MY BOX-SHAPED HEART

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MACMILLAN



First published 2018 by Macmillan Children's Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-5098-3957-5

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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To Rosie, with much love.

CHAPTER ONE

Under the surface, deep in the blue-lit water, nobody can see me.

There's nobody to judge the clothes I wear, or the way my hair frizzles around my head like a halo. I'm wearing a black Speedo swimsuit, which looks like a million others. I'm under here, and when I pull my arms up, gliding and cutting through the surface, it still feels secure.

I count my strokes and revel in my power as I speed from one end of the pool to the other. I regulate my breathing. This is my thing. I have control.

I roll over and float on my back in the water. The sunlight pours through the glass panels in the roof and sparkles across the pool's surface, shooting off prisms of light, which dapple the tiled walls.

Something hits me on the side of my leg and I feel the water sloshing over my face and up my nose. Instinctively I reach out to grab something, but I'm in the middle of the pool and there's nothing there. I bob sideways, like a cork, and my feet stretch down to find the tiled floor. I swipe the water from my eyes and tuck a dripping strand of hair behind my ear.

'Hey.'

The sound is distorted by the echoing acoustics of the swimming pool.

'Sorry – didn't see you there.'

My eyes are stinging from the chlorine. I blink, hard, and the person in front of me comes into focus. I step back reflexively, realizing it's a boy. The resistance of the water makes it hard, and I wobble sideways. It's hard to be graceful when you're up to your shoulders in a swimming pool.

'I didn't spot you under there.' His face is apologetic: eyebrows half raised, mouth in a smile that somehow tugs down at the corners. 'Sorry. Didn't mean to land on your head.'

'You didn't.' I tug at the strap of my swimsuit, looking down. 'It's fine.'

I'm conscious that it's a bit too small and a bit too tight. Generally, I don't stand close enough to other people for them to notice me.

One of the eyebrows lifts up as we stand there for a second, neither of us saying anything.

He's taller than me – which is unusual – and on his head is a wet thatch of dark brown hair. He rakes a hand through it, and there's an awkward moment where neither of us quite knows where to look. That's the moment when the fact that we're both standing in a pool of water, wearing almost no clothes, seems to cross both of our minds at the same time.

I take a breath in. 'OK.'

'Right,' he says. And he jerks his head upward slightly,

in a sort of nod, and steps sideways. I watch as he dives down beneath the water and disappears under the sparkling surface of the pool.

'Holls, my little ray of delight.'

The spell is broken in an instant. As if someone has flicked a switch, the atmosphere changes, and the space fills with the excited gabbling of small children and harried parents. Cressi, the swimming instructor, is beckoning me over. In three long strokes, I traverse the pool and lever myself out.

'You're supposed to use the steps.' Her round face breaks into a mock-admonishing smile. 'If you're going to be leading these youngsters astray before you even get started, we're going to be in trouble.'

I take a step back and look at her, my head cocked to one side. Does she mean –

'I've cleared it with the management. You're in.'

Cressi's our neighbour – or near enough. She doesn't live on our estate, but in a little stone house, which was there long before the housing association came along and filled the fields with row upon row of identical white-clad terraces. She sort of found us, and the next thing I knew she'd whisked me up to the pool where she worked, and now she's offered me the chance to escape on a regular basis. They need an assistant to help with the swimming lessons, and I need a place to go that isn't home.

'Wednesdays are a definite, but can I get back to you about the others?'

I nod. I don't think I can trust myself to speak – mainly

because I can't quite believe that I now have a justifiable excuse for being away from everything, here in the silence and the cleanliness and the space and the clear blue water.

'Excellent. I think you'll love it.' Cressi gives a decisive nod. She sticks her pen behind her ear, and then she hoicks the strap of the swimsuit under her council-issued polo shirt, hefting up her not-inconsiderable bosom as she does so.

If Cressi was an animal, I think to myself as I'm washing my hair in the showers, she'd be a sea lion. She barks – which can be terrifying, until you realize that it's just her posh, public-school background – and she's sort of substantial. Like there's twice as much of her as there is of other people. She owns her space. I like her for that.

I see the boy again afterwards.

The bus stop smells of the chip shop opposite, and my stomach is growling so loudly that the woman standing next to me smiles conspiratorially.

'Those chips smell good, don't they, hen?'

She picks up her bag as the bus groans to a halt and the doors open with a tired sigh. 'No' be long now and you'll be home for your tea.' She motions to the bus, gesturing for me to get on.

'I'm waiting for the 236.'

The door squeaks closed on her reply.

