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The Songs You've Never Heard

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Songs: lyrics and melodies
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CHAPTER ONE

'Oh my God, that's Meg McCarthy!'

'Who?'

'Caspar McCarthy's sister.'

They think I can't hear them because I've got my headphones on. Annoyingly, my music doesn't drown out their cheery, chirpy voices.

'How do you know that?'

'Every Caspar fan knows that. He's got loads of photos and interviews with her online.'

I turn the music up louder. Lana Del Rey is pouring dreamily into my ears, but even her luscious voice can't distract me from their chatter. They seem about my age or maybe a bit younger. I can't tell anymore. All the fangirls look the same to me these days.

'Are you sure it's her? She doesn't look much like Caspar.'

'I'm positive. He's from Brighton so it makes sense that she'd be hanging around here.'

The waiter hands me my bill on a plate covered with tempting

3. Richard Willbury, Year 9

Asked me out to the movies. Spent the whole date trying to convince me to give his demo to Caspar. He was also a crap kisser.

4. Melissa Hunter, Year 10

I probably should have learned my lesson about trusting people by this point, but she seemed so sweet. We were partnered on a music project and for a few weeks we shared ideas without any mention of the C word. However, as soon as our song was finished, she asked me if I could pitch it to Caspar. When I told her that was out of my hands, our newfound friendship fizzled out quicker than a sparkler dropped in a puddle.

5. Ness Hawkins, Years 10 to 12

You know the story by now. She was all over me like a rash until she realised Caspar didn't live with us anymore. Then, for some reason, I was public enemy number one. And I still am.

♫

I like lists. Unlike people, lists never let you down. Lists are sturdy and accurate. They bring order into the world when everything else is a swirling vortex of chaos. This is why I list everything. Favourite songs. Revision notes. Facts. Feelings. If I were to write

a list of things that keep me sane, lists would be at the top of my list. And the sea would be number two. I took it for granted before we moved away, but now I'm back here I vow never to underappreciate that churning, grey expanse again.

London was totally devoid of horizon. All smog and noisy madness – like a depressing, grotty version of Disneyland where you end up spending all your time standing in a queue while your soul leaves your body one atom at a time. Not that anyone in my family cared much about my disintegrating soul during The London Years™. Why would they? My soul was not the thing getting playlisted on Radio 1. Therefore, I was given no choice but to fulfil my sisterly duty, i.e. silently putting up with being nothing more than a bit part in The Caspar Show.

My time in London was an endless, nauseating carousel of people, parties and prying eyes at every window. I didn't think it was ever going to stop. Until one day … it just did. The minute Cass turned eighteen he insisted we all get the hell out of his hair. So that was it – bye-bye Big Smoke and hello Brighton, once again. Mum and Dad had a million excuses for moving back. Their favourite was claiming that Caspar was out on tour so much that it didn't make sense to rent an expensive place in Putney.

They even started pretending it was about me. *It's the perfect year for you to change schools, Meggy, before all the important coursework starts.* Blah, blah, blah. Whatever. More like: Little Lord Cass says jump and my parents put on their gym shoes.

Usually the beach is heaving in July, but today the weather looks like the start of some kind of disaster movie involving

chocolate mints. I push them away to the other end of the table. If there's one habit I've learned growing up with Caspar, it's to never indulge too much. Because someone is always watching.

As I reach for my purse, I feel an unwanted presence over my shoulder. The girls have picked up their drinks and are honing in on me. They are a cloud of blonde hair, sticky lip-gloss and flowery perfume, wrapped up in two beaming smiles. They seem nice.

They always *seem* nice.

'Meg, hi!' says the leader of the duo as though I'm someone in her class or a cousin she's grown up with. 'Do you mind if we sit with you?'

All I can summon up is a non-verbal grunt. I don't bother taking my headphones off, hoping that they'll get the hint.

'I LOVE your eyeliner!' the second girl says, or rather yells right in my face. 'It looks amazing on you. What brand is it? Your whole style is, like, serious goals.'

When I get these kinds of questions on Twitter it's easier to deal with. I can ignore them. Or block them. Unfortunately, there's no way to block human tweets when they turn up at your table.

'Hey, can you hear us?' the first girl asks, waving her hand in front of my face. I am genuinely not real to them. I'm just a 3D version of the photos on my brother's Instagram. 'Can you turn your music down a second?'

