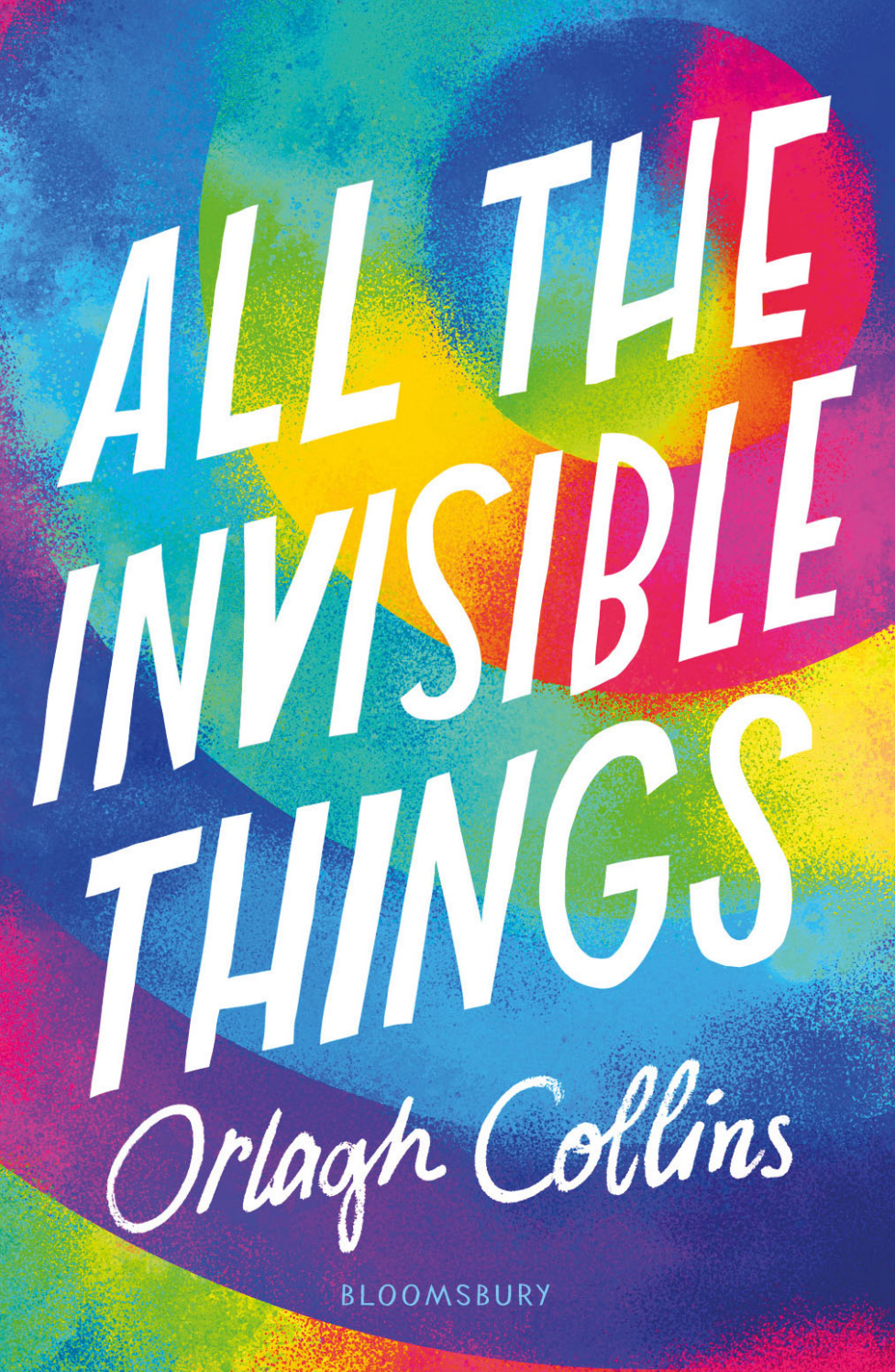

ALL THE INVISIBLE THINGS
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LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

Prologue

My name is Helvetica.

Like the font.