Hopeburn High Street is quiet, the children are all home from school, and the procession of cars full of commuters from the train station hasn't started yet. But there's a

queue forming outside the door of the just-opened chip shop opposite, and the warm smell drifts across on the wind. My stomach gives a hopeful rumble.

'Hi.'

I assume that the voice is someone talking on their phone, so I don't raise my eyes from the ground.

I'm still waiting for the bus. I'd text the thing that tells you when the next bus is coming along, but predictably my crappy pay-as-you-go phone battery has died. So I'm just sitting looking at the ground and watching a tiny ladybird making its way along a crack in the pavement.

The smell of vinegary chips hits the back of my nose, but this time it's not on the wind – it's so close that my mouth starts watering and I can feel my stomach contracting. I am ravenous, and the bus is never going to come.

There's a beat of silence, and I realize the voice wasn't on the phone; it was talking to me.

I let my eyes dart up, and as I do I feel the physical presence of the boy from the swimming pool as if it was an actual thing. It's like the air is fizzing, or something.

'D'you want one?'

He's holding a bag of chips, and he shakes it in my direction. He's got a big, open sort of face. Strong eyebrows.

(I have no idea why I've just noticed he has strong eyebrows.)

'No – it's fine, thanks,' I say. I have no idea why I just said that either.

My stomach gives a growling sort of squeak, which is so loud neither of us can ignore it. His mouth (also big) turns

down at the corners as he tries not to laugh.

'You sure?'

I reach out and take one, popping it in my mouth and closing my eyes for a split second as the taste of it fills me with delight. I haven't eaten since this morning and I am so hungry that I realize now that the spacey feeling I've had since I got out of the pool is probably lack of energy.

I swallow.

'Thanks.'

'Have some more. I've got loads.'

He perches beside me on the seat so we're almost the same height. He must be over six feet tall. I'm five eleven, so I tower over almost everyone I know. You'd think it'd be hard to be invisible when you're the size I am, but somehow I just sort of blend into the background.

I pull out another chip. I'm aware that he's offered chips, and therefore part of me feels that I ought to have some conversation handy for situations like this, but I have nothing. I'm racking my brains.

I look down.

He's wearing a pair of black trainers, which have the ghost of a hole worn in the toe.

I like that. It makes him seem a bit more real, somehow.

'Do you go to the Academy?'

He's interesting-looking. And he doesn't know anything about me.

'Yes,' he says, and he rakes a hand through his still-wet hair. 'I just started –'

There's a second where he stops, as though he's checking

himself. He looks at me sideways and rubs his chin.

'Just started what?'

I turn to look at him properly. I think there's something about being here, in a different place, that is making me act more like the person I think I am in my head, and less like the person I am back home in Kilmuir, even though it's only three miles away.

I don't think I've stood this close to a boy in years, but the weird crackly static I can sense in the air is probably completely in my head and the result of watching one too many cheesy films. And the thing is that as 'meet cutes' go (the bit, in case you're wondering, where girl meets boy, and you know that they're just going to get together), meeting at a bus stop after bumping into each other at the swimming pool would be quite a nice one.

Except this is reality, and I am not cute and ditzy and about to fall over and do something adorable. I am tall, I am a bit fat and I think my nose is weird.

'I go to Kilmuir High.'

He looks blank.

'So by rights,' I continue, thinking aloud about the feud between the two schools, 'you shouldn't be sitting here. And you definitely –' I take another chip and wave it for emphasis – 'shouldn't be giving me your chips.'

He raises an eyebrow slightly, and the corners of his mouth turn down again in that funny half smile.

'But you know that already, right?'

'Yep.' He fiddles with the sleeve of his hoody, pulling it down for a second and then pushing it back up almost

straight away. It's a bit short. Or maybe he's just a bit tall. I know the feeling.

'Do you go to the pool often?'

It's his turn to ask an awkward question. It's sort of comforting that even weirdly good-looking boys haven't got a clue how to have a conversation either. And we've got no idea when the bus is coming, so this could take some time.

'All the time.' I hitch my swimming bag on my shoulder as I say it, as if it's just reminded me it's there. 'I'm going to be teaching soon.'

'Cool,' he says. He laces his fingers together and then untangles them. For a weird moment, I have to suppress the urge that my brain – which seems to be doing all sorts of odd things this afternoon – has to make me reach over and touch one of them, just to see if they're warm or cold. I have no idea why. I have absolutely no reference points for this stuff. It's not like I can watch my loving parents being physically affectionate to each other and think, ah – *this* is what it's supposed to look like. I'm just making it all up as I go along, and it's pretty confusing.

'Maybe I'll see you there again?' he says. 'I reckon I'll be going most nights after school.'