'Sorry, I don't have time to chat right now,' I say, getting up to go and pay.

'Rude!' she squeaks indignantly as I brush past her. 'You could

at least talk to us for two seconds. We were just trying to be nice!'

Like I said, they're always nice … at the start.

I make an ungraceful exit, getting my bag tangled up on my chair as I try to escape. I can still hear the girls over my music.

'What the hell is her problem?'

'Probably just jealous of her brother …'

'Stupid, stuck-up bitch!'

Strangers insult me so often, both in real life and on the Internet, that I guess I should be used to it by now. But the fact is, it still stings me every time.

♫

Top 5 Friends Who Weren't Really My Friend:

1. Ruby McNeil, Year 7

My best friend for the whole first year of Senior School, or so I thought. On the final day of term, she begged me to give her Caspar's number but didn't ask for mine. I moved away and she didn't keep in touch.

2. Jessica Brown, Year 8

Sat next to me in every class and came over for sleepovers. After a few stays at mine, she realised Caspar was barely ever home and made excuses to stop seeing me.

shipwrecks. There are still a couple of Mountain Warehouse families down here, valiantly pretending to enjoy their houmous sandwiches in the wind. And the odd dog-walker. And a miserable, hungover-looking hen party dressed as bedraggled Playboy bunnies. And me.

I always come here when I don't want to be interrupted. The pebbles might be uncomfortable, but it's the perfect place to get my thoughts together and write song lyrics. Today I don't have a pen or paper though, only my phone. I scroll through my playlist of artists until I reach my own name. Then I hit play.

Looks like I told
Too many lies
You've fallen for my disguise

If I knew
How to tell the truth
You'd have seen it in my eyes

Closing my eyes, I let the song wash over me. The person I wrote it for comes crashing into my mind like a wave. I remember the way I felt when I wrote it. The intense blast of emotion that demanded to be unleashed. At the time, I didn't question a single line because every word was true and raw and necessary.

Now I only have questions. Does the melody move in the right way? Do the lyrics sound clumsy? Are my chords boring? Does the recording do justice to the orchestra I heard in my head when I first started writing it?

The answer is no. Of course it doesn't. After all, there's only so much I can do with a laptop and a basic microphone in the corner of my bedroom. Dad has taught me bits and pieces of music production, but I'm nowhere near his or Caspar's level. I'll need to watch a few thousand more YouTube tutorials before I get that good.

I guess this is one more song that will exist forever in digital purgatory, along with all my other unheard demos. And I guess I'll never have the guts to send it to him …

Will your heart wait while
My heart's breaking?
Is it too late
To make a second first impression?

I sigh and pause the music for a moment. The sounds that surround me clear my head a little. The wind and the squawking seagulls. Taking a deep breath, I scroll to a new song and press play.

My brother's chiselled face appears on the screen, brooding with a hint of a smile. His dark eyes stare out with complete confidence from under a mess of dirty blonde hair. It's the cover from his first single 'Next Best Thing', released when he was just sixteen – a whole year younger than I am now.

The music hits my ears, a cool mix of dance and acoustic that still sounds cutting-edge four years on. Caspar's voice is smooth honey, filled with emotion. It's beautiful and intimidating at the same time.

Full stop, listen up I've got a question
Tell me now am I wasting feelings?
Telling stories you don't believe in …

There's a reason people noticed his early demos. Sure, they got tweaked and polished by high-level producers, but the seeds of what made the songs so special were all sown by Caspar himself. He always has a concept and a vision when he's writing. He writes the kind of songs you feel like you've known forever, even if you've only heard them once. He writes songs that make sense.

I don't wanna be your next best thing
I don't wanna be another five-minute wonder
More than just a catchy song you sing
Not the kind you throw away
Want you to hit replay
Over and over I'm gonna show ya
That I really wanna get to know know know ya …

The irony of the lyrics isn't lost on me. Caspar has never been anybody's 'next best thing'. He's number one on everyone's list. And yet he still had to claim the sentiment for his own song concept. He couldn't even let me have my own misery to wallow in without taking a piece of it too.

I'm not gonna be your next best thing
Coz I'm everlasting …

I rip my headphones off and toss them onto the pebbles. I think I've had enough music for one day.

Sometimes I wish I could be more like my brother was at my age. He was always so bloody sure of his own talent.

This is why he has millions of listeners, whereas I only have two.

And one of them is me.