SHOW US WHO YOU ARE

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To beloved absent friends.

"Do you know what makes you different, Cora? Could you tell us?"

I don't answer the question immediately. Instead, I look around the room. It's as white, and as clean, as the inside of a bathtub. One large mirror on the wall to my right. Adrien warned me that this place was all smoke and mirrors. Whatever that means.

"Cora?"

I look back in her direction, not making eye contact. Dr Gold is different. Not like the other scientists that work here. She laughs with her whole body and has a glow about her.

She is smiling at me, awaiting my answer.

They're super smart, but no one can be clever about everything.

Adrien told me about them. Prepared me. His dad runs this facility and Adrien has sat right in this chair. In the uncomfortable spot that I'm currently fidgeting in. He's answered the questions.

I can do this too.

Adrien. Adrien is my best friend.

And I'm doing all of this for him.

Chapter One

THE DREADED PARTY IN KNIGHTSBRIDGE

A FEW MONTHS EARLIER

"I don't see why I have to come with you both," I say, scowling at my older brother Gregor and my dad as they rush me out of the front door and into our junky old car.

"It's this little thing called the law, Cora," Dad says, as he cheerfully pushes me into the backseat while Gregor frantically checks his reflection in the rear-view mirror. "I'm not allowed to leave you alone in the house. Especially after what you did to the toaster."

"The guy from the fire brigade said that happens all the time. Besides, you're going to let me run around London all by myself during the summer," I argue.

The engine starts and we back out onto the road, setting off for the posh part of town. "That's way more dangerous than our house, people drive like maniacs nowadays."

"Don't I know it," Gregor mutters, as Dad flies over a speedbump, causing my brother and I to grab our armrests and hold on for dear life.

The evening lights of London are too bright for me after an absolutely rubbish day at school. I flick the tension out of my fingers and close my eyes. I am in no mood to put on a social mask and try to appear interested in all the boring things the grown-ups are going to say.

Thirteen soon. My, that's a big girl. So *sad about your mother, we heard all about it.*

No, thank you.

Soon enough, Dad and Gregor are bickering about where to park and I realise that we are almost there. Gregor shoves a hastily wrapped present into my hands as we reach the stoop of the enormously tall, but extremely narrow, townhouse, with a few balloons tied on the doorknob.

"Whose birthday is this?" I hiss, as Gregor rings the doorbell.

"Rule Britannia" plays as soon as he does and Dad has to clap a hand over my mouth to cover my sarcastic groan.

"Save the attitude for later," Gregor hisses back.

"Oh, I will."

"It's the son of my boss. He's your age. Give the present to the maid."

"The *maid*?!"

The black front door is heaved open to reveal… a maid. She looks exhausted and thoroughly unamused. Music and conversation and crowds of people can be seen and heard just behind her. Dad hastily drops his hand from my face, as I thrust the present towards her. She accepts it with a sigh and turns to add it to a gigantic pyramid of fancily wrapped gifts.

We follow her in and she takes our coats. Dad and Gregor are both wearing suits that make them look like very nervous penguins.

"Gregory!"

My brother rushes off to answer to someone who has gotten his name wrong, leaving Dad and I standing in the hallway. Dad runs his hands along his lapels, anxiously, while I stare around at the incredibly posh house.

I'm scared to touch anything; it's like a museum.

"Who are you then?"

I glance up at a tall, willowy woman with long icy blonde hair as she descends the stairs gracefully. She's holding her hand out towards me with a wide smile.

It's moments like these when I have no idea what they want me to do. Does she want me to hold her hand or shake it?

I gingerly hold out my hand and her bracelets jangle as she grasps it. Squeezes it.

"Are you a friend of Adrien's?" she asks excitedly.

"No. I'm Cora Byers. My brother works for Mr Hawkins."

"And Mr Hawkins has been incredibly rude and stolen your brother away from you and your father when you don't know a soul," she says, smiling brightly at Dad.

She's still holding my hand.

"Yes," I answer bluntly.