Whenever I tell people this I wait for them to make the face: the one where their features freeze like they're hoping they misheard, then they realise *nope, she's for real* and they look sorry, like it's their fault. I bet Dad thought my name would make me sound interesting (graphic designers think stuff like this, I swear!). I was probably like some branding exercise and he just did it to make me stand out but in a good way. And he wasn't to know how different I'd feel already. My little sister, Arial, gets away with it because she sounds like the Disney mermaid, which I used to think was so unfair, but I'm relieved for her now. Mum must have been high on that baby gas to let Dad away with it. But, like, twice?

Pez never made the face.

PART ONE

Back to London, back to me

1

We're all in Shakeaway sheltering from the rain and I'm scanning the menu high up on the wall, eyes flitting over the milkshake options. I've whittled it down, toying between Reese's Cups and Rhubarb & Custards, when I realise Jess is talking.

'I'll order,' she says, lolloping off towards the till. 'It's a going-away treat.'

Liv counts out change on the counter beside me, already slurping her Strawberry Laces and Starmix blend. She always has the same, like Freya, who has a large Kinder Bueno straight-up every time.

'Must be exciting,' Liv says. 'I'd give anything to be moving to London.'

I try to smile but it's hard to hide the other feelings I have about going back and my cheeks flash hot. I'm prone to a violent reddening of face, neck and even my ears, often at the same time. Freya steps left, checking herself in the mirror behind my head. 'Still doesn't feel real that you won't be with us for sixth form. I mean, who am I going to copy my French prep off now?' she says, fanning a fistful of blonde locks over her eyes as she and Liv study her

reflection, trying to see what she might look like with a fringe. I'm pretty sure I'm not meant to answer so I pretend to search for something deep in my bag.

'Two Oreos with crushed Aero Mint bubbles,' the guy behind the counter says, landing two more cups with an impressive thud. According to Jess, Shakeaway has two rival taste camps: fruity or chocolatey, and you can only be a true fan of one. She thinks Liv is alone in the fruit camp and it's me, her and Freya in chocolate. Really, I'm there for both. Isn't everyone? I tip my cup off Jess's by way of a *thank you* and we clatter some stools to our usual high table by the window.

'Photo!' she says, reaching her arm out. 'Last Shakeaway with all of us together.'

Liv rolls her eyes. 'She's going to Camden. Not Cambodia!'

Jess ignores this and nudges us to raise our cups like she's doing. I have to stand on my toes to tilt my head next to hers and she snaps away until she's happy and my face hurts. I haul myself back on to my stool, bending over the sticky tabletop to sip my drink. 'I've tagged you,' she says, handing me the phone. It's a cute picture but my smile looks strange. A bit like this shake; it's nice but there's an aftertaste I can't put my finger on, vaguely similar to a kids' toothpaste I bought for Arial once. I take another sip to see how bad it is and when I look up Liv is pressing her face against the window.

'Check it out,' she says, tapping the glass. 'Mrs Richardson is outside the bank, with a man!'

Jess squints across the street. 'Think you'll find that's her husband.'

Freya leans in too. 'Richardson was easily the least awful of our form teachers.'

Liv makes a face. 'She said I was trouble.'

Jess shoves her shoulder. 'You *were* trouble! She threw you out of her SRE class in Year Nine. Remember?'

Liv folds her arms across her chest. 'I wasn't thrown out,' she says. 'I had to stand at the front. And all I did was ask a question.'

In the boys' sex-ed they get to discuss the fun stuff like actually doing it, so how's it fair that all we talk about is blood and STIs? That was Liv's question. I'll never forget because when I pointed out that boys can get STIs too, Richardson thought I was being cheeky and sent me to stand beside Liv in front of the whiteboard. 'Far as I recall she got through our entire sex-ed without even uttering the word *vagina*. Not once!' Liv's voice is loud and a man behind us looks up from wiping his toddler's mouth. 'She was way more comfortable with the word *penis*,' she says, more quietly. 'Preferred the feel of it inside her mouth, I reckon.'

Jess takes the lid off her shake and stabs at a stubborn rock of Oreo. 'What was it she called down there again?' she says, waving the now dented plastic spoon over her lap.

Freya hooshes her stool in. '*Intimate female area?*'

'That was it!' Jess says.

