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*For Joyce, who always made me feel special
And Bella, who told me I could write*

SUMMER

1

‘Umami.’

I look up from my phone. Jamie Cannon, a boy from my year, is standing in front of me with his hands in his pockets. My heart, until now beating in a perfectly normal, healthy fashion, quickly morphs into a big fat thumping monster.

‘Sorry, were you talking to me just then?’ I ask, nervously tucking an invisible strand of hair behind my ear.

‘Who else?’ Jamie replies, smirking and pouring himself a cup of orange squash.

Annoyingly, he makes a valid point. We’re the only two people at this end of the drama studio. Everyone else is gathered at the opposite end, caterwauling along to the *Hamilton* original cast recording. I’ve been camped out by the buffet table for the past twenty minutes now, filling the time by filling my face.

The drama club’s production of *Grease* finished half an hour earlier and this is the official after-show party. The

members of the cast, with their quiffs and perky ponytails, faces waxy with stage make-up, easily outnumber the black-clad backstage crew, of which I am one. I would have headed home straight after the curtain call, given the choice, but my backpack and jacket are locked in Ms Chetty's office and Ms Chetty has mislaid her keys, leaving me stranded until the caretaker turns up with the master.

'Umami,' Jamie repeats, nodding at the bowl of chilli heatwave flavour tortilla chips I've been ploughing my way through. 'That's what they call any addictive savoury flavour. It's why you've eaten forty-two Doritos in the past five minutes – they're covered in the stuff.'

'You've been watching me?' I ask, heat creeping up my neck.

'Maybe,' Jamie replies, a completely unself-conscious grin spreading across his face.

I swallow. Jamie and I are in the same year but have never really spoken before. This is unremarkable. Ostborough Academy is a big school, and I'm not exactly what you'd call a social butterfly. Plus Jamie is part of the 'popular' crew who hog the beanbags in the social area and say everything in loud booming voices, like they assume everyone in listening distance is automatically interested in what they have to say. This must be a dare. I glance over at the crowd gathered around the speakers, but no one is looking in our direction.

Jamie pours himself a second cup of squash and perches on the edge of the table like he's here to stay.

Out of the corner of my eye, I note he's about three inches taller than me and muscular, the fabric of his close-fitting

white T-shirt straining across his chest and biceps. I can tell from the way he's folded his arms high across his chest so his muscles bulge like inflated water balloons – that he's ridiculously proud of them.

He drains his cup of squash, immediately pouring himself another one. 'You were on lights tonight, right?' he asks, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. His upper lip is stained pale orange.

I nod.

'You into all that, then? Lighting and things?'

'I suppose.'

At Ostborough Academy, every student is required to participate in at least one extra-curricular activity. Operating the lights for school productions is both the least time-consuming and least socially demanding option available, and I've clung onto the role since Year Seven.

'You don't fancy being on stage?' Jamie asks, tossing an M&M in the air and catching it in his mouth.

I shake my head so hard my plait smacks me across the face.

Jamie starts to say something else, but my attention is stolen by the arrival of the caretaker.

'Excuse me,' I say, cutting off Jamie's sentence and heading for Ms Chetty's office.

'Wait, you're not going, are you?' Jamie asks, following me.

It's weird, but he almost sounds disappointed.

'Yep,' I reply, ducking under the caretaker's arm and scooping up my backpack and denim jacket.

‘Are you getting a lift?’

‘No, walking.’

‘I’ll walk with you,’ Jamie says, reaching for his hoodie from the heap on the floor and tying it round his waist.

‘Don’t be mad, it’s still really early,’ I say, panic fizzing in my belly.

Hamilton has been replaced with the *Grease* soundtrack and the cast are re-enacting bits of the show they’ve literally just performed, hyper from Haribo and syrupy squash.

‘I was going to go soon anyway,’ Jamie says. ‘I’ve got to be up at six. Paper round. Plus, I’d be a proper dickhead if I didn’t. It’s dark out.’

I try to argue, but it’s no good. Jamie’s mind is made up.

We walk down the corridor in silence, our trainers squeaking against the rubber floor. We’re both wearing Converse. Jamie’s are charcoal grey and obviously new, the laces brilliant white. Mine are ancient, the canary-yellow canvas faded and streaked with dirt. Despite my efforts not to, we keep falling into step with each other. It’s all *very* discombobulating, like my universe has been shaken up like a snow globe and everything has landed back in slightly the wrong place and no one has noticed but me.

‘So, where do you live, Ro Snow?’ Jamie asks as we step out into the muggy July night.

Hearing him say my name out loud sounds weird. More than weird. Until tonight, Jamie has never even registered my existence, never mind indicated he knows my *full* name.

‘Quite far,’ I answer, leaping on my chance for an out.

‘Right over the other side of town. Probably totally out of your way, actually.’

‘Try me,’ he says, folding his chunky arms across his chest.

‘Er, Arcadia Avenue,’ I say, mentally crossing my fingers. ‘You won’t know it. Like I said, it’s a proper trek.’

Jamie takes out his phone and jabs at the screen a few times before holding it up so I can see. ‘It’s not that far,’ he says. ‘You were making it sound like you live in Timbuktu.’

I smile weakly.

‘I can’t believe Year Nine is nearly over,’ Jamie comments as we cross the road. ‘This term’s gone well fast, don’t you think?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘Got any plans for summer?’

