Together we fly higher

Skylarks



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LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

Part One



CHAPTER ONE

We did this school trip to a castle once, where they got us dressing up as either knights, princesses or servants. No prizes for guessing which one I got. Right now, I feel like I'm still wearing that servant costume. Dad senses it too; he keeps putting down his pint to pull at his shirt collar. We're on one of our three-times-a-year meals out, on account of Jack turning twelve, but the place is packed with people who look like being here's as normal as going up the chippie.

'So,' Dad says, 'twelve eh? That means next year you're going to be …' he does a drum roll with his two forefingers on the table, then says in a voice of fake doom, 'a Teenager.'

Dad did this routine with Jamie, then me, when we both turned thirteen. Mum smiles around the table, while Jamie leans over to ruffle Jack's hair. Jack ducks, and when he comes up runs his fingers over the gelled bit he's got going on at the top. The rest of it's shaved; it's what all the lads are wearing and Lorraine next door's pretty good with the clippers, so we treated Jack this morning. I catch Mum giving me a don't-take-the-mick look and a faint wink.

'Yep, it'll be all slamming doors and "I never asked to be born" and *girls*,' Dad goes on, trying to make Jack go red. He made pretty much the same speech to me, substituting the 'girls' for 'boys', back before everyone cottoned on that there wasn't exactly going to be boys on the cards for me. As if sensing my thoughts, Dad says, 'You'll be giving your sister a run for her money before long, I'll bet.'

Everyone groans, and I say, '*Urgh*, Daaaad,' in a way that lets him know I'm partly exasperated, but mainly OK with how he's not fussed who I like. Then he seems to have the same thought, because he says in an even louder voice, 'Or you might decide you like boys, son, and that's fine with your mother and me, isn't it, Marian?'

Mum nods, but I spot her glancing around as Dad downs the rest of his pint. She's always the one who's more worried about what people will think. I follow Mum's gaze and meet the eyes of a woman at a table across from us, with perfect make up and smart-casual clothes you can tell cost a bomb. She sniffs and looks away.

I can't help the faint flush that works its way over my cheeks. Dad's trying to get the attention of a waiter, but it seems my six-foot thirteen-stone father has somehow become invisible. I stare around the restaurant. It's the third nicest one in our little market town; we wouldn't go for Molray's which has two Michelin stars and is definitely too pricey, even if it wasn't for Jamie getting the sack from there, or the local gastropub, but none of us wanted to go up The Olde Inne, where Jamie's got his latest job as a sous-chef. So we've ended up here, where the floors are wood and there's hunting prints and a massive stone

fireplace with a real fire blazing away, though spring is definitely here and it's pretty nice out. I guess it's a tradition of sorts, even if none of us are totally ourselves in a place like this.

There's a gust of laughter from the next table down. They came in after us; two boys and two girls about my age, all slouched walks and those accents all the kids have at the local posh school. No parents in sight. When one of them, a girl with super shiny dark hair, swears, Mum frowns in their direction.

'I'm full,' I announce to no one in particular, mainly to distract Mum. Jamie doesn't bother to ask before he spears the last of my veg with his fork. I had the veggie option – I'm not massively down with eating animals – and I probably could've managed that last piece of purple broccoli, but it's worth it because Mum pulls her attention back to the table and says for the hundredth time, 'How about you, Jack? You want anything else? You can have a dessert if you want.'

The word 'dessert' instead of 'afters' sounds wrong, especially the way Mum says it, and Jack gives her a bemused look. 'Nah, you're all right, thanks.'

'Go on, it's your birthday.'

Dad has finally got the waiter's attention. He clears our plates, ignoring our thank yous as he piles them up. Maybe you're not supposed to say thanks, just pretend the waiter doesn't exist, like that twitchy-nosed woman sitting there like something got rammed up her behind. I realise, looking around, how upright everyone else is. My family all tend to lean down to meet our food, but it isn't the way other

people sit in here. I feel my own spine lengthen, then I purposely slouch back down.

