CONTENT NOTE: this book contains
content relating to drug abuse

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

www.penguin.co.uk
www.puffin.co.uk
www.ladybird.co.uk

Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2023

001

Text copyright © Jenny Ireland, 2023

The moral right of the author has been asserted
The brands mentioned in this book are trademarks belonging to third parties

Set in 10.75/15.5pt Adobe Caslon Pro
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–59182–6

All correspondence to:
Penguin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

For Chris, Lyla and Rory, with all my love. Always.
(And a wee bit for Casey even though she's just a dog)

1

Juliet

There should be a disclaimer at the beginning of teen movies:

CONTENT WARNING:
REAL LIFE IS NOTHING LIKE THIS. WE ACCEPT NO LIABILITY WHATSOEVER FOR THE UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS THAT WILL ARISE FROM WATCHING THIS FILM. VIEWER DISCRETION IS ADVISED.

Seems fair. People *should* be warned that the whole 'guy meets girl, they hate each other (or pretend to), they get forced together, and – BAM – they fall in love' thing is total bullshit.

And yeah, I know it's fiction. That none of this stuff is *real*. But I still get sucked in. Every. Single. Time. I even get *butterflies* when they stare at each other the way I stare at my hot-water bottle and painkillers after a day of too much standing up.

You know which movies are the worst? The ones set at Christmas. Teenagers with above-average good looks, festive jumpers and mistletoe, Tiffany boxes and fake snow, wrapped up with perfect smug smiles.

Don't even get me started on Disney movies. Targeting five-year-olds with their happy-ever-afters? It's sickening.

Here's a spoiler. Real life doesn't work like that. Real life is a first kiss with *way* too much saliva with someone you barely know, behind the sports hall at breaktime, with your best friend keeping lookout and whispering that you're taking too long when you're only trying to figure out a polite way of stopping the slushy horror show. Real life is your other best friend doing *way* more than kissing, with someone else, at the same time, a few metres away.

Real life is the doctor handing you disgusting grey crutches and telling you that you'll need to use a walking aid for the foreseeable future.

Real life is staring at yourself in the mirror and trying not to despise your new reflection.

In real life, all your problems aren't solved over the course of ninety minutes. There is no witty voice-over, no strategically placed plot points, and *definitely* no over-emotional soundtrack telling you exactly how to feel.

Because real life is *nothing* like a stupid movie.

Michael was already outside. I could hear music blasting from his car. I threw off my crutches, letting them slide down the stairs, almost taking out Jeffrey, our Chihuahua-Chewbacca cross.

Mum was in the hall beside the front door, watching me come down: one step, two feet.

'Maybe we should keep the other pair downstairs, so Jeffrey doesn't have to fear for his life every morning?' Jeffrey hid

behind Mum's legs as she joked, gauging my mood with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

'Yeah. Would probably be easier.'

Why don't we just get it over with and put some in every room?

'How are you feeling this morning?' Mum asked.

I didn't look up. I didn't need to. I could practically see the crease of concern in her forehead deepen.

'Fine, Mum. Completely, one hundred per cent fine.' Fake smile.

'Jules.'

'Mum.' I met her gaze and smiled, properly this time. And when I did that, the forehead crease disappeared for a second.

'It's the first day of your final year, love. It's going to be great. And nobody's going to notice the crutches.'

'Yeah, I know.' *Of course* everyone was going to notice the crutches. That wasn't the issue. The issue was what they were going to say about it.

She leaned over and kissed my head.

'Ready to take on the world, kid?' Dad came out of the kitchen holding a coffee.

'Something like that.' I looked down at my new trainers. Black Nike Air Force 1s. Not exactly Birch High regulation uniform. As if I needed another reason to stick out. But shoving my feet into leather school shoes hurt too much nowadays.

Dad kissed my head too. 'Promise me a game later? I've got a new move up my sleeve.'

'Sure.'