‘Nothing special.’

‘I’ll be in Florida for most of it. My grandparents live out there. You going away anywhere?’

‘Not this summer.’

As if this summer is the exception and not the rule.

The journey veers between awkward silences and equally awkward small talk and I’m weak with relief by the time we turn into Arcadia Avenue.

‘Well, bye then,’ I say, hovering by the street sign. ‘You can just leave me here.’

‘Don’t be mental,’ Jamie says. ‘I said I was walking you to your door and I’m gonna. What number are you again?’

‘Er, fifty-six.’

I increase my pace, hoping Jamie will follow my lead but

he does the opposite, slowing down, his head swivelled in the direction of the houses on his right. Reluctantly, I reduce my pace to match, all the while hoping the crazy hammering in my chest doesn't sound as stupidly loud as it feels.

'Do you know who lives here?' Jamie asks, stopping in front of number 48.

'No, not really. Why?' I say, fiddling with the hem of my jacket and looking in the opposite direction.

'I just thought you would, being neighbours and everything.'

'Well, we're not exactly neighbours,' I say. 'It's not like I live next door or anything.'

'Lucky you. I bet they have rats and all sorts.'

I keep walking, hoping Jamie will notice and follow but he stays stubbornly where he is, gazing up at number 48 as if under some sort of spell.

The house is mostly hidden behind thick thorny bushes, old crisp packets and plastic bags impaled on the thorns, fluttering in the faint breeze. Rotting climbing ivy clings to the walls, obscuring almost all of the filthy windows, their frames scuffed and peeling. Although its leaves are brown and brittle, the ivy seems to multiply by the day, as if slowly choking the dirty, crumbling house to death.

'I wonder what it's like inside,' Jamie ponders, screwing up his face. 'Well skeezy, I bet.'

As if on cue, a mangy-looking cat shoots out from under the gate and scampers across the road.

'Can we keep going? I kind of just want to get home now.'

'OK,' Jamie says, reluctantly dragging his eyes away from the house.

We continue down the street in silence, the only real sound the soles of our trainers scuffing against the paving slabs.

Number 56 is in darkness.

Good.

‘Bye then,’ I say, reaching for the front gate.

Jamie moves in closer. He smells of sweat covered up with aftershave. I try to step backwards, but I have nowhere to go, the catch on the gate digging into my lower back.

‘You’re different, Ro Snow. Did you know that?’ Jamie says. ‘Good different,’ he adds quickly when I don’t say anything. ‘What I mean is, it’s a compliment.’

He grins. He clearly has no idea that ‘different’ (the good *or* bad kind) is the very *last* thing I want to be.

I fumble for the catch with my left hand.

Before I can register what’s happening, Jamie has wrapped both arms around my waist, his open mouth looming towards my very much closed one.

‘Er, what do you think you’re doing?’ I say, pushing him away.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asks, staggering to regain his balance, his face slack with confusion. ‘I thought we were getting along. Didn’t you?’

‘I wasn’t really thinking about it, to be honest,’ I say, digging into the front pocket of my backpack for my keys.

‘Oh . . . Well, can I use your loo at least?’

‘No!’ I cry, the keys slipping from my hand.

Jamie’s eyes widen in alarm.

‘What I mean is, you can’t,’ I stammer. ‘We’re . . . we’re having our bathroom retiled at the moment.’

‘I wasn’t planning on pissing on the tiles.’

‘Very funny. Look, the whole bathroom is out of action, OK?’

Jamie frowns. ‘If you don’t want me to come in, then just say so. You don’t have to lie.’

‘I’m not. God, do you really think I’d bother lying about something so mundane?’ I crouch down to pick up my keys.

‘But I really need a wee,’ Jamie whines.

I stand up. ‘For God’s sake, can’t you just go in the bushes or something?’

‘Hey, don’t have a go at me,’ Jamie says, holding up both hands. ‘We were having a nice time until you started making weird shit up.’

‘It’s not my problem you find the concept of my bathroom being retiled so bloody exotic!’

He shakes his head. ‘You’re a weird girl, you know that, Ro Snow?’

Downgraded from ‘different’ to ‘weird’ in a matter of minutes. It’s clearly a very fine line.

‘Well, that’s rich, coming from the boy who spent most of the evening monitoring my Doritos intake,’ I snap. ‘Because that’s not creepy at all.’

Jamie’s eyes narrow into a glare. I return it with a glare of my own. He looks away first.

‘Seriously, I’m going in now,’ I say.

Jamie doesn’t say anything, his shoulders hunched over like a sulky toddler as he pushes a pebble back and forth with his foot.

‘Night then,’ I add.

‘Night,’ he mutters, sticking his hands in his pockets and striding back up the street.

I sigh, ease open the front gate and walk up the path. I wait until I’m at the top before sneaking a look over my shoulder. Jamie has increased his pace and is already several houses away. Instead of using the front door, I go round the side of the house, the security light flicking on as I pass beneath it. I press my back against the wall, the bricks rough and cool against my splayed hands. I close my eyes and silently count down from sixty. About halfway through, the security light snaps off, plunging me into reassuring darkness for the rest of my countdown.

‘Three, two, one, zero,’ I whisper.

I creep back down the front path and look both ways, relieved to note the street is quiet and empty.

I take a brisk left in the direction I’ve just come from.

Towards number 48 Arcadia Avenue.

Towards home.