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Chapter 1

'One more time, guys!' Sierra jabbed at her iPod.

Elly groaned as the *thud*, *thud*, *thud* of the electronic bass and drums started up again. Much as she loved The Sparks' hit single, 'All Together Now', she'd had enough. Her throat was sore from singing and her legs ached from dancing.

'Oh no you don't.' Tash staggered across the room and collapsed face down on her bed. 'You've promised "one more time" for hours now.'

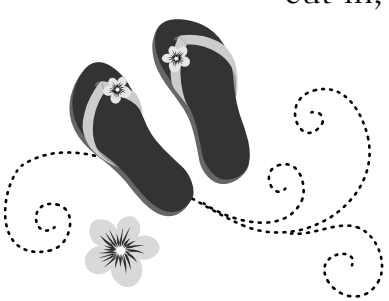
'I need a break too.' Elly sank onto the

floor of Tash's bedroom. They'd cleared a big space in the middle to make a dance studio. 'My legs and brain have stopped talking to each other.'

'Come on, guys!' Sierra flicked her long dark hair over her shoulder. 'You're not trying. The singing's good but, Tash, you've got to get the dance steps sorted or we'll never win *Tomorrow's Stars*!'

Tash groaned loudly. She rolled over to look at Sierra. 'It's easy for you. Dancing's your thing. I can't help it if I'm good at surfing and sailing but rubbish at dancing.'

'Tash, you're not rubbish, just tired,' Elly cut in, seeing Sierra's face grow stubborn. She knew how much their friend wanted to win the talent contest and appear on stage at Sunday Island's music festival. But she



and Tash needed a break. 'We've been practising all day, Sierra.' Elly bit back a smile as a sneaky but brilliant idea flitted into her head. 'I don't know about you, but I'm hungry.'

Sierra sniffed. 'You're not gonna get me with that one. I know I'm a greedy pig, but there are more important things than food. Well, sometimes.'

'OK.' Elly shrugged. 'I'll just have to take Aunt Dina's special spicy gingerbread cookies back home with me and tell her you didn't like them.'

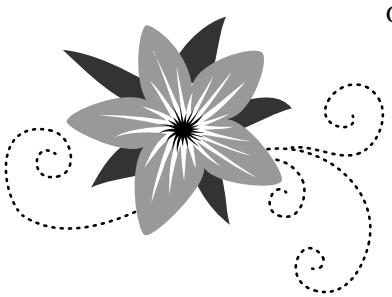
Sierra's eyes grew wide. 'Gingerbread? The ones that are sort of chewy, but melt in your mouth?' Her stubborn frown faded into a dreamy look as Elly nodded. 'Where are they?'

'In my backpack.' Elly stopped trying to hide her grin.

'Training does burn up loads of calories,'

Sierra announced. 'I'll fetch the lemonade, you get the cookies.' Sierra picked up the jug of lemonade, home-made by Tash's butler, Jasper, and plonked it on the floor near Elly. 'We can talk costumes, hair, and make-up while we eat. I've brought research material,' she said. She held her giant purple handbag upside down and dumped its contents. Out showered lip gloss, hair wax, sparkly headbands and hair clips, nail varnish in bright glittery red, purple, and pink, and half a dozen glossy magazines.

Elly lifted the plastic tub full of homemade cookies out of her backpack. She prised off the lid and a rich, warm smell of cinnamon and ginger drifted through the room. Tash groaned once more, but this time it was a happy sound. She shoved herself off the bed



and padded across the floor to sit cross-legged beside them. 'I might live after all.'

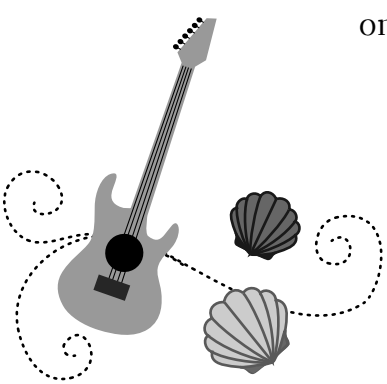
Elly's stomach gave a demanding growl, then relented as she bit into a cookie. She rinsed it down with a swallow of lemonade. Delicious!

Sierra demolished three cookies, then grabbed a copy of *Music Trend* and opened to a two-page spread. ***This Year's Hottest New Girl Band!*** shrieked the headline.