'*Who cares, Joni?*' That's what Kelly would say. I'll go over to hers later, tell her all about this, and even though her family could afford to eat at Molray's any time they wanted, she'll have a laugh with me and tell me I'm being ridiculous. She'd probably have a point.

The waiter brings back some menus.

'Can we have some more water, please?' Dad says.

'Still or sparkling?' the waiter says.

'Just tap again, son,' Dad says.

I catch a smirk on the waiter's face when he turns away. Fish and chips at home followed by one of Mum's cakes sounds just right round about now, especially as the group next to us are still laughing like only they exist. When one of them drops another f-bomb, Mum turns round and says, 'Do you mind not swearing? My son here's only twelve.'

They apologise, but when she turns back, the dark-haired girl and the two boys pull faces and whisper together. There's another girl with them, her hair arranged on top of her head in that expensively messy way you see on the posh girls round here. She's not smiling.

Mum's persuaded Jack to have the biggest pudding on the menu, some sort of sundae which comes with sparklers, although the rest of us all pretend we're too full. You're not allowed to bring your own cake in here but we'll all sing 'Happy Birthday' anyway, stuff what anyone else thinks.

We wait for the sundae to arrive, chatting about nothing

stuff like what's been on telly. Mum doesn't watch much, but she loves *Call the Midwife*, even though she's guaranteed to bawl at pretty much every episode. Jamie's quiet compared to usual; he'd normally be joking around with Dad, but I can see he's not happy about having to yell over the top of the brayers, who've got even louder, if that's possible. They have wine and everything on their table, even though they only look my age. Maybe the management turns a blind eye for people like them. But where it makes me a wee bit irritated and a lot uncomfy, like I've done something wrong except I don't know what it is, the expression on Jamie's face is pure lava. It's one I've seen too many times the last few months, since whatever it was that got him the chop from his last job. His rants at the tea table are getting way too regular, and with a sinking feeling I can see he's winding up to start one now.

He leans forward. 'So Dealo reckons this thing with the estate's going to go through. We could all be out on our ears by –'

'Jamie.' Dad doesn't use that voice often and it stops Jamie in his tracks, but only for a second.

'But how is it f–'

'Jamie.' This time there's a real warning in Dad's voice. 'Not tonight.'

Fair. We can see the shape of the word Jamie was about to say. Things being fair, or not fair, is becoming a right theme with him. Far as I'm concerned, I'm with Mum and Dad: don't borrow trouble, and concentrate on what you do have is their motto. What's the point in spending all that energy hating random people because they've got more

than you? Even if there's a few at the next table I could work myself up to disliking.

But Jack's birthday is definitely not the time for one of Jamie's lectures. He knows it too and shuts his mouth as the waiter shows back up and plonks down a new jug of water.

Maybe to diffuse the tension, or because he's seen it on telly or something, Jack picks up a spoon and taps at the side of his Coke. 'I'd like to make a speech,' he announces.

We look at him, amused, and I smile as he gives a cough, goes red, then says, 'Just to say thanks very much for my birthday and for the PlayStation,' – me and Jamie managed to find an old PS2 and some vintage games on eBay – 'and for my tea.' He gives us a Jack-special – this innocently cheeky grin that always makes you want to hug him, even when he's done something annoying like scoffing the last of the biscuits and not telling anyone.

Then I notice the restaurant has gone quiet. The lads on the next table are sniggering, both the girls trying to shush them, although the dark-haired one is laughing as she does.

Before I have the chance to get irritated, I spot the sparklers approaching. I nudge Jamie and we start to sing 'Happy Birthday'. Jack's eyes get wide, and Mum and Dad exchange smiles as they begin to sing too and suddenly everything is perfect, because we're a unit, us Coopers, never mind about Jamie being weird these days. He's got over himself anyway and is singing loudest of all, and Jack's face is all happy and pink. He's already reaching for his spoon.

