School for Fireflies



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Erica Gomez

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Chapter One

At precisely one minute past eight o'clock on the last day of August, the streetlights on Sandhurst Street unleashed flickering fireflies. Orange light whomped frantically from window to window along the street, doubling each time they touched a new glassy surface. It seemed like the frantic flashes were dispatched for the most urgent of missions.

It didn't take long for the street to become awash with ebbing waves of fireflies surging in one direction, towards Number Sixty-Four in the middle of the street – the house with the peeling black paint gate and a small garden of overgrown begonias. The pulsing lights began to gently tap the bedroom window with a drawn curtain.

Inside were two girls, bound by one knotted earphone wire, playing their favourite crime-solving podcast, *Storm Chasers*, at double speed. One leaned

against the bedframe, scrunching her face as she took her evening dose of cough syrup. She used a tissue to wipe the sticky dollop that landed on the sleeve of her moulting ladybug-patterned cardigan. Zadie liked 'ugly' jumpers (as Siddy called them).

Siddy flopped over the edge of the bed. Her thick black hair pooled on the rug, beneath the string of paper lanterns she had never taken down from Lunar New Year, while her fingers fiddled with the old paintbrushes tucked around the back of the bed.

"What's that noise?" asked Zadie from the floor, jumping in her skin. "Was that thunder? Sid, I don't do thunderstorms." Zadie's voice shrank to a whisper as she hit pause on the podcast.

Siddy shrugged and pushed play. "We're not doing this again."

She sounded a million miles away, caught in a daydream beneath the rows of strung red paper lanterns. She studied every inky splotch on her bedroom wall that made up a map of every lighthouse in the country, decommissioned and still functioning, remembering the January day her dad painted it with the same brushes hiding behind the bed.

"Think they'll find him tonight?"

Rubbing her throbbing eyes, Zadie propped her

new, thick-rimmed glasses above her tight-curly hair, slicked into two high buns.

"Don't give up. My dad said they won't stop until they find your dad, and you know my dad. He never breaks his promises."

"I don't think that's a promise he or anyone can keep."

With her thick eyebrows knitted together, confused, Zadie shuffled until she and Siddy were face-to-face. "Question mark."

Siddy rolled over, stomach flat on the bed, with a frown. "Because it's been three months. My dad never liked airports or travelling, and now they think he got on a plane to who-knows-where! I know he wouldn't go on an adventure without *me*."

"Ampersand."

"Ampersand, what?"

"There's something else. Something you're not telling me."

"I don't know," Siddy shrugged. "All I know is that there's something off between him and Mum. Whatever it is, she won't tell me, but I know that's why he ran away. Zadie, I know you trust your dad and everyone looking to find him, but the 'grown-ups' aren't telling us the whole story, so I've got to find it."

The girls nearly leapt out of their skin as a loud tapping

made the window glass shudder. Stacked canvases spilt out from behind the bed. One painted map for every year of Siddy's life. No two years were the same. She and her dad changed yearly, as did the places they visited.

Surely, he would return and when he did, she told herself, it would be before her twelfth birthday, and he would give her the best painting of her life.

"This can't be normal thunder," Zadie grumbled, comforting herself with a packet of salt and vinegar crisps.

"Ignore it."

Ignoring things was something Zadie was quite bad at. She brushed the specks of crushed crisps off her skirt and approached the curtains. When she rolled them open, the overwhelming gleam of a ball of fireflies sent her stumbling backwards. "Exclamation mark. Exclamation mark. EXCLAMATION MARK."

Like a released jack-in-the-box, Siddy sprung to her feet, standing shoulder to shoulder with Zadie, nodding. "Wicked cool."

A pep now in her step, Siddy zipped up a grey-blue Storm Chaser hoodie, reciting the slogan, "You can't be a chaser without a storm. Let's go."

"But… the last fifteen minutes of the episode?"

"We're chasers. Out there is something big, a real storm. Come on, Zadie," Siddy shook her shoulders

dramatically, "last week when your eye went funny, you said you saw dots with flapping wings. It's like that episode a few weeks back, you know, the one where they got help from that psychic, what's her name, to find the missing jewels. Jinx Finnegan!"

"Bad vision means I'm psychic now? Really? I'd rather be a fairy."

"Just trust me," Siddy took Zadie's clammy hands, yanking her down the stairs with her. Shoes quickly on and keys in her pocket, Siddy held a broad green umbrella at the ready. "Rule two ready?"

Zadie nodded, flashing the pair of silver cotton gloves in her raincoat pocket. Rule Two of the Storm Chasers detective code: always have a pair of gloves. Pleased, Siddy locked the front door.

"Eek," Zadie yelped. Rain pelted her neon yellow raincoat.

As they stepped down the front path, the fireflies floated down in front of them, lighting a path ahead. In silent agreement, Zadie and Siddy started walking.

Three roads later, the magical path had led them to the mouth of the alley behind the construction site of new flats. A dank, slithering path of discarded bricks, wires, and things the neighbourhood dumped in the skip.

Retching, the girls pulled their clothes over their

noses. Sid gulped, swallowed her squeal and swung her leg over the first obstacle heap.

"No, no, no! Come on, Sid; you can't be serious."

Pointing to the fireflies sprawled out to light the path, she said, "It's been a boring summer and finally, something's happening. We can't go home now. Besides, there will still be a million episodes waiting when we get back."

"But we're not meant to take the alley to the High Street."

"I won't tell my mum, and you won't tell your parents," she said matter of factly. "So, can we do this now, please?"

"Fine. But I'm doing this under protest." Zadie shakily followed Siddy down the alley.

