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Opening extract from

Stars

Written by

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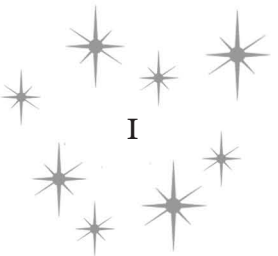
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1

'Well,' said Peter Bailey. 'Here we are!'

Jess looked about her. To her left, blue and gold against the roadside trees, was a large painted sign.

Arcadia School of Performing Arts
Boys and Girls, 13–18 years
Principal: Wanda Allen, OBE

In front of her was pair of iron gates, and beyond these, half hidden by trees, was a large red-brick building. She felt a sinking feeling and a sudden, sharp loneliness. She had wanted this so much, but now that the moment had come . . .

Her father switched off the car engine, and reached for her hand. 'You'll be fine,' he smiled, squeezing her fingers.

'And what about you, Dad? Will you be fine, without me to look after you?'

'I promise.'

They drove through the gates and up the gravel driveway. To Jess's relief, no bits fell off their ancient car as they did so. That would have been just *too* embarrassing. Close up, the school looked huge, old and a little shabby. Other cars were parked in front of the entrance, and half a dozen boys and girls – mostly around fourteen, Jess guessed – were standing around chatting. As she got out of the car they glanced at her, and one of the boys walked over. He was wearing a faded Radiohead T-shirt and had dark, untidy hair. A gold stud shone in his left ear.

'You look, like, *new*,' he said with a grin.

'Er . . . yeah,' said Jess, struck by his confidence. But then this was a stage school, so perhaps it wasn't so surprising.

Suddenly she felt self-conscious. She hadn't known what to wear for the first day so had put on the red school tracksuit. Wrong! Everyone else was wearing their own stuff. As she watched, a slim, sharp-featured girl walked past in shredded combats. The sides of her head were shaved and her hair gelled into little punky points. *Bat-girl*, thought Jess.

'That's Spike,' said the boy. 'She's pretty nutty, even for this place . . . But how come you're joining now, in the summer term? All the other first years have been here since September.'

‘I know. Long story. I’ve got a lot of catching up to do.’

‘You’ll be fine.’

‘I hope so.’ His eyes, she noticed, were a clear, icy blue.

As soon as she’d spoken, her father appeared beside her with her suitcase.

The boy stared at them. ‘The girls’ dorm block’s at the back of the main building,’ he said, pointing. ‘You should register with the office and then get your stuff over there.’

‘OK,’ said Jess. ‘Thanks!’

He raised a hand, smiled, and turned away. He looked completely at home. Exactly the opposite of how Jess felt, right then.

‘I guess we should go and register,’ said her dad, lifting her suitcase.

‘Guess we should.’

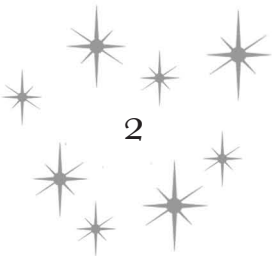
Jess had met the school principal, Miss Allen, at the audition. She was elegant, silver-haired, and a little scary, but smiled as she welcomed Jess to the school. There was some paperwork to sign with Mr Dye, the school secretary, and then they were back outside again, and it was time to say goodbye.

‘I mean it, Dad. I’ll be fine. Please. Just . . . leave the suitcase and go.’

‘OK, Jess.’ He gave her a quick, tight hug. ‘I’ll see you . . .’

‘Soon, yeah?’

‘I promise.’ He bent down and kissed the top of her head. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again he was gone.



2

Minutes later Jess was standing, suitcase in hand, in an echoing first-floor corridor that smelt faintly of floor polish. Other girls hurried past her, dragging suitcases and calling out to each other. Some of them slowed for a moment to glance at Jess in her red tracksuit. There was the distant sound of running feet and slamming doors.

A notice board above a radiator held lists of names and room numbers.

Upper Gallery Room 10, she read. *Eleanor Fox, Ashanti Taylor, Verity Nash, Jessica Bailey.*

This was it then. Until that moment it had not really sunk in that she was going to a boarding school. That she would be sleeping here, night after night, week after week, month after . . . Never in her life had she so longed for her room at home. It was small, and it was usually pretty untidy, but it was hers, full of the things she'd grown up with. And now, for what seemed like *forever*, she had to

share a room with strangers. Taking a deep breath, she pushed the door open.

The room had four narrow iron beds in it, and hadn't seen a new coat of paint in years. On the wall next to the window was a small mirror, on which someone had written 'Fame and Fortune' in marker pen. One of the beds was taken, with a suitcase beneath it and a bright red dressing gown and pink nightdress draped across it. A glance at the label on the case told her that it belonged to Ashanti Taylor.