Then one of the boys at the next table, the arrogantly good-looking one, shoves back his chair without looking, because he's busy still braying, just as the waiter goes past.

The waiter trips, does a comedy run for a couple of paces before finally losing his balance and crashing to the ground, propelling the sundae, sparklers and all, up into the air. We all watch in horror as it comes down.

Right into my lap.

CHAPTER TWO

'*Aargh!*' The combination of cold sundae spreading over my legs and hot sparklers in the vicinity of my boobs is not the best feeling in the world.

Mum lunges across the table and throws a glass of water over me. Two waitresses rush over. One helps the waiter up, the other starts saying sorry to me. Mum grabs two napkins, hesitates for a second because they're these thick cloth ones, then chucks them to me. I use them to scoop the worst of the ice cream off and dump it on the table. Dad's saying, 'Are you burnt, Joni?'

Jamie says, 'Je-sus,' and Mum says, 'Watch your mouth.'

Jack's gone quiet, his round face shocked.

The boy who tripped the waiter is saying, 'So sorry,' in a lazy voice, but behind him the black-haired girl and the other boy are killing themselves laughing, and not trying to hide it. I can't see the face of the blonde one.

I stand, lumps of sundae still dripping off my top. Arrogant-face boy spots my expression and his apologies turn slightly more sincere. He says to one of the hovering waitresses, 'I'll pay,' without directly looking at her, then looks me up and down and says, 'I'll get one for all of them.'

And maybe it's something about the way he says 'them', but even my hackles go up.

Jamie shoves his chair back too. 'No thanks, *mate*,' he spits out and I know his 'mate' is standing in for a totally different four-letter word. Jamie's white with anger.

The atmosphere sharpens. Arrogant-face boy stares at Jamie in the worst possible way and I suck in a breath and step closer to my big brother, but Dad puts his hand on Jamie's arm and propels him outside to cool down before anything else can happen. The waiter is already bringing in another sundae, but even though Jack smiles, I can feel the moment's ruined. Once Jack's started eating, Mum chatting at him in a too-bright voice, I get up.

'Going to sort this out,' I say.

Mum nods.

In the toilet I take off my shirt and rinse it under the tap. There's a singe mark on the front and I wince; that was my favourite shirt. At least I was wearing a vest top underneath. My jeans are spattered with ice cream as well. I bundle the shirt into a ball and leave it on the side of the sink while I go into one of the cubicles.

I'm finishing up when I hear the door open and a loud, posh voice drawl, 'Oh, come on, Annabel, it was hilarious. I wish I'd been filming.'

If the other person makes a reply, I don't hear, because I've already pushed my way out of the cubicle in time to see the blonde girl picking up my shirt. Next to her, the other girl's laughing.

I can't help channelling Jamie. I glare at them.

The first girl looks like she couldn't care less, but the blonde girl's pale face flushes, as she holds out my shirt to me. I can see she's about to say sorry, but I take it from her before she gets the chance and walk out, conscious my greying bra straps are showing under my vest top.

Dad's come back in to sort out the bill. 'I told Jamie to wait outside,' he says in a low voice to Mum. We get the sundae for free and on the walk home, we try and keep the mood up for Jack, but Jamie walks a couple of paces apart from the rest of us.

When we get home he turns on Dad, his jaw jutting. 'You should've let me lump him. Bunch of –' he glances at Mum, 'idiots.'

Dad sighs. 'And what good would that've done, son? Eh?'

Jamie mumbles something about, 'Teach him a lesson,' but I can see the anger's draining out of him now. Jack's looking from one face to another and I chew at the side of a nail. This isn't how his birthday was supposed to be. In fact, nothing seems like it's supposed to be these days, and it's all since Jamie landed that swishy job and then got fired. Since then he's stopped being my usual laid-back big brother and turned into some rant-machine.

But it's Jack's birthday and I can't stand to see him looking so worried. I nudge him on the shoulder. 'Didn't you say your PlayStation's got Tetris Worlds on it?'

Jack's face lights up.