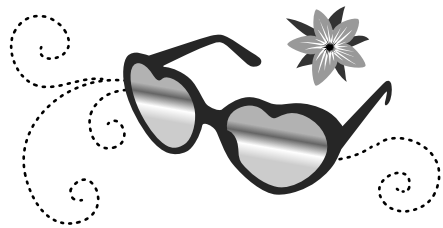
'The Sparks!' Elly swallowed a mouthful of cookie and bent forward to get a better look. 'Wow,' she sighed. 'Don't they look totally amazing? Why can't I ever look like that?' The three members of the girl band wore sparkly jackets over their jeans and T-shirts. The jackets were embroidered to look like exploding fireworks. Marina, the guitarist, glinted in green and gold; Abi, on keyboard, sparkled silvery blue; and Lou, the drummer, dazzled in hot pink.

Sierra snorted. 'Because you haven't got a personal make-up artist and stylist. But you're right. They look great. Lou is just so cool.' Sierra pointed to the image of the tall, slender girl who sat perched at her drum kit, smiling at the camera, her long hair dyed a vivid red. 'I read that she started the drums at five and got her first gig as a drummer touring with a rock band at sixteen.'

'She's good.' Tash nodded. 'But Abi is super-talented. Keyboard holds everything together, and she does all the electronic stuff, like the bass. Plus she's a great singer. Did you know she cycled across China last year on a charity ride for Disaster Aid? How cool is that?'



'I read about that too,' said Elly. The photo of Abi showed a petite, smiling young woman standing behind her keyboard, with her



short black hair and large dark eyes ringed with eyeliner and massive fake lashes. 'And she is really pretty. But I like Marina best.'

Elly's eyes returned to the guitarist. She wasn't as dramatic-looking as the other two band members. She was average height and had softly curling brown hair and freckles. In fact, Elly thought, she looked so nice-but-ordinary that you would hardly notice her if you saw her on the street, unless you looked into her eyes. There was something in them that grabbed your attention. 'She writes all their songs; not just the words, but the music too. And when she sings, you can see that she really means it. She's not just performing.'

'Marina is a genius,' Sierra agreed. 'But she really ought to do something with her hair. I mean, if she wasn't wearing about twenty glamour rings, a nose piercing, and those

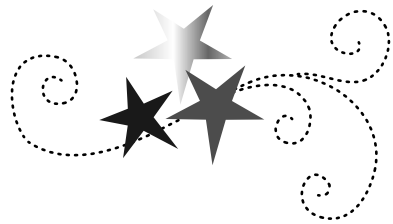
gorgeous shoes she'd look just like my RE teacher at school.'

'My RE teacher has double nose piercings *and* five tattoos,' Elly said. 'Your school needs to work on its image.'

Tash snorted, then started in surprise as the door burst open and Mojo raced into the room. The border terrier was whimpering, his tail tucked between his legs. He made a beeline for Tash and jumped into her lap with a whine.

She cuddled him in her arms. 'What is it, Mojo?' The dog whimpered more loudly. Tash lifted her head to look at Elly and Sierra. 'Something's really scared him.'

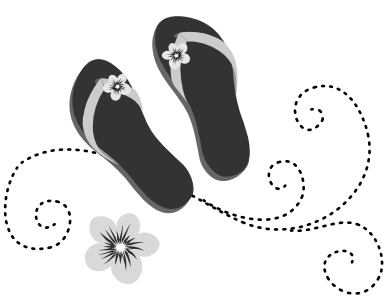
'Shhh! Listen!' Sierra cried. Her eyes turned towards the open door, a look of horror growing on her face. 'Do you hear that?'



Elly heard it now: a strange wailing cry drifted upstairs and through the door. It wavered, died, then rose to an unholy shriek.

'Oh my godfathers!' Sierra yelped, jumping to her feet. 'What is that?'

'Whatever it is, it's scared Mojo half to death. You stay here, Mojo.' Tash placed the dog on her bed. He whined and cowered. 'I know,' Tash said. 'It's a nasty noise, but you'll be safe here.' She whirled round to face her friends. 'I'm going to investigate. That could be an animal caught in a trap or something. I've never heard anything like it in my life.'

'I'm coming with you!' Elly shoved the lid on the remaining cookies and leapt up. The strange cry had dwindled away, but now it began again. 'The poor thing needs help. Besides, I've just got to find out what sort of animal makes that weird sound.'

'But it could be dangerous. Let's consider our options,' Sierra wailed, as Tash and Elly grabbed her by the hands and pulled her out of the door after them.