Mum opened the door. *And there endeth the leaving ceremony.* Thank God for that.

'Hey, Mrs C, Mr C!' Michael walked into the hall and headed straight towards the kitchen. He appeared two minutes later, his mouth full of one of Mum's home-made back-to-school blueberry muffins and another one in his hand.

'Juliet is the sun. Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,' he intoned, bursting into overdramatic life. *Way* too much energy for this time in the morning.

He took my school bag from me, and we walked down the driveway. 'Your hair is on point today.' He kissed his fingers, then nodded at my crutches. 'And I *love* the new accessories.'

'I'll cut you.'

'What? I'm serious. They totally give you something extra. And are those new kicks? Watch that Princess Peach doesn't try and rob them off your feet.'

He nodded towards Tara, sitting in the back of his car. Michael picked her up at the crossroads every morning. He offered to pick her up from her house, but she always said she liked a little walk in the morning, something to do with the air making her skin glow. She was smiling at her phone as we approached.

'Bye, Jules,' Mum called.

God. Why have they followed us outside?

'All will be well, my friend. I promise.'

Easy to say if you're Michael. I'd never met anyone so comfortable in their own skin. Then suddenly his smile disappeared and he looked serious. It amazed me how

expressive Michael's face was, like it was impossible to hide the thoughts in his head. 'Actually, though, how are you? The new look can't be easy.'

'Seriously, I'm *fine*. We don't need to talk about it. Wait – is that a top knot?' Michael's dark hair had been pulled back off his face into this tiny bun on top of his head.

'Yeah, it is. Do you like it? My dad was watching Italian football last night, and what can I say? Something he watched finally appealed to me. Don't you think it makes me look like an Italian stallion?' His movie-star smile almost blinded me.

It was impossible not to smile back at Michael.

He squeezed my bag into the back seat with Tara and helped me into the passenger seat of the car. His parents had bought him a new black Audi over the summer.

Some of us got crutches, some of us got an Audi . . .

'Is that a muffin, Michael? I'm starving – did you bring me one?' Tara asked.

'No, sorry. You should've come in instead of sitting on your phone.' He shrugged.

'Ugh, whatever. Oh wow, you're actually bringing them to school?' Tara eyed my crutches like they were carrying some infectious disease. Michael slid them into the back seat beside her, next to my bag. 'Ouch, Michael! Watch where you're sticking those things.'

'Yeah. Remember what I said? Dr Patel –'

But she wasn't listening. She was on Insta. 'Oh my God, Hana got a *lob*. What do you think?' She pushed her phone through the space between me and Michael, and there was

Hana, head cocked, lips parted, peace sign in the camera and her black hair cut into a long bob with a blunt fringe. Gorgeous. It was pretty much the reason Tara decided to be friends with her in Year Ten. 'Hot people have hot friends,' she'd said.

She used to say that about me.

'She looks amazing,' I said.

Michael sighed. 'Yeah, looks fine.'

'Well, *your* hair looks ridiculous, Michael,' Tara said. 'Love your shoes, though, Jules – are they new?'

'Yeah, Dad bought me them yesterday.'

'Ugh, lucky bitch,' she said as Michael started the car.

'Just get yourself a disease.' I smiled.

'Do you think I could pull off crutches?'

To be fair, she probably could.

'Oh, you know that *thing* we were talking about last night, Jules? Hey, Michael, turn down the music, will you?'

I noticed Michael grip the steering wheel more tightly before reaching for the volume control.

Tara and I had spent an hour on WhatsApp last night. She'd decided she wanted to go for it. To lose her virginity this year, and we were basically going through all the guys at school, trying to find the perfect candidate. We hadn't found one.

'Yeah?' I said.

'Well, there's this party next Friday. You know, Daniel from St Anne's?'

No.

'Yeah?'

'Well, I figured that might be the perfect opportunity –'

'Am I missing something?' Michael asked, looking at me.

