The Cooking Club Detectives

Ewa Jozefkowicz grew up in Ealing, and studied English Literature at UCL. Her debut novel *The Mystery of the Colour Thief*, published by Zephyr in 2018, was shortlisted for the Waterstones Children's Book Prize. Her second book, *Girl 38: Finding a Friend*, blends contemporary times with WWII Poland, and *The Key to Finding Jack* explores the bonds between siblings. Ewa lives in north London, with her husband and twin daughters.

Also by Ewa Jozefkowicz

The Mystery of the Colour Thief
Girl 38: Finding a Friend
The Key to Finding Jack

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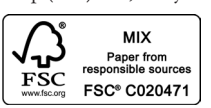
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For the amazing staff at Magic Breakfast





One

When I first saw it, I thought it was the home of an artist, or maybe a fortune teller. I always imagined that they might live in peculiar ramshackle houses with colourful, patchwork curtains, ivy crawling up the walls and cats roaming around on the roof. And this is exactly the view that greeted me when I peered through the gap in the hedge that Tuesday morning. It was such an unexpected and beautiful sight that it made me gasp. I glimpsed a blue sign, not quite covered by the ivy that said, 'Skipton House Community Centre'.

A cold wind bit the air and I was exploring Milwood, our new village, for the first time. Later, I would remember it as the day when everything started to go wrong, but at that early hour, I didn't



suspect a thing. I remember looking at my watch and seeing that it had just gone seven a.m. I couldn't believe that it was still so early as I'd been up for hours. I think on some level my brain was struggling to deal with all the newness. We'd only moved into the flat a week ago, and now I was starting secondary school. The estate still freaked me out – there was *sound* everywhere. It was an awful lot of sound for a place that was surrounded by what was mostly a big field.

My mum, Lara, would've probably flipped out about me going out on my own, especially as it was still half dark and I was only dressed in my school skirt, a T-shirt and a hoodie (the first things I could find) but she would never know if I made sure I was back before she woke up.

The field was practically on my front doorstep. It stretched from Milwood Road and was bordered by a river on the right. At the far end was a line of small, squat terraced houses, that looked as if they came from another century, and on the left-hand side, was a main road – if you could call it that – Dunstan Row. I'd seen its overgrown sign and was

intrigued. I decided to turn into it, hoping that it might lead somewhere interesting. And it did.

Skipton House was almost hidden by dense bushes, and I would have walked right past it if I hadn't heard laughter coming from behind the hedge. First there was a giggle and then I heard someone singing a song. Before I knew it, I was edging closer, trying to take a peep through the misted window with the patchwork curtains.

Upon closer inspection, I saw it had three floors and it seemed there were quite a few people in there. The voices were young – kids my age. Someone was playing the guitar, then there was a clatter of plates, a clap of hands and an older voice talking over the noise.

I hadn't even realised I'd got so close. I was about three steps away from the window when something furry brushed against my leg and my heart lurched. I looked down to see one of the two cats I'd spotted earlier on the roof weaving a figure of eight around my legs. I must have yelped, because suddenly the misted window was flung open and a boy's puzzled face appeared. He had olive skin, a shock of black

curly hair and deep brown eyes, which looked at me questioningly.

'Want to come in?' he asked simply.

I frantically shook my head. And before I could think about what I was doing, my feet were already stepping away, pounding the grass at an increasing pace. I burst through the gap in the hedge and ran all the way down the road to our estate. I didn't stop until I'd pelted up the three flights of stairs to our new flat and banged the door behind me. I slid down the back of it and gulped mouthfuls of air.

But what had I been so scared of? The boy hadn't seemed cross and he'd invited me in. I'd acted like a complete chicken, running off like that. He must have thought I was mad. I only hoped he wasn't in my year at school. I could do without having to deal with any additional awkwardness.