Liv grabs her cup and speaks into it like a microphone. 'Girls, today we're going to talk about reproductive health and sex-sue-al relations.' She's got Richardson's voice exactly down and it's impossible not to laugh. 'By that I mean, how to avoid touching any genitals whatsoever outside of marriage.'

'Stop!' Jess says, bouncing on her chair. 'I've got a wet patch going on here.'

Richardson might have failed at sex-ed, but Freya's right – she was far from an awful teacher. When I arrived in Year 8 just weeks after Mum died, she left me alone and let me thaw in my own time, which to be honest felt kind.

Liv is at full volume again. '*And* it's not like boys are the only ones with any genitals so how come they only ever talk about boys doing it?' Everyone is laughing now and I'd join in only I seem to have missed the beginning of this particular rant and I'm not one hundred per cent clear what she means.

'Doing what?' I ask. Freya sticks her tongue in her cheek and makes a pretty unmistakeable hand gesture. I force a smile. 'You mean … masturbating?' The word lands awkwardly and this makes them crack up even more. I take a noisy slurp of my shake, kicking myself for opening my mouth as a reverse avalanche of freezing cold ice cream shoots down my throat. The brain freeze is so sharp I have to squeeze my eyes shut. When it finally subsides, I cautiously open them.

Liv leans closer. 'Yes, Helvetica, mastur-bayy-shun,' she says, in Mrs Richardson mode again. 'Feel free to share any personal experience with the class. We're all ears.' I twiddle my straw, making some face back at her. She's looks like she's about to take a sip when she sits up. 'OK, real talk,' she says, looking around. 'Say you're at home, alone in your room, and like … testing your batteries or whatever, just say … who you do you fantasise about?' She glares at each of us. For a moment no one speaks and I scan the table. Jess sinks

into her seat, cup raised to her mouth, but Freya looks like she's really thinking about it.

'Jamie,' Freya says, after a while.

'He'll be thrilled that took you so long,' Liv says. 'But Jamie doesn't count on account of the real-life sex you're having with him.'

Freya peers up from under her lashes. 'Um, we haven't actually gone *that* far.'

'Whatever,' Liv says, 'I said *fantasise*,' then she turns to Jess, who is opening her mouth, but Liv quickly raises her hand. 'I swear, Jess, if you mention that Timothee Chalamet one more time, I'm reconsidering our friendship.'

Jess laughs and Liv moves on to me. 'Vetty, I'm counting on you now for some real juice.' Her eyes are locked on mine and I know I should just blurt out an answer but the last time I did this it nearly changed everything. Admittedly, it was in Year 8 on a sleepover at Freya's house and Liv wasn't even there, but still. I wish I could be like them and joke about this stuff but it's as though nothing I've said since sounds convincing.

I shrug. 'No one in particular.'

'C'mon!' Liv says. Everyone is looking at me. This could be my worst nightmare. 'They don't even have to be famous. Like, how about that Pez guy? He'd count.'

I groan inwardly. 'Pez is just a friend.'

'An attractive *friend* as I recall,' she says, reaching for my phone. 'There's that picture of him somewhere … wearing a cap.' Liv and Freya peer over her shoulders, staring at the screen while she scrolls. I don't have to look. It's Pez and his dad on a red carpet somewhere. Thankfully his mum isn't in

the photo or her fans would have shared it all over the internet. Me and Pez still follow each other and stuff, but neither of us really post much now. Liv's hand flies up. 'Here it is!' she says, tilting the phone in the light before shoving it towards me. Then she leans closer. 'I've said it before but that boy is welcome to watch *Vampire Diaries* on my couch anytime,' she says, writhing about making some kind of sex noises.

This is just one of the reasons I don't really mention Pez any more. None of the girls know how close we really were, and I sit back, almost enjoying how wrong they are about all of it. Lying on the couch watching TV all weekend is exactly the type of thing Pez and I would do. Well, it's exactly what we *used* to do. Just completely not in the way Liv thinks.

Freya stops laughing and taps her hand on the table. 'I've always wanted to ask,' she says. 'Is his nickname Pez because of those sweets? The ones with the Mickey Mouse dispenser things—'

'I had one of those!' Jess cuts in. 'But Hello Kitty.'