Jess was just wondering which of the other beds to choose – there were two beneath the windows and one behind the door – when a willowy figure swept into the room. It was the bat-girl. Earphone wires trailed from her head to her hip pocket and she was carrying a bulky backpack.

'Hi,' said Jess.

The girl didn't answer, just gave her a wave and slung her pack on to the bed behind the door. Then, turning, she pointed to the bed nearest it and smiled questioningly.

'Er, yeah. Sure,' said Jess, a little irritated that the girl couldn't even be bothered to speak to her. Swinging her case on to the bed, Jess started to unpack into the nearest chest of drawers. Her dance gear took up the most space. Ballet shoes, jazz shoes, leg warmers, leotards and the rest of

it. Apart from this, and the regulation school clothing, she didn't have much. Her laptop and her phone. Jeans, trainers, a couple of hoodies, a few T-shirts, some underwear, and that was about it.

Spike – wasn't that what the boy had said her name was? – was another story. Unzipping her backpack, she poured the contents on to the bed – a rainbow cascade of belts, tights, scarves, wristbands, scrunchies, fingerless gloves, bandanas, make-up boxes, hair-gel, perfume sprays and nail polish. Jess was staring enviously at it all when the door swung open.

'Yay, Spike! And you must be Jessica Bailey?' The speaker was a girl of mixed race, amber eyes in a heart-shaped face, hair cut in a short, fashionable bob.

Jess nodded, returning the girl's smile. 'And you're . . . Ashanti, right?'

'I'm Ash, yeah. And you've met Spike? Her real name's Verity, if you're wondering, but no one actually calls her that.'

'Er, well, we've . . .'

'She's deaf,' said Ash breezily, swinging the door shut behind her. 'You've probably gathered that.'

Jess glanced at the other girl, eyes widening, not quite sure what to say, and Spike shrugged

back, as if telling her: *Don't worry about it – it's no big deal.*

'She lip-reads brilliantly,' said Ash. 'So you can talk to her all you want.'

Spike bowed, grinning broadly, and Jess smiled back. She'd never met a deaf person before. And this was a stage school, which seemed just about the most unlikely place in the world to find someone who . . . well, who couldn't hear.

'She's a dancer,' said Ash, as if reading her thoughts. 'She was born partially deaf, but the amazing thing is that she can hear music.'

Spike's fingers fluttered briefly.

'She says it's the vibrations,' Ash said. 'She sort of half feels them, half hears them.'

'So was that sign language?' asked Jess.

'Yup. We've all learnt a bit.'

'Wow! Is it difficult?'

'It is, quite. But there are lots of good websites where you can learn. And it's fun too. Like a secret language.'

Jess nodded. Learning sign language did sound sort of fun and, if she was to be friends with Spike, she'd have to give it a try. Right now, though, it just felt like one more challenge she would have to face.

Jess had done singing and dancing classes since she was at primary school. To start with she'd

been pushed by her mother, who'd always dreamt of a career on the stage. It had also helped that the church hall where the classes took place was just one stop on the bus from her school, so she'd gone there every day.

Gradually, she'd come to love it. The daily ritual of the classes, the familiar sound of the old upright piano, the tutus and tote bags, the suede-soled jazz and ballet shoes from Freed of London. She even enjoyed the exams. For the ballet grades their teacher, Miss Julie, would put the girls' hair up in buns and braid them with miniature silk roses. For her musical theatre grades Jess and her mum would improvise costumes and props. A swimsuit for songs from *South Pacific*, a cowboy hat for *Oklahoma*, a flowery skirt for *Showboat*.

Best of all were the end-of-term shows. Somewhere, at the bottom of a drawer at home, Jess still had the pink satin rabbit-ears she'd worn aged six. Right from the start, she had loved performing. It wasn't so much the challenge of the singing and the dancing; it was the sheer excitement of being on stage. That magical feeling of being an ordinary person one minute, and then, with the help of a costume and a dab of make-up, turning into someone completely different.

'You've got a real talent, Jess,' Miss Julie had

told her. And it was true. In that little world, she'd shone.

Whether she would shine at Arcadia was another matter altogether. Here, she knew, everyone had been the best in their class and in their school. The best singers, the best dancers, the best actors. If Jess was going to survive – and she was determined that she *would* survive – she'd have to push herself harder than she had in her life.

'Did you share a room last year?' she asked Ash.

'Yeah. The Fatal Four. Me, Spike, Foxy and Eve. Eve left. That's her bed you're taking.'

'Wow,' Jess stared at her. 'I mean, I'm sorry. That's . . .'

'It's fine,' said Ash, swinging her suitcase on to her bed and popping the catch. 'Don't worry about it.'

Jess frowned. When people told you not to worry, that was the time to start worrying. The four of them had obviously been really good friends. Why had Eve left?