'Same,' I say, and he gives me another one of his wide-mouthed smiles. Is he handsome or is he weird-looking? I can't actually tell.

He's sort of both at the same time.

A second later the bus pulls up, and I grab my things.

'You coming?' I ask, fishing my pass out of the front of

my rucksack. I grab the metal rail and turn back to look at him. He's moving in an unhurried sort of way, unfolding his long legs and straightening up.

'Nah,' he says, standing up and pulling up his hood despite the sunshine. 'I wasn't waiting for the bus.'

'Can you two no' have this conversation by text message?' the driver calls out at us from behind the glass, nodding approval as he scans a look at my bus pass.

'I –' I begin, but the door swooshes shut, and I'm jolted as the bus lurches forward. I watch as – I don't even know what his name is – raises a hand in farewell. I flop down into a seat and turn to look back at him. He grins at me as the bus pulls away, down the high street, back to my own life where nobody talks to me and strange, weirdly good-looking boys don't offer to share their chips with me.

'Those seats aren't for you, hen.'

I feel my face going scarlet as the woman opposite me motions to the wheelchair sign. I pick up my bags, and – despite the fact that the bus is empty but for the two of us and two younger boys who are drawing faces on the window in the condensation from their breath – I move. Obediently, and without making a fuss. In my head I point out that if someone got on and wanted the seat, of course I would move. But, like most of the arguments I have with people in my head, it stays there.

We turn the corner out of Hopeburn and head past the castle on the way over the hill. The trees are lime green with leaves, and the sun is shining. It's summer, and the loch is shining blue.

I rest my head against the window and it bumps along as we pass the outskirts of town, rising up to the crest of the hill that leads to Kilmuir. My stomach isn't growling with hunger now; it's lurching with a strange, half-nervous feeling. Am I ever going to see him again? What sort of person just randomly sits down and has a conversation in a bus shelter?

I think back over everything that was said (which isn't that much, I know). His accent sounded more like Edinburgh – definitely not from round here. Maybe that's what he meant when he said he'd just started?

My mum's English, which means I don't sound anywhere near as Kilmuir as the people at school. She was always really particular about me 'speaking properly', as she put it (if you're looking for a way to mark your children out as different, teaching them to speak in a way that everyone considers stuck up is a good start). So we say *yes, darling*, not *aye*; and it's *not*, never *no'*; and you don't ever say *dinnae*. Useful if I was planning a career as a newsreader, I suppose. All it's really done is give me a little extra something – as if I needed it – to make it clear I'm not like everyone else.

I used to daydream about moving house and starting again. In my fantasy, we'd have a huge, spacious white house (when I was ten, I used to pore over the IKEA catalogue and mark my favourite pages) with giant windows and bright light pouring in. It'd look like spring all year round. I'd be minimalist and uncluttered, and nobody would know who I was. When I turned up for

school, I could reinvent myself, start afresh.

But that's not what happened. Instead we live here in Kilmuir, where every single one of your mistakes hangs around your neck forever. That's partly why I decided to start swimming at the pool in Hopeburn. Cressi sort of forcibly befriended my mum – it's hard to explain, but that's just how she is – and the next thing I know I was being bundled in the car with her and given a lift to the pool where she worked. And I realized that nobody there knew or cared who I was, and I didn't have to worry about bumping into people I wanted to avoid. There is a pool in Kilmuir, but even though you might be hard to spot in the water there's always the chance that afterwards, hair ratted with chlorine, you might bump into someone from school. So I took Cressi up on her offer, started using my bus pass, and escaped to another world – or the closest I can get to one. I'm aware that exchanging one tiny Scottish town for another three miles away isn't exactly reinventing myself, but there's a limit to how much I can do. I'm only sixteen.

CHAPTER TWO

I've walked this path so many times that I swear my feet know their own way. I feel the gravel of the path crunching through the thin soles of my fake Converse (which are actually quite nice – they've got red flowers all over them), and I run the flat of my hand along the tops of the cow parsley, which is frothing along the verge. I walk past the path that leads down to Cressi's little stone cottage and along the pavement towards the estate. Down the path, through the play area where three little girls are dancing on a makeshift wooden stage they've made out of an old pallet, like I used to with Lauren, when we were sisters.

A picture of her seven-year-old face pops into my head for a fleeting moment, and I remember the day we met for the first time: me on roller skates on the path outside the house; Lauren standing, a too-big pink holdall over one shoulder; and Neil, her dad, giving us both money for the ice-cream van.