She laughs.

"You come with me, my love," she says, leading me through the swarm of people who pay us no attention. Hollow laughter rings out around me as the lady leads me to the back of the house. "There aren't a lot of kiddies here for you to talk to, I'm afraid."

"Oh." I don't tell her that I actually don't mind being by myself.

"Please get Mr Byers a drink," she tells the maid as we pass her.

"Can't, I'm driving," Dad calls before disappearing into the crowd behind us.

We reach what must be the backdoor and she finally releases my hand.

"See if you can find the birthday boy," she says, handing me a large, shining golden key that was hanging on the wall. I stare down at it in confusion, and then back up at her, but she's already gone. Leaving me with the mysterious item.

The backdoor is already open, so I'm not certain what the key is for until I step outside.

Down the stone steps, I can see it. A huge, hidden garden, behind tall iron gates, with trees peeking over the top. I move slowly towards it, desperate for the solitude and quiet. I can't stand the crowded bodies, the noise and all of the sensory pressure.

A garden seems so luxurious. I wish we had one.

The key opens the black gate swiftly and I'm inside, sheltered by the trees.

A Biology teacher at school said something about trees and oxygen; I can't fully remember the lesson. But, I do feel like they give me breath sometimes.

I'm just starting to feel relaxed when I get a tingle.

I'm being followed.

Constantly having trouble in the school hallways has given me a sixth sense. I know when I'm being watched or talked about. I can feel the unwanted attention on the back of my neck.

I keep walking, gripping the key and pressing it against my stomach. Maybe it's because I had a nasty day at school, but I'm quickly becoming angry.

I'm tired of being treated like a spectacle.

As I hear a faint crunch behind me, I spin around. I slam my arm against the blur of a shape and push.

It falls to the ground, taking me down too, the key forgotten on the grass by the path.

"Hey!"

My forearm is pressed against the collarbone of a boy. My age, or a little older. He splutters for a moment and then laughs loudly.

"Why are you creeping up on me?" I snap.

"Why are you so strong?" he retorts, laughing between words.

"Are you spying on me?"

"Oh, yes," he snorts, as I release him. He sits up, still laughing. "You walked all the way from the gate to the middle of the path. Exciting stuff."

"Who are you?"

"You're the one in my garden, you should tell me who you are."

I take a good look at him. Tall but not gangly, and definitely my age. Dark curls and a nose that's a little too big for his face. His eyes are completely lit up with

laughter and it's very alarming. All of the boys at school have started getting really mean eyes. His are nothing like theirs.

I glare at him. "You're Adrien Hawkins."

He points his finger right in front of my face. "You got it."

I shove his finger away. "Fine. Happy birthday. Your present's back in the house."

"You got me a present?"

"Sure."

"That's nice for a complete stranger."

He doesn't talk like other kids our age. Or any grown-ups I know, in fact. None of my rehearsed and prepared conversations match what he's saying so I just pick up the key and walk away, towards what appears to be tennis courts at the other end of the secret garden.

"Do you go to school?" he asks, falling in step beside me.

"Of course I go to school," I mutter.

"I don't."

"Yeah, that makes sense," I reply, looking him up and down.

"Why?"

"I dunno," I blow my fringe out of my eyes. "You're not… broken down."

He chuckles. "Yeah. Mum pulled me out before that could happen. I learn better at home."

Maybe that's why his behaviour is so different.

"Do you have a name?"

"Yes," I say coolly.

"Can you tell me?"

"Why aren't you at your own party?"

"It's not really my party," he says flatly. "It's my dad's party. For all his fancy friends and people from work."

"Your dad's my brother's boss."

"Your brother works at Pomegranate?"

Pomegranate Institute is Magnus Hawkins' company. I'm still not entirely sure what they do there. Gregor sometimes starts talking about it but Dad always changes the subject.

"Yes," I tell him, happier to talk about Gregor than about myself.

"My dad must think he's useful if he's invited you all here."

Another strange comment. I ignore it.

