out of the stone wall. The Hole. It's tiny. Not high enough to stand up in, not wide enough to lie down in. All you can do is sit and wait for the enemy soldiers or religious persecutors or whoever to give up their search so you can go about your business, ordering your servants around or kicking peasants.

We manage to get the new girl inside and sitting down on the little ledge. 'Put your hand out,' Lily orders, and Kirsty obeys without hesitation.

Lily takes the matchbox from her pocket and places it on Kirsty's palm. 'Right. Please don't go freaking out or anything. No one will hear you if you scream, we know that for a fact. There's nothing to be scared of, it's just a little. . . test. We've all done it. There are forty matches in there. They reckon it says a lot about you, how many matches you use . . . but I

wouldn't worry too much about it. Loads of people use all the matches so it's nothing to be ashamed of.' No prizes for guessing that Lily was one of those people. 'There's a bottle of water in there just in case you accidentally set fire to yourself. We'll be back in the morning . . . Um . . . sorry about this . . . and welcome to Duncraggan Castle.'

We remove the blindfold and seal her into the Hole. Rowan's right: it *is* barbaric. Thank God she has that torch. Still, it feels like we're burying the new girl alive.