And then Neil moved in with mum, and we went from two to four. Our house was my granny's house, and when she died the housing association let us stay there. Over the years, the flowery wallpaper was painted over with bright colours, and the patterned curtains replaced with

long cotton ones from IKEA. And Lauren and I crashed up and down the stairs surfing on a mattress and scuffing the walls with our school shoes, and for a while it felt like we were a proper family – the kind you see on the adverts on television. I liked having a stepsister, and I felt happy lots of the time. And Mum smiled a lot then too. Until Neil started disappearing and leaving us at the weekend and saying he was working. And then he'd come back and be all smiles and charm and flowers from the petrol station up the road and they'd share a bottle of red wine from the corner shop and Lauren and I would fight over the television and then one day it all just ended.

Round the corner and past the gardens.

Our house is the second in a long white terrace, the walls spiky with stone harling. I press the flat of my hand against it for a second, feeling the way each little stone jabs into my palm.

When I was little, I fell on my roller skates and crashed into it, head first. I've still got a constellation of scars on my forehead left over from the accident.

I try the door, but it's locked. I fish my key out of my pocket and try to shove it in the keyhole, but the key's in the other side, so I can't do that either. I think about yelling through the letterbox, but decide it's just as easy to go round the back. Our house is so small that when I peer through the dappled glass, I can see straight through it to the fuzzy green of the back garden. I pocket the key and head round the back.

The passage is crammed with a heap of bikes, which

makes me smile. Mine used to be one of them. Before the Academy – before the gang we used to be was divided by some unknown criteria into the cool, the uncool and the unspeakable – we all used to hang out together. We'd hurtle around the pavements, playing football and rounders, and doing bike races and speed skating on the big green along the way. And then it all stopped. These bikes belong to the little kids who used to tag along begging to join in with us – they were four then.

Now they're freckle-nosed nine-year-olds, and I half wish I could join in with their games. It's funny, but growing up isn't anywhere near as much fun as it looks on the Disney Channel.

We don't have a back garden so much as a sort of patch. The grass is a bit long and shaggy, and there are dandelions sprouting up in the corners. I take a handful and shove them in the side of Courtney Love's cage. She hops out, twitching her nose in approval. I like to think the actual Courtney would be pleased to discover there's a rabbit named after her. We used to have a guinea pig too, called Kurt Cobain – but he died. We probably could have predicted that.

The back door's open. I push it – hard – and manage to squeeze through the gap. We've got a sort of little back room – I think maybe it was meant to be for bikes and stuff. But it's not full of bikes and stuff. It's full of . . . everything.

There's a tower of kitchen rolls balanced on top of a stack of newspapers, which were going for recycling until they weren't because they were being saved for something.

There's a pile of bags full of bags, because they're going to go out some day but we might just keep them in case they come in handy. The bookshelf is overflowing, the shelves double-stacked with books, and covered in dust. There's some sort of cross trainer under a heap of black bags, which are full of clothes from when I was little, which are going to be a patchwork quilt. One day. Everything in this house is going to happen on a mythical future date when the planets align, and in the meantime it's as far removed from my tasteful, white-painted Scandinavian dream escape as it's possible to be. I step over a huge crate of Avon catalogues and the kit that came with them. They're dated September 2015. The catalogues weren't handed out. The make-up samples are still encased in their shrink-wrap. One day, I'm sure, they'll make their way to wherever they're supposed to be. In the meantime, they're just another might-have-been, boxed up – just in case – and lying in a pile of all the other stuff that makes up the chaos of our house.

It's not just a bit untidy. It's more than that. We used to live – when there were four of us, and life wasn't unravelling – in a sort of happy muddle. Paintings on the walls, and piles of coats on the end of the banister in the hall. Shoes heaped up under the stairs, and stuff that was going to be tidied up (but never quite made it) in piles on the kitchen worktop.

But that was before. Now it's just the two of us, and the walls are closing in. I thought when Cressi found out what the house was like it might make things change

– that Mum would be embarrassed out of her torpor and into action. But no. And as time passes, and Mum spends more and more of her time shopping online in a dressing gown and watching *Friends* on repeat, it's like the fuller the house gets the emptier it feels. It doesn't make sense.

I try to tidy it up when she's not looking, stacking stuff in piles and filtering through out-of-date stuff. But it causes arguments and she gets stressed out and it's easier to escape to the pool on the bus, or catch a lift with Cressi. And when Cressi asks how things are, or why she hasn't seen Mum for a few weeks, I manage to gloss over it by saying she hasn't been feeling well. Cressi's busy managing the swimming school, and I think she's worked out there's not much point trying to get through to Mum any more. It's happened before with the woman who used to live across the road. Eventually, if you don't get anything back, you stop trying to be friends with someone.