"It's fine if you don't want to tell me your name."

"Good."

"I'll just guess."

I close my eyes. Is he going to go through every girl's name he can think of?

"Angela."

He is.

"Bryony?"

Alphabetically.

"It's Cora." I sigh. "C for Cora."

He grins. "Cool. I like that."

I keep waiting for a horrid remark to follow. That's what the kids at school would do. Sweetness followed by an even bigger sting. But he doesn't do that.

Mum once said, when she was alive, that boys were mean to girls because they liked them. I thought that was the most revolting thing I had ever heard, and I know it's not true of the boys at school.

Adrien suddenly turns his head and whistles, loudly and shrilly. I flinch away from him, the sound too loud for my senses.

Something comes bounding towards us.

"Cerby, this is Cora. Cora, this is my dog."

A large dog with tufty ears looks up at me, tail wagging furiously.

"Boy, she had me pinned to the ground and where were you?" Adrien asks jokingly, ruffling the dog's neck of fur. "Huh? Where were you?"

I fight a smile and lose. The dog is cute, and they make a nice pair.

"I want to see this present Cora's brought all the way here for me, boy," Adrien says teasingly. He sets off towards the house, Cerby following him diligently.

I scowl. He's calling my bluff and I don't like it.

I follow the two of them back out of the garden and up the stone steps to the backdoor of the house. Everyone seems to have moved into the drawing room. The birthday present pile remains untouched by the stairs.

Adrien moves towards it and then glances over at me. "So. Which one is from you?"

I grimace, trying to remember. Then I spot the one that hasn't been professionally gift-wrapped. "That one."

He carefully whips it out and the pyramid stays intact. I'm almost impressed.

"It's signed from you and Gregor," he states, smiling as he reads the tag. "So, what is it?"

He stares at me straight on, lips twitching. I glower. I'm not losing this annoying game.

"It's," I try to think of which boring, yet, useful thing my big brother would have bought and wrapped up, "it's an alarm clock."

"An alarm clock?" He slowly pulls the ribbon from the box, never looking away from me and never losing his determined little smile. "Really?"

I smile back, haughtily. "Really."

Adrien unwraps the package, gaze still locked onto me. I suddenly feel like snorting.

He's making me laugh.

We both look down, surprised to see him unwrapping a model plane in a box. One that has to be built from scratch. I look up at him, expecting him to gloat at the fact that he won our odd little back and forth.

But he looks suddenly less playful.

"Sorry," I say jokingly. "Not an alarm clock."

"No, this is better," he says quietly. "I love planes."

I look down at Cerby, who's sniffing the other presents. "Well… that's good."

"I want to be a pilot someday," he tells me, smiling widely.

"Wow." I want to be a reporter but I don't say so out loud.

He puts the box gently on top of the pile and beams at me.

"Thanks, Cora. I *love* my present."

I snort, knowing he knows that I had no part in the present. But I want to pretend that I did, so I smile graciously. "You're welcome, Adrien."

"You found him!"

We both turn to see the glamorous woman from

earlier. She comes over, a glass of champagne in one of her slender hands.

"Come here!"

Adrien pretends to try and escape her, but she catches him and plants a huge wet kiss on his temple. She leaves a massive dark red lipstick stain on his skin and he laughs.

"Happy birthday, darling." She keeps one arm wrapped around him, turning to smile warmly at me. "Cora! Did you like the garden?"

"Yeah," I say, a little shyly. "Yeah, it was nice."

"And have you two made friends then?" she asks brightly, looking back at Adrien.

I expect him to be embarrassed and to pull away from her, but he beams broadly at me. "Yep."

I'm too surprised to argue.

"Good!" his mum cries delightedly. Her happiness is too obvious to mistake or misread. "Adrien gets quite lonesome during the summers, Cora. You must come over whenever you want."

I think of my own usually long and lonely summers and feel a strange twinge.

"I'll think about it, Mrs Hawkins."

And the weird thing is that I think I just might.