It had been Lara's idea to move here. She'd been promoted at Rodrigo's and she'd always said that the first thing we'd do when she'd earned a bit of

extra money, was to move to a bigger place, where I could have my own bedroom and everything. It sounded amazing, but the only two-bed place we could afford was miles away not just from school and my friends, but also any form of proper civilization. Lara's commute into work now took over an hour, but she said that it was worth it. She'd admitted to me that sales at Rodrigo's had been down, and that he'd given her the promotion in the hope that she might turn the shop around. I couldn't help but think that it was risky. What if she couldn't save it from shutting down?

'I think I can boost the sales,' she said to me. 'It's about getting the right clothes in and offering a few promotional discounts. Plus, you and I need a new start, eh?' she asked, looking genuinely excited, and that was that. I didn't dare say anything to put her off.

That morning when I first saw Skipton House, Lara was in her usual deep sleep. She didn't even wake up when I slammed the door behind me after my morning escapade. In fact, she only emerged from her bedroom when I was putting on my

shoes and I was surprised to see her up that early. Tuesdays were her only proper lie-in days, as the Deputy Manager opened the shop.

'Hey, hey – what's happening?' Her sleepy, unmade-up face appeared in the living room doorway.

'Nothing. Getting ready to go into school. How come you're up?'

'I set my alarm so that I could whip you up some breakfast. It's a big day for you! D'you want eggs?'

'You didn't have to,' I muttered, and then when she looked disappointed, I added, 'I'm so nervous, I couldn't eat a thing.'

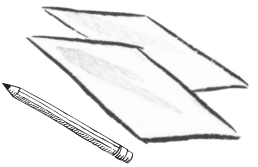
'I don't like you going without breakfast. Here, take this,' she said, putting some dried apples and almonds into a snack box and handing them to me. 'Hey, it's going to be an adventure! You'll meet great new people and you'll make loads of friends.'

'I hope so.'

'Those kids would be mad not to jump at the chance to be mates with you.'

And then she enveloped me in a hug. She still smelled like the lime from the pie that she'd made

yesterday and, as she ruffled my hair, I felt that things would work out. There were moments, just like that one, when she was the same as every other mum. Only I knew that she was anything but.



Two

'You have a cool surname. Where did that come from?' the girl sitting next to me in geography asked.

'Oh, erm thanks – it's Italian,' I told her, feeling the heat rise in my face. I prayed she wouldn't ask anything else about it, but the question I was dreading soon came.

'Does it mean anything? The word sounds kind of familiar.'

'Well, yeah. Bellissima means "beautiful".'

Ever since Lara had told me this years ago, it had made me cringe inside. Anyone would think I should be pleased, right? Wrong. I was really self-conscious about it because I'd always been gangly looking, with long arms and legs, and elbows sticking out at

awkward angles. Throughout primary school, I was a head taller than most of the kids in our class, and that included the boys. I suppose Lara is tall too, so maybe I get it from her, but she always seems to move gracefully like the beautiful gazelles you see on nature programmes, not like me – the human daddy longlegs.

But Tanya, my new desk companion, clearly didn't guess my thoughts. 'It's awesome,' she said. She had gorgeous earth brown skin, and long plaits arranged in two neat buns. I noticed how brand new her school uniform was, the shirt collar neatly ironed, the skirt expertly taken up so it was just the right length to be within the school rules, but not long enough to be uncool. Lara had taken great care washing and ironing my second-hand uniform, but even without looking at my reflection in the window, I could tell how scruffy I was in comparison.

'Thanks,' I muttered.

I'd begged Lara not to send me here. I'd wanted to go to Mayhurst, like most of the other kids from my primary school, but she'd insisted on Fieldway,

because it was closest to our new flat – Mayhurst would have been a forty-five minute drive each way.

I didn't normally get nervous, but when I went through the school gates for the first time, I could already feel my heart in my stomach. I knew how important it would be to make a good first impression – it might be my only chance of making friends. At primary school I'd never had a best friend, but at least I'd had a group I'd always hung around with and I knew everyone. Here, I felt like I was lost at sea.