'Come on. I'll show you how the master does it,' I say.

The next day, I manage to sleep right through my alarm, so by the time Mum comes to investigate why I'm not up yet

I've got about twenty minutes to get ready and bike it down to the library. I take the world's speediest shower, cursing myself for being such a heavy sleeper. Kelly insists I snore like mad, which is clearly a total lie, but all I know is sleep is like this great comforting blanket to look forward to at the end of a long day. And I always seem to have exciting dreams.

Mum's already on her way out – she's on a double today – and Jamie will have left hours ago; but Jack's there at the table, hunched over a bowl piled with Weetabix. He never sleeps in on a Saturday.

'Morning,' I say, stretching out my Wiltshire accent to make it all Farmer Giles-like.

He replies through a mouthful, so it comes out a muffled *muuhh-ihh*. I go to the bread bin and it's empty. So's the milk, apart from a dribble I'd better leave for Dad.

Jack gives me a guilty look over his spoon, then treats me to a Jack-special, cheeks chubbed up as he grins. How does that work every single time?

I smile back. 'I'll go to the shop on the way home. What you up to today? Going round Dylan's?'

He nods. Jack and Dylan next door have been mates about as long as me and Kelly. Dylan's all right, even if Lorraine can be a bit much sometimes. She knows everything about everyone and if she doesn't, she makes it her business to find out.

I check my phone; I am seriously late. 'Got to go. Take a cup of tea up to Dad before you go out,' I say. I give him a quick kiss on the top of his head, getting a waft of warm Weetabix and sleep. It reminds me of when he was a baby. He'd sit for hours on my lap in front of the telly. Mum

reckons he was born happy. Apparently, I was 'a tornado'. I wonder where that energy all went, because this morning I'm hanging.

I stop at the back door. 'Make sure you take your phone and tell him when you're back. And don't be late for tea.'

Jack waves his milky spoon goodbye and I'm off out into the morning air.

The sky is white as I pull out of our little cul-de-sac on Jamie's knackered old bike. I've lived here my whole life, know every pothole and grass verge. I like being up high with the wind pushing across my cheeks as I whizz past tall hedges and trees that are just beginning to show signs of spring blossom, reaching towards each other to form a tunnel over the road.

I settle into a rhythm, pushing away worries about the essay I didn't quite finish last night, about money for food, and the thing Jamie keeps bringing up – that our houses are all getting sold to some private company. They're owned by a charity now, but from what Mum and Dad say, the charity's 'gone downhill' over the last few years, so I figure it might be a good thing for someone else to take over. Could mean there's more cash for stuff like fixing the damp, or the shower, which comes closer to packing up altogether every year. Maybe we'll even get proper double-glazed windows and central heating, so it's nice and toasty instead of the usual hop-about-freezing-your-butt-off nightmare on winter mornings. Last time I tried saying all that to Jamie though, he just laughed like I don't know anything, but I'm with Dad on it: why borrow trouble? Better not to

think about it at all, and especially not about the homework I've got piling up at home. An image of my French teacher, Miss Armstrong, comes to my mind. She stopped me again after lessons the other day, going on about uni open days.

'I don't know, Miss,' I said, when she showed me a pile of prospectuses. I didn't want to ask how Mum would get time off work to drive me, or where we'd get money from for petrol or train fares if I went on my own. Or what I'd even do at uni anyway.

'Have a think about it. Perhaps we could chat again next week?' she said. Her hopeful look, and thoughts of the prospectuses shoved at the bottom of the recycling box go on to my mental list of things to stop worrying about.

I stand on the pedals again, pushing, pushing. The future is like that great white sky above me – I don't have a clue what I'm supposed to write on it. What I'm allowed to. And then for some reason, the restaurant pops into my head. Jack's face, the shock of that sundae going into my lap. It would've been funny if it had just been us lot. And that girl in the toilet …

I'm coming up fast on a sharp bend when a car suddenly appears on my side of the road. I slam on the rusty brakes and swerve on to a patch of gravelly stones, the bike going out from under me. I hit the ground, pain jolting up my leg like a firework and wind up half in the hedge.

