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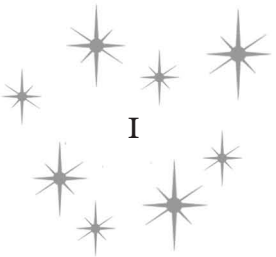
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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON



1

Late-afternoon sunshine lit the school grounds as Jessica Bailey hauled her suitcase across the drive towards the girls' dormitory block. Around her, other students were pulling their luggage from cars, blowing kisses to parents, waving goodbyes.

'Well, that's summer over,' said a voice behind her.

Jess swung round. 'Foxy!' she yelped, dropping her case. The two girls hugged. 'How *are* you? Wow, you look . . .'

And Eleanor Fox, as usual, did look amazing, the red cascade of her hair clashing spectacularly with her pink mohair coat. 'So how was your holiday?' she asked. 'Lots of glam parties, super-fit guys . . .'

'Not too many of either,' admitted Jess. 'Although the boy from my aunt's pet shop did try to snog me when we were cleaning out the hamster cages.'

'Try to?'

'Well, he was nice, but he smelt just a bit too much of gravy-flavoured dog chews.'

'Ew!'

'So what about you, Foxy? How was the south of France?'

'Weird, as usual! Dad on his BlackBerry by the pool, turning bright pink; Mum freaking out because they'd asked too many people to stay . . .'

'And you?'

Foxy smiled. 'Under a beach umbrella, covered in factor fifty. The vampire of St Tropez.' She glanced around her. 'It all seems a long time ago now.'

'Boys?'

'Well . . . there was this one boy.'

'Go on.'

'He was Moroccan, I think, and he sold caramelized peanuts on the beach. He used to stare at me with these sad, golden eyes. We never spoke. It was the perfect relationship.'

'And that was it for the entire summer?'

'Not *quite* . . .'

'Eleanor, Jessica. How nice to have you back!'

Instinctively, the two girls straightened their posture. 'Thank you, Miss Allen,' they replied in unison, as the principal of the Arcadia School of Performing Arts walked past.

'I *never* know what that woman's thinking,' hissed Foxy.

'I think that's what she wants,' said Jess. 'It gives her power over us. But she hasn't totally gone over to the Dark Side.'

'You think not?'

'Well, she could have expelled all four of us last term.'

Foxy looked thoughtful as they continued towards the dormitory block. Neither of them particularly wanted to revisit that day, the previous June, when they and their two room-mates had bunked off school to appear as walk-ons in a feature film. Everything had gone horribly wrong. Alex Karman, the star they'd risked everything to get close to, had turned out to be an arrogant drama queen, and shooting the scene with him had gone on for so long that they'd had to ring the school and ask to be picked up. Unsurprisingly, Miss Allen had not been amused, and they'd been grounded for the rest of term.

'You're right,' said Foxy. 'I guess that could have turned out worse.'

Jess shuddered. Being expelled from Arcadia would have meant the end of everything – her dreams of a career on the stage, on TV and maybe even in films. In the end, though, Miss Allen had been merciful, and the cloud had

proved to have a silver lining. Grounded, Jess had spent much of the time working on her acting. She'd understudied the lead in the first-year end-of-term play, and a lucky break had seen her step into the shoes of the scarily beautiful Shannon Matthews. For a single, never-to-be-forgotten performance, she'd played the role of Titania, queen of the fairies, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

As if to greet the two friends, the lights flickered on in their dormitory block. Inside, there was a faint chill and the familiar smell of school. Dragging their cases up the stairs to the first floor, they arrived, panting, at Room 10.

'So, here we are again,' said Jess, throwing open the door.

'Ladies,' said Ash, stepping towards them, arms outstretched. 'Welcome back!'

Ashanti Taylor was still wrapped in her coat and scarf and, as the three of them hugged, Jess felt a tremor run through her.

'Look,' said Ash, holding out a slim hand. 'I'm shivering. Why can't they turn the central heating on? Seriously, girlfriends, I wasn't brought up to live like this.'

Jess laughed. 'Ash, you are such a princess. It's only September.'