Her musings were interrupted by a brisk knock at the door. 'Good afternoon, girls. Ashanti, Verity . . . and you must be Jessica.'

The speaker was a neatly dressed woman in her forties with a sharp, bird-like gaze. Jess nodded, a little nervously.

'Excellent. Welcome to Arcadia. I'm Miss Pearl. You're something of a dancer, I gather?'

'Er . . . a bit.'

'Well, I expect we'll soon find out.' She looked briskly round the room. 'Eleanor's not yet back, I see?'

'Not yet,' said Ash, glancing at Spike.

'Hmm. I hope she's not going to be late again, or –' At that moment Miss Pearl's phone trilled. She left the room.

'Wow!' breathed Jess. 'She's scary.'

Ash nodded. 'She's head of ballet. And you're right, she's dead scary, specially if you've got two left feet, like me. Spike, of course, gets away with murder . . .'

Spike grinned, and curtseyed. Then, a questioning look in her eye, lifted her arms and circled her hands around each other above her head.

'She says, are you really a dancer?' Ash translated.

Jess shrugged. 'Well, I've done ballet classes since forever,' she began. 'But I wouldn't say I was that brilliant.'

'So what was La Perla going on about?'

'I think she meant my audition,' replied Jess, wincing. 'God, I go hot and cold all over just thinking about it.'

'Tell,' said Ash firmly, and Spike nodded.

Jess took a deep breath. The audition had taken place three months earlier. Most of the other boys and girls there had been thirteen-year-olds, auditioning to join the first year the following September. But there had been a dozen girls – Jess one of them – who were hoping to start the following term, in the summer.

'There was just one place,' said Ash. 'The school knew by then that Eve was leaving.'

'*One place!*' yelped Jess. 'Thank God I didn't know that then. I'd have completely lost it. As it was I had this whole kind of freeze-up, freak-out-type experience.'

'Go on,' commanded Ash, and Spike nodded enthusiastically.

'Well, I'd done the drama and the singing, and there was only the jazz-ballet and the classical left. So I went into this huge studio, with all these people sitting at this long table, and a guy at the piano, and it was just awful, because you know they tell you to prepare a dance? Well, I'd learnt this routine to "Superstar" by Jamelia, but I was suddenly like *a hundred per cent certain* that I'd forgotten every single step of it. Which was totally crazy because I'm really not someone who forgets routines. Like ever. So it must have been some sort of audition thing.'

'Omigod,' said Ash. 'I so know that feeling.'

'Anyway, I totally panicked and asked the guy at the piano to play whatever he liked. So all the people at the table look at each other, like *please*, who *is* this person, and the piano guy shrugs and starts to play this tinkly ballet music from *The Nutcracker* or whatever. At which point all my steps suddenly come back to me, and I start doing my "Superstar" thing and, weirdly, it kind of *fits*. I mean, it wasn't brilliant, but it was different, and by the end I could see they were smiling. So, you know. Kind of worked out. And then there was the actual ballet bit, with pointe work and everything, and by then I was so hyper that I just went for it flat out. And I got through it. So . . . yeah. That's what happened.'

'Wow,' said Ash. 'And here you are!'

'Yes, here I am. But like they told my dad, I'm here on a trial basis. I've got a term to prove myself.'

The acceptance letter had arrived a week after the audition. She could join the school, the letter informed her, at the beginning of the summer term. But she would need to work hard to catch up with the other first years, who had already spent two terms there. And if she couldn't catch up she wouldn't be offered a second-year place in the autumn.

Ash squeezed her arm. 'You'll be fine.'

Jess glanced at the mirror. 'Fame and Fortune! Who wrote that?'

'Eve. To remind herself why she was here, every time she looked into the mirror. Which was quite often!'

'Why did she leave?' asked Jess.

Ash looked at Spike and then back at Jess. 'Basically, because she couldn't handle it here. The whole performance thing. The competition. She just decided it wasn't for her.'

Jess nodded. 'I see.'

'I didn't want to tell you that. But you'll find out soon enough. Basically, it's not enough to be good; everyone at Arcadia is good. You need more. You have to want this life more than anything else in the world.' She brightened. 'The good news is that you're not facing it all alone. You've got us on your side. Spike, Foxy and me.'

'Thanks. That means a lot. But I haven't even met Foxy.'

'Oh, don't worry,' said Ash breezily. 'Roommates stick together here. First law of survival.'

Jess opened her mouth to speak, but no words came, and tears sprang to her eyes. She turned away, not wanting them to see that she was upset. It wasn't saying goodbye to her dad that had set her off, although that was part of it, and it wasn't

Ash's kindness, although that was part of it too. It was that deep inside herself, she was beginning to think the school was right to have its doubts. Perhaps she wasn't talented enough, or attractive enough, or whatever it was that you had to be to make it through this place. Right now, fame and fortune seemed a very long way away.