The PIANO at the STATION



HELEN RUTTER

ILLUSTRATED BY ELISA PAGANELLI

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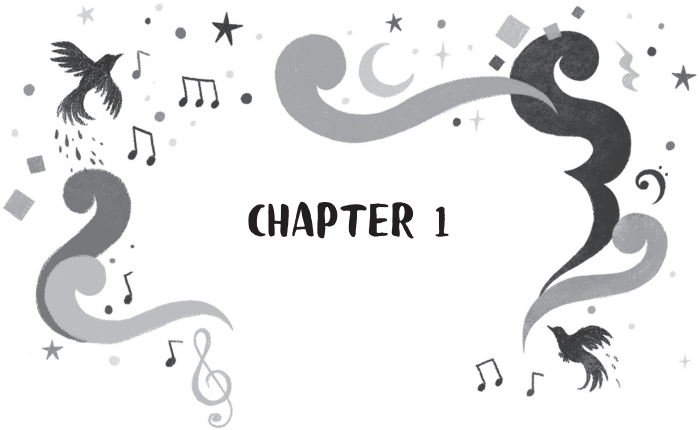
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CHAPTER 1

"LACEY LAYTON!" Mr Jenson yells. "I am sick and tired of hearing your voice."

I'm about to get kicked out – again. I just need to say one more thing and I'll be free.

I hate Maths more than any other subject. Well, actually it's Mr Jenson I hate more than any other teacher. I used to be pretty good at Maths in primary school.

I consider keeping my mouth shut for a second. Maybe I'll stay and mess with Mr Jenson for a bit longer, but then he gives me a

look. It's a look that says he's disgusted by me and would rather be teaching anyone else in the whole world. That does it – I can't keep it in.

"Well, I'm sick and tired of hearing your voice, sir," I say with a smirk. It works.

"Out!" he shouts.



None of the teachers seem to understand that I don't care. I don't want to be in their boring lessons, so it's hardly a punishment to get kicked out, is it? Anyway, I only said what Mr Jenson said to me. Why do I get kicked out and he's still free to teach his boring class?

So I'm soon sitting in ISO (isolation) yet again. The headteacher, Mrs Hukin, spots me from her office and shakes her head.

"What are we going to do with you, Lacey? That big brain of yours is being wasted. You spend more time here than in the classroom."

"I love it here, miss," I reply.

"Mmm, I'm sure you do," says Mrs Hukin. "We might need to chat to your mum again, see what we can do to make school a bit easier for you."

"Mum's busy, miss. She won't answer the phone today." This is a lie. Mum's shift will

have finished by now. She'll be in the kitchen drinking tea with Auntie Jackie before her next shift starts.

"Well, you are on your last chance, Lacey," Mrs Hukin goes on. "Try to stay out of trouble for a while, hey? What are you doing at lunch-time? I know you find break-times complicated."

"It's not me, miss," I say. "Everyone starts on me for no reason."

"Well, stay out of it today, OK? Find something else to do or somewhere else to be."

"Yes, miss."

I don't want the school to call Mum again. It's not that she's bothered about me getting in trouble. I think she actually finds it pretty funny. Mum says I remind her of her when she was young. But I don't want to have to deal with the other kids making comments about

her. Seeing the way she is and saying that's why I'm like I am.

The last time Mum was in, she'd been singing down the halls, looking in all her old classrooms and pulling faces at the teachers. Then Alyssa Harris made some snooty comment about how rough Mum was. You can't let someone comment on your mum and not do something about it. I had to punch Alyssa in the face, didn't I?

I hate Alyssa and her posh mates. They think they are better than me.

*

At lunch, I try to keep my head down like Mrs Hukin said. Mum's already had two calls from Teresa and Britt's school this week, so she doesn't need another call about me. Teresa secretly put her teacher on her Insta live again. She films everything – it's like she's addicted.

Teresa is only ten, but she's got thousands of followers. Sometimes people recognise her in the street. Mum got a second call when Britt used a bad swear word for an eight year old – the worst word.