'No sign of Spike?' asked Foxy. Verity Nash,

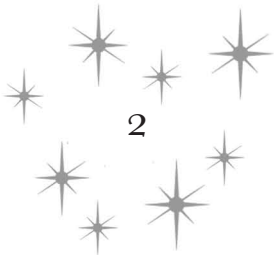
otherwise known as Spike, was the fourth of the room-mates.

'Not yet,' said Ash.

Jess swung her case on to her bed. 'Let's go to the dining hall,' she suggested. 'I'm starving.'

'Already?' Foxy raised an elegantly arched eyebrow. 'Jess, we've only been back here five minutes.'

'That's quite long enough,' said Jess firmly.



2

Five minutes later, they were sitting with steaming cups of tea in front of them. Other Arcadians drifted into the dining hall in small, chattering groups, looking around as they entered, waving, hugging, and searching each others' faces for signs of change.

The hubbub grew. Further up the table, a long-established trio took their places: Shannon Matthews and her sidekicks Kelly Wilkinson and Flick Healey. As usual, all three were dressed to impress in designer-branded hoodies and T-shirts. For much of the previous term Shannon and Jess had got on so badly they'd barely spoken to each other, and it hadn't helped that Shannon had suspected Jess of trying to steal her boyfriend.

Shannon had been wrong; Jess hadn't tried to do anything of the sort. But Johnny Finn was very good-looking and had seemed to like her a lot,

and somehow – she really, *really* hadn't planned this – they'd ended up kissing in the boys' locker room. For a split second everything had been wonderful, but only for a split second, because they'd been seen. And shortly afterwards – Jess still froze with horror remembering the scene – she had walked into the dining hall to be met with a chorus of *Bitch, bitch, bitch!* from Shannon and her friends. That had been bad enough, but even worse had been the realization she'd never meant that much to Johnny. All that attention he'd paid her – all those meaningful looks, all those text messages – had just been part of his game. He was a player, and she'd been played.

Well, it wasn't going to happen again, and she and Shannon were now officially quits. They weren't friends exactly, but they had a wary respect for each other, especially since Jess had taken over Shannon's role in the end-of-term play. Now the summer was over and the autumn term was beginning. From today, they were all second years. A chance to start again, surely?

'Hey, Bailey,' said Shannon, fixing Jess with eyes of swimming-pool blue. 'I hear you survived Titania. Hear you were pretty good, in fact. Almost as good as me!'

Jess grinned. 'Well, I remembered the words and managed not to fall flat on my bum –'

'I'm sure you'd have bounced back,' smirked Flick.

With an effort, Jess ignored her. When Flick and Kelly were with Shannon, protected by the force field of her glamour, they often liked to have a go at people. Not in a really nasty way, but not in a completely jokey way either. There was usually a little sting in there, somewhere.

Presumably, thought Jess, the pair of them hadn't sussed that she and Shannon had signed a truce. A truce that she wasn't going to endanger by having anything more to do with Johnny. No way in the world.

'That's a gorgeous bracelet, Shannon,' said Ash, and Shannon smiled. From the way that she was showing the bracelet off, turning her wrist so that the stones caught the light, it was obvious that she wanted to be asked about it.

'I know, right? It's crystal. Crystal and silver. I had to wear it for this modelling job, and they let me keep it.'

'That's cool,' said Foxy. 'Have you joined an agency then?'

'I'm with Tempest,' said Shannon. 'They talent-spotted me outside Topshop in London. A lot of the top agencies recruit their models there. They know it's popular, so on Saturday mornings they have people looking out for girls with, like,

really good figures and cheekbones and stuff.' She shrugged modestly.

Jess smiled. 'That's me ruled out.'

'That's so not true, Jessica,' said Shannon. 'With help, and some good hair products, you could look . . . y'know. Fine!' She smiled. 'Are you hoping to get into the pantomime?'

Jess had heard about the pantomime, which took place in a local theatre each Christmas. But because she'd only arrived at the school that summer – two terms later than everyone else in her year – she didn't know much about it.

'Er, yes, I guess so,' she said vaguely. 'Are you?'

'Not sure if I'll have time. The way things are going, I'm likely to be too busy with the modelling.'