'His real name is Peregrine.' It's been a while since I said Pez's full name out loud and though it sounds unusual, I'm not sure why I ever kept it a secret.

Freya is trying hard to keep a straight face. 'Like the bird of prey?'

I think about mentioning the lesser-known Marvel character Pez once told me about but I just nod. 'He never liked it.'

Liv looks like she's already worked this out. 'Peregrine and Helvetica?' she says, barely able to contain herself. 'Dead

heat for *Meanest Parents Award* that year. No wonder you two found each other.'

I've often thought about how our names brought us together. Like, if I'd been called Liv or Jess would it have been the same? Would Pez have let me ride on the back of his BMX or taught me how to play Perudo when we were stuck inside on account of my broken arm? Would he have cried with me when Thomas J gets stung by the bees in *My Girl*? Would he have held my hand under the willow tree when the doctors found Mum's grapefruit? Liv pushes her cup forward and places both elbows on the table. 'Things could be different now,' she says, eyebrows up. 'You're not kids any more.' Without meaning to, I make the kind of face Arial gives me when I say something she thinks is ridiculous. 'Unless,' she says, her voice softer than it's been all day and possibly ever. 'You don't feel that way … about boys.'

The table shakes. 'Ouch!' Liv says, spinning her shoulders around to Jess, who is glaring at her. My mouth fills with water, that way it does when you're about to be sick, and I set my cup down as casually as I can, but the shake blender behind the counter stops whirring and all eyes weigh heavy on mine in the new silence. Liv isn't exactly known for her subtlety, but *this*? 'Sorry,' she says, even more gently. 'I'm just saying you shouldn't feel weird, if you're not into guys.' Her hand creeps across the table towards mine. 'We're cool about it.' She stops and does something silly with her mouth. 'Well, I'm cool as long as *I'm* the one you fancy, obviously.'

The table trembles again. 'God, Liv!' says Jess, her eyes slatted in anger.

Liv frowns. 'What?'

'If and *when* Vetty wants to talk about … *this*,' Jess says, lowering her voice. 'That's up to her.'

Liv sits back. 'Well, she leaves tomorrow and I think it might help.' Then she looks at me. 'Get it off your chest, you know?' Her eyes are wide and earnest, like she genuinely believes this is a good idea. Jess looks like she's afraid I might cry, which I might. Freya looks confused.

'Um, hello?' she says. 'Vetty went out with Arthur for, like … months. She was mad about him.' Arthur is Freya's cousin. He sat beside me on the bus on the way to her house at Christmas time of Year 8, a month after the awkward sleepover from hell. I was chatting away when he reached over mid-sentence and casually fixed my smudged eyeliner. He was dry and funny and when he laughed he had this squint and his shoulders shook violently but he made absolutely no noise. He was sweet and turned out to be a really nice kisser. We only broke up because he moved back to Birmingham that summer.

I move my hands under the table, clenching my fists tight. I may have less than twenty-four hours left in Somerset but I still can't do this. I grit my teeth, then slam a hand against my chest. 'You got me, Liv! I've been dreaming about you in that panda bear onesie of yours for so long; waiting to find the right moment to tell you!' I think I'm doing a good job of sounding all theatrical but the girls stare like they're not entirely sure whether or not I'm joking. OK, so, this is worse than saying *masturbation* out loud.

Jess looks at her watch, then shoves her stool out. 'I better get going,' she says, flashing me a quick *are you OK?* look as

she slings her jacket over her shoulder. 'Vetty, you must be heading that way?'

'Just a sec,' I say, freeing my bag from the leg of my stool.

I get through the goodbyes and promises to keep in touch but it's only outside in the fresh air that I properly exhale. Jess arrives by my side and we stroll silently over the bridge towards town. Outside the Co-op, I slow down and something must happen to my face because she looks guilty, making my chest even tighter. 'I didn't say anything,' she says. 'You know? To Liv.'

My spine stiffens. The queasy feeling in my stomach isn't the Aero Mint bubbles. 'I was just going to … say thanks. That's all.'

She looks relieved and places her hand on my shoulder. 'Anytime, Vetty,' she says, and we walk on up the hill.

Please, god, let this stuff be easier in London.

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