Mum calls it a hat-trick when she gets calls about all three of us in the same week. Last time she said she kept expecting the phone to ring about the baby and make it a full set.

Auntie Jackie thought that was hilarious and they started acting out a phone call about what a naughty baby Baye was. Auntie Jackie put on this posh teacher voice.

"Hello, Mrs Layton?" Auntie Jackie said.

"Yeah?" Mum answered. "What's wrong this time?"

"I'm afraid it's baby Baye, Mrs Layton," Auntie Jackie went on.

"She's not even at your school," Mum said. "She's only a baby."

"But I can tell how badly behaved she is from here and so I thought it was worth a phone call."

They both howled with laughter at this.

It always happens. When I'm trying to stay out of trouble, it just seems to come and find me. I'm heading over the yard after lunch and am just minding my own business. But Alyssa and her gang shove past me and nearly knock me over.

I half think about ignoring them. I can't really be bothered with more drama today. But then I hear Alyssa's snide voice say, "Don't touch her. She probably can't afford to wash."

I can't stop myself. No one speaks about me like that. It's like a switch has been pressed

in my head and my body. I lose it. I shove her hard in the chest, her pathetic mates squealing as I do. As she falls backwards, I see Mrs Hukin coming towards us.

*

An hour later I'm sitting in Mrs Hukin's office with Mum and Auntie Jackie either side of me. I just want this to be over with. Baye is sitting in her pram playing with one of my old Barbies.

I know how this all goes. Mrs Hukin tells us all how violence is not tolerated at this school. Mum defends me and says what a horrible mare Alyssa is. Mrs Hukin tells Mum to watch her language but agrees that what Alyssa did was not OK.

Talk, talk, talk. Nothing changes. If Mum swears too much or storms out, then I might get suspended and stay at home for a few days. But everyone knows that suspension won't do

much. The whole thing is pointless. I'm only in Year Seven and we've been here so many times already.

Then Mrs Hukin starts.

"I think we need to try something different this time, ladies."

"How about dealing with that little cow bag who keeps starting on my daughter?" Mum says.

"I will talk to Alyssa separately, Mrs Layton," says Mrs Hukin. "Let's focus on Lacey, shall we?"

"Lacey's a good girl," says Mum. "She's the brainiest one of the lot of us."

Mum has always called me a brain box. Just because I used to do well in tests at primary school. Baye squeals and throws the Barbie on the floor.

"Baye Layton, you will get yourself a detention!" Mum tells Baye, adding, "Sorry, miss."

Mum acts weird with Mrs Hukin. Like she's a child again. One minute she's cheeky and rude, and the next she's trying not to get into trouble.

Mrs Hukin carries on.

"Lacey seems to find lunch-times most difficult and so I have an idea that could help. We have a music tutor visiting the school. They work with students, using music as therapy."

"Our Lacey doesn't need therapy." Auntie Jackie spits this out as if even the word "therapy" is revolting.

Mrs Hukin just carries on, as cool as a cucumber. I'm always amazed by how calm she stays.

"In which case she can just play music and stay out of trouble each lunch-time. Therapy or not, this is a chance for Lacey to have somewhere to go, to be safe and stay away from the kids she struggles with."

"Oh God. What are they gonna get her playing this time?" Auntie Jackie says, snorting and nudging Mum. "Remember that chuffing recorder?"

"Shut up, Jackie," Mum whispers. "I'd like to hear *you* try to play something." Then she looks at Mrs Hukin as if she's not sure. "They better not send Lacey home with some horrible-sounding thing. I'm not having a trumpet or anything like that in the house."

"If Lacey doesn't take up this offer, Mrs Layton," Mrs Hukin says, "I think we may need to look at other options for her schooling."

I see panic in Mum's eyes. I know the look – she'll either get angry and storm out swearing or turn into a little girl.

"She can't go anywhere else, miss," Mum replies, choosing the little girl. "Mountview is too far. I haven't got a car any more since Phil left."

Mrs Hukin smiles. She knows she's won.

"In that case, let's see what music can do, shall we? We might all be surprised."