I lie still as the car roars off behind me. Then I untangle myself from the bike, wincing at the hot throbbing in my shoulder and knee. I bend my leg a couple of times, decide it's probably fine, although I'm going to have one hell of a bruise, and take a look at the bike.

It seems OK – if there's a new scratch it's merged with the existing ones. The chain's popped off, and I kneel on my good knee to push it back on, getting my hands covered with grease. I wobble the rest of the way to the library.

Mrs Hendry's car is already in the car park when I creak in, red in the face and puffing hard, leg still on fire and shoulder not much better. Next to her car is Dave's blue transit, one back door open to reveal a stack of boxed donations. Someone's scratched a pair of boobs into the dirt on the back. A couple of spaces down from it is a really posh Audi parked all wonky, paintwork gleaming like the shiny new *Huntington Library* sign with that weird little crest thing they put up a couple of weeks ago. I liked it better when it was just plain old *LIBRARY* in black letters. Above it, the clock reads ten past nine. I chain my bike to the railing and run up the steps.

I bang through the double doors and nearly barrel right into Mrs H, who's standing next to the desk.

I jump back, still panting. 'Sorry I'm late. I fell off my bike.'

Mrs H's irritated expression changes to one of concern. 'Have you hurt yourself?'

'Bashed my knee, but it's OK, I think.'

'Well, good. I've been waiting for you to get here.' Mrs H's face takes on this satisfied shine. 'I have some news. We've got a new helper starting today. She's going to be with us for the next few months.'

I frown; we can't afford to pay anyone else. I've been doing this library job ever since I got the chop from the vets after Jazzy, our cat, got run down and we couldn't

afford to pay the bill. They fixed her for free and once the Huntingtons gave the library a load of cash, I managed to get my Saturday job here, at sub-minimum wage, obvs. But still, it's a job and anyway I like it in the library.

'She's volunteering. To help with her university application,' Mrs H says.

'Oh right. Fair enough.' I wonder who from school Mrs H has got in. No one mentioned it to me. I go over to the desk and turn on the second PC.

'I want you to help her settle in,' Mrs H says. She has this nervous smile on her face, like the time when the local MP came for a visit and it was in the *Evening Gazette*. I follow her gaze to where a tall girl is walking towards us holding two cups. The adrenalin that's just started settling after my bike crash dials straight back up to ten as I take in her messy-yet-stylish ponytail, sunglasses pushed up on top of her head, her pristine clothes. The look of surprise on her face as she clocks me.

'Ah, here she is!' Mrs H says in an overly bright voice. 'Annabel insisted on making the coffee.' She turns to me. 'Annabel, this is Joni. Joni …' There's the tiniest of pauses, as though Mrs H is about to make some important announcement. 'Meet Annabel Huntington.'

I bite back an exclamation that was probably going to end in a swear word.

It's only the girl from the restaurant.

CHAPTER THREE

Annabel Huntington. Blimey. And she's going to be volunteering here? What for? Is it to keep an eye on us all for her dad? Then I remember Mrs H said about her UCAS or something. Surely any uni would let her in if her dad had a word in the ear of someone important – that's how it works for people like her, isn't it? Then I flash back to the restaurant, and her handing me my wrecked shirt, and I feel a flush pushing up my neck.

I reckon Annabel's having similar thoughts, but she recovers fast, puts the coffees down and holds out a long, pale hand, which she's clearly expecting me to shake.

I give it a stiff up-and-down, wondering how hard you're supposed to hold on. Her fingers are cool, but it seems like mine heat up as she says, 'Lovely to meet you again,' and looks right into my eyes.

Something weird happens in the vicinity of my stomach.

'Er, yeah, me too. I mean, you too … likewise.' I look down, which is enough to see she has amazing legs, ending in what even I can tell are designer sandals. I snap my eyes back up to her face, feeling my own go redder, if that's even possible.