I shrugged and looked at Tara. I wished she'd just tell him. I hated the weird tension now.

'It's kind of a "best friend only" thing.' She smiled at the back of Michael's head, and I tried to soften his side-eye by pulling a stupid face.

Michael had never liked Tara. Well, that's not true. We all used to hang out in this big group: Tara, me, Michael, Hana, Luke and Charlie.

Michael and I had met on our first day. We sat beside each other in English, and he passed me a note saying, 'Please, sir, can I be your friend?' I laughed, then we both got told off, and he's been making me laugh ever since.

Michael and Tara actually used to get on, for a few years at least. Until she told him that her second favourite ex-One Direction band member was Louis and not Zayn (first was Harry, obviously). He said that made him suspicious of her as a person. Michael took his stanning of One Direction really seriously and never trusted her after that. That's what he said anyway when I asked why he didn't like her. There are loads of other reasons now, but that triggered it. *Apparently.* He just never went into details.

'Oh, Jules, I forgot to tell you – I totally went up a cup size this summer.' Tara grabbed her boobs. My neck hurt from turning round.

'Riveting,' said Michael, rolling his eyes so hard I was surprised we didn't run the red light.

I thought about my barely-there chest, hidden underneath my school jumper.

As if she'd read my mind, Tara piped up: 'You know, Jules, you really need to get smaller jumpers – that one looks like a sack. You'd look really hot in a tight jumper.'

But I liked my big clothes. The baggier they were, the better I was doing at hiding how skinny I was. I pulled my sleeves over my fingers. Michael called my style 'hobo chic'.

'I don't know,' I said. 'I don't think Mum would buy me them just for that.'

I noticed Michael raise an eyebrow, and he was right not to believe me; there wasn't much Mum wouldn't buy me. Mum was never done buying me stuff, mostly clothes. She'd got to the point now that she'd make excuses for it, saying things like, 'Oh, I was in town and saw this!' or whatever. And it wasn't like I didn't appreciate it; I just knew why she was doing it – so the new clothes were kind of tainted by the fact that their existence had been triggered by my disability.

'Boo. Your mum is such a bore,' Tara said, rolling her eyes, and Michael turned up the music again.

Luke was waiting for us (well, for Tara) when we got to school. He'd not-so-subtly fancied her for ages, but until last year had barely talked to her. I don't know what happened over the summer after Year Twelve, but he came back to school with new confidence. He started showing up everywhere. Every breaktime, every lunchtime, trying to get her attention. I think the first time Tara actually spoke to him was the day he came to school with two tickets to see Taylor Swift and asked her if she wanted to go. She said yes, then took Hana instead.

'Hey, gorgeous,' said Luke, directed at Tara.

She ignored him.

I tried to get out of the car too quickly and my ankle twisted as I stepped out. When I tried to steady myself with the door, it swung open further and I landed on my side, my right knee hitting the ground.

'Jesus,' said Michael, jumping out of the driver's seat.

'Help Jules!' Tara snapped at Luke. I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd clicked her fingers too.

'I'm fine. I don't need help – I'm fine,' I spluttered.

But Luke was already there, at Tara's request.

Pain.

I'd learned to do this thing where I'd bite my tongue as hard as I could instead of screaming. But it didn't get rid of the shame. My face was burning, and I squeezed my eyes shut, wishing to God I was back at home in front of my laptop.

I felt Luke's hands under my arms. I kept my eyes closed, as if he wouldn't see the humiliation all over my red face. For a minute I enjoyed the feeling of his hands on me, and for a second I pretended I was in one of those teen movies. And that Luke was some hot guy touching me because he couldn't keep his hands off me, not because he was helping the disabled friend of the girl he was obsessed with off the floor.

'You OK?' he asked. But by the time I'd made some witty joke and balanced myself on the crutches that Michael handed me, he was already five steps ahead, carrying Tara's school bag.