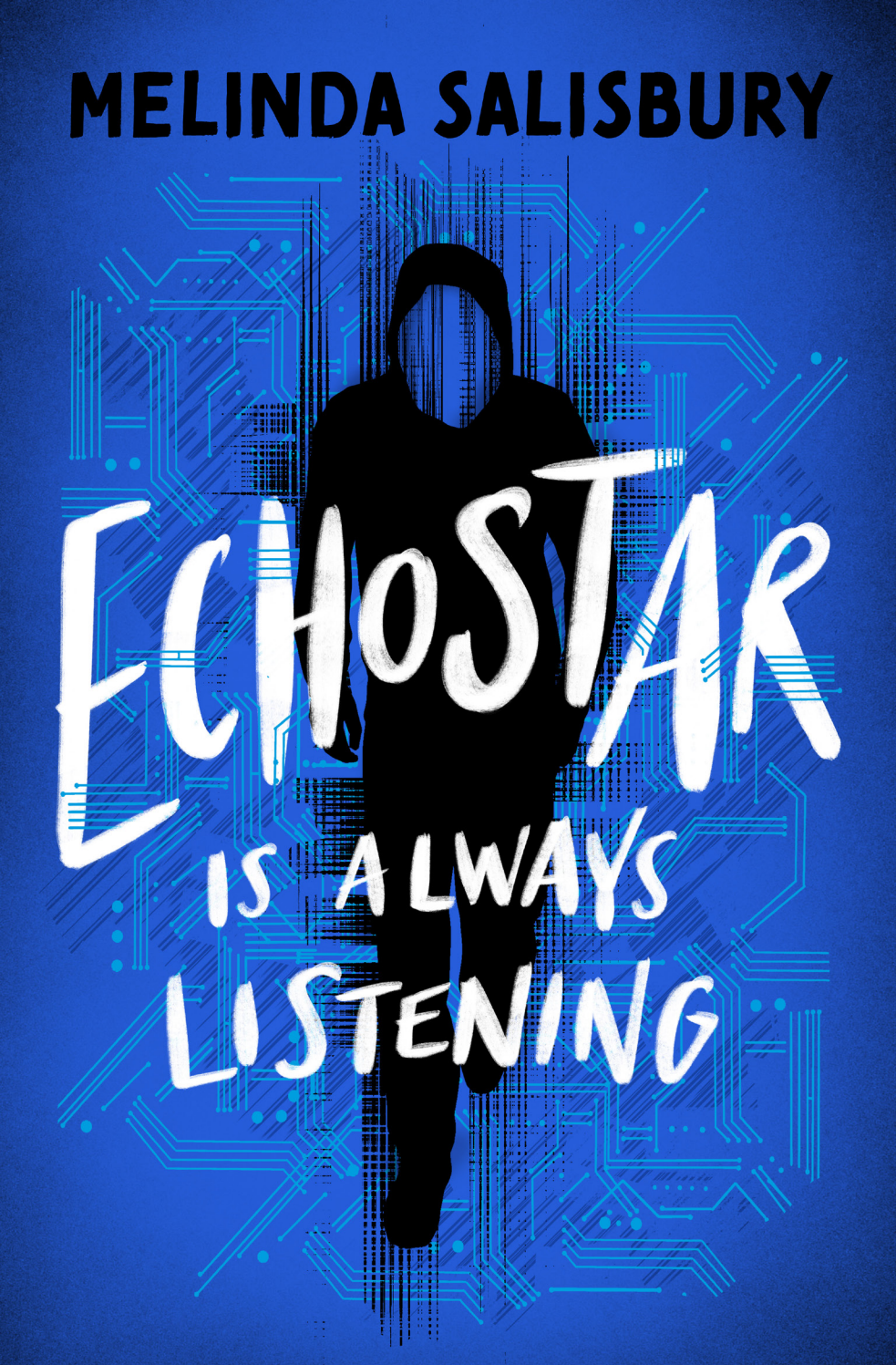
MELINDA SALISBURY



ECHOSTAR IS ALWAYS LISTENING


ECHOSTAR

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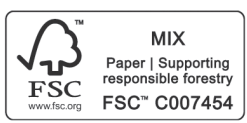
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CHAPTER 1

I skidded into the seat beside Deva, my best friend, as the last ring of the bell faded away into a tense, expectant silence. It was a feat so impossible, so *miraculous*, it should be turned into a film, starring me, written, directed and produced by me. It was cinematic. It was spectacular. It was—

"Disgraceful," said Mrs McGinty, my Biology teacher, as she glared at me. "Truly, Ruby. Disgraceful. When the bell rings, you should already be in your seat with your books out for the start of the lesson, not hurling yourself across the room like an animal," she continued.

"I'm sorry, Miss," I replied, offering a winning smile. "What can I say? I live for the drama."

A few people laughed, and Mrs McGinty's expression darkened into a dangerous look.

It was a look I knew well.

I braced myself, determined to go to the guillotine with my head held high (at least while it was still attached). But somehow, instead of giving me detention, Mrs McGinty exhaled slowly and opened the register.

"Thank you, Universe," I muttered.

"I thought you were toast this time," Deva said. "Where were you?"

"Asking about the end-of-year show," I said, glancing at Mrs McGinty, who was calling out names. "I made it clear to Mr Conti I'm ready for an actual speaking role this year. You'd think he'd realise I have star quality."

"Ruby Brookes," Mrs McGinty barked.

I snapped my head around. "Here, Miss."

"We all know you're here, Ruby," Mrs McGinty said. "We can hear you whispering to Miss Shah."

I held up my hands as I couldn't deny it, and everyone laughed again.