Likewise?! For God's sake, Joni.

She smiles. The sort of self-assured smile that makes me feel like I'm about twelve again, with a crush on Miss Narayan, my old Geography teacher.

My face forgets to smile back.

I drop her hand suddenly, see her eyes go to my fingers, which are still coated in grease and for bonus points there's a whacking great grass stain and a smear of mud up my jeans leg, so that makes twice I've met this girl while covered in muck. Brilliant.

'Uh … I'll just go and sort myself out,' I say, and make a dash for the toilets.

I give my jeans a quick rub down with some toilet roll, which gets the worst of the mud off, but does nothing for the grass stain. I wash my hands and tell myself to get a grip. So she's working here, it's not a massive deal. I bet she lasts a couple of weeks, tops, before she gets bored. Can't imagine someone like her sticking about for too long. I'm still red in the face when I come out and see Annabel and Mrs H relaxing with their coffees in the two chairs by the desk. I hover, scanning my brain for something to say and ignoring the too-rich smell of the coffee. Mrs H clearly cracked out the posh stuff you have to make in one of those pots with a plunger, but I've never liked the smell – it's too loud somehow.

I realise Mrs H is waiting for me to reply to something she's just said, but I don't have a clue what it was. Annabel arches her perfect eyebrows.

Luckily, Dave barrels through the doors at that moment with a massive box in his hands and plonks it on the floor.

'Where do you want all these?' he asks the room in general. I notice he's avoiding looking at Annabel, like he's shy of her. Dave lives on our estate and does painting, decorating and various odd jobs.

'I'll give you a hand,' I say and follow him out. Anything to get away from the two of them in there. Dave's admiring the Audi, which must belong to Annabel. As I come up beside him he gives a low whistle.

'That's top of the range, that,' he says.

'Yeah?' I say and I'm surprised to hear a hard Jamie-like edge creeping into my voice. As I heft up the first box, I realise the prickling feeling in my stomach has intensified into something approaching anger. I'd just got settled in the library, liked it, as far as a job goes, and now I'm going to be stuck with Annabel Huntington. What am I going to say to her? The library, with its threadbare carpets and ancient PCs, isn't exactly her sort of place, is it?

Or maybe it's way more her sort of place than mine.

I remember when I first used to go in the library. Mrs H would give me wary looks from behind her desk, assuming I was with the kids from school who used to hang around. They never did anything much, maybe smoked a few fags outside, left a couple of crisp packets lying about, but the main thing they were guilty of was just being there. It got so that people only had to sit in a circle at the edge of the car park after school before the woman who lives in the old Victorian house at the end of the road was calling up the school or the local council to complain. Eventually, everyone moved on and it was only me left. I'd sit in the corner of the library, next to the radiator doing my homework, or

reading. Still took weeks before Mrs H properly chatted to me and a good while later until she asked me if I was interested in a job. And someone like Annabel gets that straight away, because of who she is, or at least who her dad is. Suddenly it strikes me as totally unfair.

Just like Jamie always says.

The thought makes me plonk the box down extra hard when I've heaved it inside, like I'm having a go at squashing it flat. I don't want to be angry all the time like my brother. I give a sigh. Mrs H is watching me from behind the computer. Annabel seems to have disappeared already.

'You will be nice, won't you?' Mrs H says, her voice aiming for jokey but coming out with a warning bite to it.

I give her an I-don't-know-what-you-mean look, eyes wide. Then, to wind her up, I say, 'Where's Madame got to anyway? She hasn't gone home already, has she?'

I don't mean my voice to sound so hopeful.

'Not quite.' I turn around to see Annabel lugging in a gigantic box. We've done all right with donations this month.

I stare and then she says, 'Would you take the other end, thank you.' It doesn't come out as a question, more of a command. I feel like Jazzy when he spots next-door-but-one's huge scraggy ginger cat in our garden. If I had a tail it'd be puffed out like a bog brush right about now, getting ready to fight if I'm cornered.