As I walk through the back-room door, I can hear the television on in the sitting room.

'Hi, darling,' calls Mum.

I go inside and find her sitting on the sofa, hands wrapped round a mug of tea, her feet curled up under a blanket despite the fact that it's June and sunny outside.

'D'you want to watch this with me?'

She's watching repeats of *Friends* on one of the Freeview channels. Her hair's tied up in a scruffy sort of bun, and she's still in her dressing gown. I shake my head and reverse out of the room, making an excuse about having to

have a shower to wash the chlorine out of my hair. I'll grab something to eat on the way.

I wake up before the alarm goes off and head downstairs.

I step carefully through the minefield of plastic bags and cardboard boxes, piles of washing and unopened letters. I put the kettle on and pick my school jumper up from the drying rack, sniffing it as I do so – I'm paranoid it smells weird, but I can't smell anything but the acrylic of the fabric and a faint odour of Fairy Liquid. I had to wash it by hand last night in the kitchen sink because we've run out of washing powder.

I half hope as I open the fridge that a miracle might have happened overnight, but when I look inside there's still only a dried-up lemon, a piece of cheese that has cracked and gone dry, and the milk carton in the door. I really need to go to the shop.

I shake the milk and realize there's only enough for one cup of tea, so I put the teabag from the second mug back in the jar and pour the water into one. There's the end of the loaf in the bread bin, so I toast it, spread it with butter, and put it on a plate.

When the tea's ready, I take it upstairs with the toast, repeating the precarious journey. I slop some on to a heap of papers in a shoe box and pull a face, but there's nobody there to see it. Whatever it is, it'll dry out. I hope.

'Mum?' I push open the bedroom door with my foot. It resists, and I transfer the mug to my other hand and lean my bodyweight against it. There's a crackle of plastic bags

and a slithering noise as the objects behind the door shift, making space for me to tiptoe into the room.

All I can see is a lock of faded henna-red hair sticking up from under the naked duvet. The clean covers I left there the other day are still folded up on the floor, and she's sleeping on the bare mattress.

'Mum.' I lift the corner of the duvet and shift her alarm clock round so the red numbers are shining in her face.

'Off,' she mumbles.

'It's eight o'clock,' I say. I shove an empty box of paracetamol off the bedside table to make space for the mug, balancing the plate with the toast on top.

'I'll get up in a minute.'

I'll be going in a minute. I don't let the feelings in. The only way to cope is to take a deep breath and just let it go over my head. She can't do mornings – she never could. But especially not now. I turn to leave.

'Holly?'

I have my hand on the door. I lift my head and tuck my hair behind my ear.

'Mmm?'

'Love you, darling.'

'I know.' I make my way back across the room and kiss my fingers and put them on the duvet, approximately where her head should be.

'I'll be up later, I promise. I just need to have a bit more sleep, then I'm going to get things sorted.'

'OK.'

I've heard that a million times. Sometimes I get home

and there's a pile of black bin bags by the front door where she's started clearing up, but inevitably I find her, slumped on the sofa with a cup of tea watching the shopping channel, or dozing. She starts off with good intentions, but she just gets tired halfway through. It's as if she can't quite work out what to throw away and what to keep, and it's too tiring to figure out. So she just gives up.

And we live on in this house, as it silts up slowly with layer after layer of random stuff.

'Mum?'

I call up the stairs. There's no sound.

'I'm leaving now.'

There's a vague mumbling.

'Try and eat something,' I say, and pull the door closed behind me.

School is . . . school. I hover around the edges of it. I'm basically invisible, which is better than it sounds. I don't get into trouble. I don't get picked on by anyone. Teachers don't single me out to read aloud in class. In fact, sometimes I wonder if I'm there at all. I swear it's like I wear an invisibility cloak. I was standing in the corridor last week when Lauren and her friends walked past, talking about Jamie's party. She didn't even acknowledge my presence. As time passed after our parents split up, she drifted further and further away, snared by the sharp-edged cool-girls gang, who were impressed by the big house she lived in and the expensive car Neil drives now.

And so these days Lauren and I don't really talk to each

other at school. I'd say we're not in the same social group, but my social group is the weird collection of misfit people who end up sitting at the same table at lunch every day, not really saying anything. I sometimes wonder if I went somewhere else and started again, would I still end up sitting at the same table, just in a different school?

There's one thing different about today. Halfway through maths, I feel myself grinning, and I look down at the page before anyone notices. I remember the look on the boy's face as I turned round to look at him, surprised.

I wasn't waiting for the bus.