Mrs McGinty blinked, then went back to the register. I mouthed, "To be continued," at

Deva and opened my exercise book, fighting back a yawn.

Biology was not my best subject. Neither was Chemistry. Or Physics. Or Maths, English, English Lit., Geography, French, History or PE. I was so-so at Art, as long as my teachers let me embrace my inner Picasso. With still life and classic portraits, I was somewhat less gifted.

I really did live for Drama.

Standing on stage in the spotlight was the only time I felt like myself. It was ironic, considering I was pretending to be someone else. My first word was apparently "star" – my parents thought I was talking about the shape, but I know I was talking about my destiny.

I wanted to be in films: I'd start as an indie darling and become a Hollywood icon. In TV, there would be a couple of cameos in crime shows followed by a lead role in something award-winning. But most important of all was appearing on stage. Repertory, Off-Broadway, *on* Broadway, a West End transfer. I needed an audience. I needed—

"—to pay attention!" growled Mrs McGinty.

Deva elbowed me in the arm.

I looked up to find our teacher towering over us, her eyes bulging like a frog's.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Sorry, Miss. Could you repeat the question? If there was a question."

I thought she was going to explode. Her face was the colour of an aubergine.

Deva rescued me, saying, "The four bases that make up DNA are T, A, G and C."

I stared at Deva.

Mrs McGinty was also staring at her.

Deva pushed her glasses up her nose. "I think," she added.

"That's right, Miss Shah," Mrs McGinty said, blinking. "Well done. Your work has been very impressive this term. I'm glad to see at least one of you putting in the effort. Keep it up."

Deva gave a small nod.

Mrs McGinty smiled at her, scowled at me and went back to the front of the room.

"Read the chapter on DNA bases and then answer the questions I'm going to write on the board. You don't need to talk while you're reading," Mrs McGinty added, glaring at me.

The moment she looked away, I turned to Deva to ask how she suddenly knew about DNA bases and why old McGinty thought her work was impressive – Deva used to be as bad at Biology as me. Then I paused. I didn't want to get either of us into any more trouble. Instead, I tore a page from the middle of my exercise book and scribbled on it, sliding it along the table to Deva.

What does she mean your work has been impressive this term? Are you blackmailing her?

Deva looked at my note, adjusted her glasses and jotted a short reply, pushing it back to me.

I've been studying, she'd written.

I mock gasped at Deva, clutching an imaginary pearl necklace. *Are you possessed?* I wrote back.

Deva shrugged, her pen moving quickly. *My mum says I can't go to the ATF Camp if I don't sort my grades out.*

I sucked in a sharp breath. Deva and I had both been offered free places at the Ash Tree Foundation Performing Arts Camp this summer after auditioning earlier in the year.

It sounded amazing: six weeks of workshops and classes and talks with real showbiz professionals. They hadn't revealed who yet, but there were rumours about some of the tutors they'd hired – and they were big. *Hollywood* big. Agents and scouts too. Deva and I had been dreaming of summer ever since.

My mum said the same, I replied. *But there's no way she means it*.

My mum means it, Deva wrote.

Deva pulled the paper back and added something else before I could reply.

I need to concentrate. Talk at lunch.

She slid the page over to me and then bent over her book, pushing her glasses up her nose as her dark hair spilled onto the desk.

I tried to focus on my own work, but I could almost feel the words going in through my eyes and then slinking straight out of my ears without ever going near my memory. It wasn't that I had

a terrible memory – give me a monologue, and I'd have it down in twenty-four hours. Biology stuff wouldn't stick because it was boring, and I'd never been good at paying attention to things I found boring.

I was still reading the first page of the DNA chapter when Deva started writing.

From the corner of my eye, I saw her pen whipping across her exercise book as she worked through the questions on the board. She wasn't even pausing to think, as if she already knew what the answers were.

I got so caught up in watching her that when the bell went for the end of the lesson, I jumped, startled by the sound. I hadn't even finished the reading, let alone started the questions.

"All right, make a note of anything you haven't answered yet and complete it for your homework," Mrs McGinty declared. Everyone was shoving their books and pencil cases into their bags. "I'll expect it next lesson."

I groaned and rushed to copy down everything on the board.

"I'll give them to you," Deva offered.

"Thanks, you're a—"

I lunged over to hug Deva and accidentally knocked her glasses off.

"No!" Deva cried. She scrabbled to pick them up from under my seat where they'd landed, but I'd already got them.

"They're OK," I said, examining them. "Not broken. Oh, hang on, there's something caught—"

Before I could finish, Deva snatched the glasses from my hand, smoothing a long, transparent string down along one of the arms. She looked at the front carefully, then put them on, tucking the string *inside* her ear and pulling her hair over to hide it.

She wouldn't look at me.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Not here," Deva whispered.

"Deva—"

"Ruby, please."

Then Deva met my eyes.

She was terrified. I'd never seen her like this before, not even just before performing in a show.

I got stage fright, but Deva never did. She was always cool, always calm.

"Please," Deva said again.

I nodded, a twisting sensation in my stomach.

Something was very, very wrong.

Deva jerked her head towards the door, then began to walk away. After a second, I followed, my mind racing, my heart pounding.

We were the only two in our form who brought lunch from home. It meant we had the form room to ourselves until everyone else finished in the cafeteria.

"Dev, you're scaring me," I said as soon as we were safely inside, the door shut firmly behind us.

Deva closed her eyes, like she was in pain, and my stomach lurched again.

"If I tell you, you have to swear not to tell anyone else. Or get mad," Deva said.

"Why would I get mad?" I asked.

Deva pulled her phone out of her pocket, unlocking it. A few seconds later, she handed it to me.

An app was open on the screen.

"What's *EchoStar*?" I asked.