I grab the other end and almost pull the box out of her hands, so that she staggers a step, then lets go as I swing it down on top of my own box. We straighten and I catch her eye, my eyebrows raised in a 'yeah?' expression as if she's

about to start on me. Annabel's face takes on a flush which probably mirrors my own; apparently neither of us wants to be the one who looks away first.

Mrs H's voice breaks into the stand-off. 'That was the last one, wasn't it? Well then, you girls can take these to the storeroom to sort through them together, yes?' She doesn't wait for a response. 'Wonderful.'

Annabel's face seems to be saying the same thing that's going through my mind, which is something along the lines of *oh yeah, wonderful*.

Completely, totally, *wonderful*.

CHAPTER FOUR

'So then she opens up a box and lets out this little shriek, seriously, like a proper girly shriek, and looks at her nail to see if she's chipped her manicure,' I say in the pub later on that night. The whole gang is here: tall, skinny Pete, looking at Kelly with hopeful eyes, me, and Ed and Stacey who've been a thing for a few months now. Stace is sat on Ed's lap in the corner, while Pete's kicking my arse in a game of pool. Kelly's leaning against the pool table, a drink in her hand. The Crown always lets us in, as long as we stick to soft drinks. My knee's still hurting and my arms feel like I was doing press-ups for the last four hours, courtesy of lugging boxes about half the day. And I'm knackered from the effort of trying to be polite to Annabel and find things to say to her; one day has already shown me we have literally nothing in common.

I think about Mrs H giving Annabel the 'grand tour' of the library, and the community hall which is through a linking door, and the way Annabel looked at everything with this totally inscrutable face so you couldn't tell what she was thinking. I could probably join a few of those dots up, seeing the place through her eyes; the windows with

their flaking paint and the scuffed-up floor in the hall, the worn patches on the carpet and our motley donations lining the shelves.

Kelly's got one eyebrow up like she knows I'm enjoying my rant a teensy bit too much, but I'm on a roll. 'Honestly, she's so annoying. I don't 'spect she'll last too long though.' I lean over and crack the pink into the top left-hand pocket with a satisfying – and to be truthful, fairly rare – *thwack*.

When I look up, Kelly's pinching her chin between her finger and thumb, her eyes narrowing in the way they do when her brain's on overdrive. There's a small smile on her face, which I pretend not to notice, conscious I may have neglected to mention Annabel actually looked at her nail because she'd broken it down to the quick. I felt pretty bad when I saw that as it happens. I even said, 'That looks nasty – do you want me to get you a plaster?' but she drew herself up and said, 'No, thank you, I can manage,' like me offering to help her was an affront or something. The version I told fits better anyway. And don't ask me with whose idea of her. It just does.

'Come on, maybe you should give her a chance,' Pete says.

'I would, but she's –' I break off. What is Annabel like? She has this thing about her, like some sort of invisible protective bubble – you can see it in the way she moves, how she looks at things. I don't know exactly what it takes to get that sort of shine, but I'm guessing it's easier when your family aren't exactly short of a fortune or two. '… annoying,' I finish up, my voice sounding lame even to me.

'I can't believe her dad's *the* Mr Huntington. They're minted,' Stace says from Ed's lap.

'Do you remember that thing in the paper, with the ball?' Pete says. He's talking about this massive charity ball the Huntingtons put on last Christmas at the Town Hall. They even got the High Street shut off. Mum got caught in the resulting traffic jam.

'Yep, minted,' Ed says.

'So what?' I take another shot and miss.

Pete takes the cue and starts cleaning up the table.

'Wouldn't mind her money though,' Stace says. She's still on Ed's lap, one leg hooked behind his. 'They've got a massive mansion out by the Downs, don't they?'

I shrug, as if I don't already know this.

'If I was rich,' Stace says on a sigh, 'I'd do some serious shopping. And get extensions.'

'You don't need them, you're gorgeous already,' Ed says, to a general chorus of sick noises. Stace winds one arm around his neck.