Each step was like the one before. The fireflies behind whirled at their back, forming a giant wall behind the girls. One remained ahead to lead the way. Glancing back, the alley was spick and span, not even a single piece of littered gum in sight. With their hands webbed together, the girls stepped out of the alley.

Gone was the neglected Post Office thirsty for a new paint job that usually stood on the High Street. In its place, towering proudly were glossy marble walls covered in fireflies.

Siddy's jaw slackened, "This isn't *our* High Street."

"You can say that again," Zadie said, rolling her glasses down to her eyes.

The street was empty of people, but the Post Office building (if it could even be called that anymore) was a hive of activity. Both girls stepped up to the front entrance as a frazzled-looking woman appeared with a clipboard.

"Quick, quick, inside and into the queue! You followed the fireflies, yes? Of course you did. Look at you, wetter than the gremlins under Tower Bridge and just as confused. For the life of me, I don't get why some parents always wait until the last minute," she muttered the last bit to herself with some irritation.

Stunned into silence, the girls were quiet until Zadie sneezed into a tissue and wiped her nose.

"You've got the sniffs too, we're definitely in the right place. Let me break this down. Magic is everywhere you go, always has been. You just couldn't see it, but, once a year, the Administration dials down the concealment so your budding powers can find us and you are beginning to see. Tonight, you will learn if magic has chosen you." The lady kept talking at them as they followed her into a crowded lobby.

"That's a little unfair, showing us all this strange stuff if there's a chance we don't get to keep it!" Siddy said.

"Okay, well, thank you," Zadie swivelled on the balls of her feet, about to step back out of the door, until Siddy grabbed her collar. "What are you doing?"

"What are *you* doing? We have to go into the Post Office."

"No, we have to go home and get my dad."

"You said you wanted to be a fairy, so here you are. The universe answered!"

The lady, clearly growing more stressed by the second, cleared her throat loudly. "I do mean to rush you; I've got a schedule to stick to. Please line up and you'll be on your way home in no time."

"Fine," Zadie muttered, typing in her phone's notepad the date, time and '*noting my objection for the record*' in big blue letters.

The girls wormed through a dense pack of sweaty people to lean by the outer window streaked in grime. They watched as firefly-swirled buses began to fill the trafficked lanes, halting at the red lights.

"How much trouble do you think we're in when we tell our mums and my dad about this?"

Siddy pulled her palms apart as far she could in the cramped corner. "About that much, *if* they believe us."

The buses were parking inside a loop of blue barrier ropes.

"This is Grand Central Post Office, our final destination. Please take your belongings and exit the bus," the automated bus closest to the two friends announced.

"Please line up," a voice bellowed through a megaphone. "Go to your closest booth."

Waves of kids joined the winding crowd-control aisles. As Zadie followed the crowd, she noticed they all looked close in age to her and Siddy. At the start of each queue stood flashbulb cameras on tripods.

"Have we gone back in time?!" Siddy whispered. "That's older than the dinosaurs."

"Have your picture taken and move on. Do not delay the line," the no-nonsense voice boomed

"I don't have a good feeling about this," Zadie muttered.

"It's fine. What could go wrong?"

"Exclamation mark, a lot. Want a list? Dad says never let strangers take your picture."

Siddy rolled her shoulders and stepped forwards into the light as the camera flashed. She wiped her watery eyes on her way to the counter at the end of the fast-moving queue. A grey-haired woman with smudged lipstick snarled, rummaging through stacked files and envelopes.

"Um… maybe we should go to someone *other* than the slug woman from Monster's Inc. I still have nightmares," Siddy shuddered.

"Just go," Zadie nudged her from behind. "I want to go home."

"Let's see," she croaked. She tapped the keyboard,

adjusted her screen and pushed her thick-rimmed glasses up her nose. "Siddy Alexandra Rollins, daughter of… Owen Rollins?"

"How do you know that?"

With an aged groan, she ignored Siddy and instead stretched for a large blue object with silver handle, pressed it into her ink tray, stamped the envelope and slid it across the desk. "Your parents have a week to return the paperwork. Next!"

"But what's this for?"

"Miss Rollins," she glared over the top of her glasses. "There are hundreds of children from all over London who need to be seen, *preferably* before midnight. Move along. It's all quite self-explanatory. NEXT."

"Oh dear," Zadie moved forwards.

"Zadie June Nichols," the woman beamed. "I had no doubt Zachary Nichols' daughter would be accepted. Did you know he was the first student I ever handed their admission papers?"

"Um no, I didn't."

"Well, that's alright dear; we all start learning somewhere. I volunteer for this every year. It keeps me youthful."

"Question: what's being allocated?"

"School, Miss Nichols," she stamped her envelope

with a flourish. "You are not going to *one* of the best Firefly schools in the country. It is in fact *the* best school, and, just like your father, I have every confidence you will succeed where others did not." A prickly expression settled on Siddy.

"But I already have a secondary school spot. I start in two weeks."

"There once was a time when the world was for Fireflies, but now our numbers dwindle and we only exist in a few pockets of the world. That's why you, all of you young Fireflies, matter, so that the light of the world may never dim or go out. Good luck, Miss Nichols, although you'll have no need for it. Do tell your father that Marjorie at the Post Office says hello."

"I think I'll say more than that," she backed away with a half-hearted smile, holding the thick wad of paper to her chest as she caught up with Siddy a few paces ahead.

"Are we sure this isn't the cough medicine? There's a high chance we're dreaming."

"Don't think dreams work this way," Siddy laughed, wrapping her arm around Zadie. "We're going to magic school, and I don't think we'll be getting into any trouble with the parents, especially your dad."

"Why didn't he tell me about this? He tells me everything, at least I thought he did."