'Are you OK?' asked Tanya, when we were spilling out of the classroom for break. 'You look pale.'

'Oh, yeah, fine,' I said, too quickly and she raised an eyebrow.

'I'm going to check out the vending machines,' she said. 'Want to come?'

I nodded and followed her along the corridor to the hallway of the canteen, when another girl – small and black-haired – gave a squeal of delight and launched herself at Tanya.

'Ohmigod ohmigod. I've been looking for you

everywhere. I'm so gutted that we're not in the same class. You know, I even got Mum to write to Mr Kelly to ask if I could be moved, but he said that our allocated classes were final. So we only get to see each other at break and lunch. Anyway, you need to fill me in on totally like everything. I'm dying to hear what Jamaica was like. Were you there with Tom's family? *Please* tell me about the older brother.'

Tanya hugged her back, but she didn't respond to her greeting in the same hysterical way.

'I will. I will. It's good to see you, Ali. Hey, this is Erin. She doesn't really know anyone here yet.'

Ali gave me a disinterested look. She linked arms with Tanya and fished around in her pocket with her other hand. It suddenly hit me that I'd obviously need money for the vending machines. I didn't have any.

I must have looked panicked because Tanya asked, 'Did you forget your cash? Don't worry, I can let you borrow some. Dad's given me a tenner.'

It was only when I looked at the rows of neatly arranged chocolate bars in the machine, that I

realised I hadn't eaten anything since supper the night before. Hunger was probably one of the main reasons for me feeling so sick. I searched around in my bag for the snack box that Lara had given me, but I couldn't find it. I must have left it on the kitchen table.

'Thanks. I'll make sure I pay you back tomorrow.'

'No worries.'

In the end, she bought us both an apple and a packet of crisps and we sat down together at her desk in the form room. Ali kept nattering on about travelling around Iceland with her parents and some family friends, but her memories seemed to mainly feature her dad's friend's son, who was fifteen and had gone on the trip with them.

'He sat next to me in the back for the whole thing,' she said, glancing over at Tanya to check whether she looked impressed. I was surprised to see that she didn't. 'I'll show you a photo later. Anyway, what about Jamaica?'

'Oh, it was great – boiling hot and the tastiest food! The jerk chicken was insanely good. And before you ask, Tom and his brother were acting

really stupid – most of the time they were dive-bombing in the pool and being told off by the hotel manager.'

I could tell that Ali was disappointed with this answer and wanted to ask more questions about Tom, but Tanya cut her off.

'Hey Erin, what did you do over the summer?'

I secretly wished that she hadn't asked. I hadn't gone anywhere like Iceland or Jamaica. I'd spent most of the six weeks either helping in the stockroom at Rodrigo's, reading or hanging out on the playground of our old estate. I did go to Harrogate for a long weekend with Lara to visit one of her old school friends who'd recently had a baby.

'Not much really. We went up to Yorkshire for a few days. Then we were moving house, so it got a bit chaotic.'

'Oh really? Where did you move from?'

'North London.' I figured the less detail I gave, the better.

'Oh, from the Big Smoke?' said Ali. 'It must be really boring for you round here in our little town. And where do you live now?'

'On the Milwood Estate,' I said, hoping that she didn't know where it was.

'Behind the big playing fields, next to the river?' she asked, wrinkling her nose. 'I've heard it's dodgy round there. Do you live in one of the Alms Houses?'

'Alms Houses? No, what are those?'

'They're a row of old houses at the bottom of the field near the community centre. I've heard they're dirty with mould climbing the walls and that tramps live in them, but it's probably not true,' said Ali, looking meaningfully in Tanya's direction.

'Of course it's not true,' said Tanya, ignoring her. 'That area's really nice. There are some great views from the top of the hill. I'm jealous that you're so close to it. I love that place.'

It didn't make me feel much better. I had a suspicion that there would always be an invisible barrier between Tanya and Ali's world, and mine.