I watch them for a moment, how natural they are. How they seem to be really happy together. A tiny part of me wants that; to have someone sitting on my lap, my arms around them.

I spot Pete giving Kelly a swift look, all open and longing, and her pretending she hasn't noticed. Most of the time Pete's crush on her isn't awkward; she'll laugh it off or say, 'Stop trying to get into my pants,' if Pete says something nice to her, but it's never in a mean way.

He gives his head a little shake and then looks at me. 'If I was rich I'd travel, go to China. See the Great Wall,' he says. 'What about you?'

I pause, listening to the jukebox blaring, and the babble of voices. What would I do if I had a shedload of money? Get Mum and Dad a house, for starters, so Mum stops worrying about her evil boss and getting shifts, and Dad stops having to mainline painkillers for his back. But that's a bit sad, so I take a deep breath of beery air through my nose and say, 'I don't know. Get some driving lessons?'

'Boring,' Stace says. I know she's just joking, but I feel a flicker of annoyance; Stace's parents got her driving lessons for her seventeenth a couple of months ago.

Pete cracks in the last ball and turns to me with a smirk. 'I'll have another Coke, please.'

Loser always gets the winner a drink. I go to the bar and wave at Nic. She was a couple of years above me at school and has a younger brother who Kelly dated for a bit a while ago. Everyone knows everyone else, or at least us townies do. The posh kids have their own places to hang out, I guess.

Nic's got stunning skin. It has this warm glow about it, unlike mine which seems to break out on a monthly basis. Bloody periods, excuse the pun. Her skin reminds me of Annabel's; she's not got a spot in sight either. Then I shake my head, annoyed I'm still thinking about her.

Kelly appears. She leans over the bar to grab a straw, then twirls it between her fingers before looking up through her long fringe at me. 'So Annabel. I take it she's a hottie?' She taps the straw against her mouth and grins.

'I haven't really thought about it,' I say, aiming for breezy and totally missing, which makes Kelly grin even more and say, '*Mm-huh*?' with a waggle of her eyebrows.

'*No,* Kelly. There will be no *mm*s or *huh*s,' I say in my sternest voice.

'OK, OK. Was just saying.' Kelly laughs, then turns to Nic and says, 'Can I have half a cider, please?'

Nic rolls her eyes. 'You've turned eighteen since last week, have you?'

Kelly shrugs. 'Worth a try. Lemonade then. And one for Joni too.'

I open my mouth to protest, but Kelly says, 'Don't bother.'

I get this warm rush of affection for her; trust Kelly to know I'll stand my loser's round, but I've only got enough cash left for one drink.

'Thanks,' I say.

While Nic pours our drinks, Kelly stretches her arms up to the ceiling, showing off a dark stomach where her top's ridden up, and yawns. 'God, I'm knackered. I think I've been to every shop on the High Street. I've probably got blisters.' She pulls off a shoe to look at her heel, then wafts her leg in my face. 'I have as well, look.'

I push it away, laughing. 'You get no sympathy from me.' I think about Kelly's room – with its heaps of clothes on the floor, piled on her chair and spewing out over the top of her tall chest of drawers – and shake my head.

Kelly takes a sip of her drink, then says, 'So … back to this Annabel girl.'

'Oh my God, stop, for the love of …' I cast around for inspiration, 'shoes.' I'm grinning, but for once Kelly has a straight face.

'It's just, I reckon this is the first time I've seen you get worked up over a girl since you were going out with Lara.'

I shake my head. 'I swear, it's really not like that,' I say.

'Oh yeah?'

'Seriously yeah. It's about as far from that as it's possible to be.'

'*Uh-huh*.'

'Way-*huh*.'

'OK.' She pauses for a moment. 'But she is fit though?'

I think about this a bit too long before I say, 'Not really.'

'Ah-ha!'

'Shut up, Kells.'

I take a long drink because, to my extreme annoyance, I'm blushing.

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