'So, do you have, like, a portfolio and everything?' Foxy asked.

'Sure,' said Shannon casually, reaching into her bag. 'Take a look.'

The portfolio was a stylish matt grey, with 'TEMPEST Models' imprinted on the cover. Inside were a dozen or so studio photographs. Shannon looking taut and athletic in a Hollister bikini, Shannon moody in skinny jeans and tight white T, Shannon laughing in a Lipsy minidress.

'That's my favourite,' said Flick. It was a swimwear advert from *Mizz* magazine, showing Shannon and a sleepy-eyed boy holding hands

on a beach. Shannon was wearing the crystal bracelet.

'You look great,' said Jess. 'And that guy looks nice too.'

'Nice?' said Kelly. 'He's *gorgeous*. I could totally . . . Oh my God.' Her voice flattened. 'Look who's here.'

It was Spike. Seeing her, Jess, Ash and Foxy jumped to their feet, the Tempest portfolio forgotten. Spike was a bit of a legend at Arcadia, not least because of her appearance. Last term she'd had a punky bat-girl crop; now it was a choppy asymmetric cut. Only Spike could have got away with the look. Or, for that matter, the charity-shop sweater and the baggy combat pants.

By the time they'd finished saying their hellos – which Spike, being deaf, answered in sign language – Shannon and the others were making their way out of the dining-hall doors. If they weren't going to be the centre of attention, there was no way they were sticking around.

'God, those girls can be a nightmare,' said Foxy, watching them go.

Spike gave an elegant shrug of her shoulders.

'Whatever.' Ash looked around brightly at the others. 'So. The summer holidays. Who's going first?'

As they talked, Jess looked at her friends. Ash,

with her long-lashed eyes and smooth, dark-cinammon complexion. Despite the fact that she was the youngest of the four room-mates, the Hampshire dentist's daughter was very much the sensible one. The one whose clothes were always put away, whose toothpaste tube always had the top on, whose class timetable was neatly Blu-tacked to the wall by her bed. When they'd been planning the trip to the film set, it had been Ash who sounded the note of caution.

When she let loose her big, rippling voice, though, you saw another side to Ashanti Taylor – a risk-taker, prepared to try anything. Pop, soul, R&B, she took it all in her stride. Jess thought she was awesome, but Ash herself wasn't so sure. 'I'm just another girl who can sing,' she'd told Jess. 'There are thousands of us out there, all wanting the same thing. To make a name, carve out a career, win respect – it's gonna be hard. It's gonna be *really* hard.'

And Foxy. What could you say about Foxy? That mane of red hair. Those cool green eyes and the knowing way that she had about her. Her parents were, as she put it, 'in the business'. Her dad was something in TV and her mum had a casting agency, so Foxy herself had grown up in the showbiz bubble. Jess came from Mitcham in south London, where the high point of the day

was a walk to the shops or to feed the ducks on the common, and she had always thought that Foxy's life sounded thrillingly sophisticated, but the other girl had assured her that it wasn't all like that. 'Sure, once in a blue moon you come home and there's some big star sitting at the kitchen table, but mostly it's just deals and contracts and stuff. And it never stops. The phones are never switched off.'

Behind that confident front, Jess realized, her friend was often lonely. 'I mean, last Boxing Day, OK? I came down to breakfast to find a note saying that Mum had flown to LA. And I'm like, hey! We were supposed to go ice-skating. But then I found these guests tickets on her desk to this big charity concert with Jay-Z and everyone, and, I mean, *she* wasn't around, so I rang my friend, and we were in these VIP seats and went to the after-party and it was, you know, great. So . . .'

The home lives of the four of them were very different, Jess had realized, even if they all shared a similar dream. And strangely, although Foxy didn't have a specific talent, she was the one Jess found it easiest to imagine actually living that dream. Whether it was as the face of a new perfume, or fronting some new, must-see TV programme, Foxy was clearly going to be *someone*.

Of all her room-mates, Jess was closest to

Spike. From her first day at Arcadia, she and the willowy Scottish girl had shared an instinctive understanding. Spike's deafness had never been an issue for Jess, and they communicated in a number of ways. Spike was an accomplished lip-reader, which was fine for one-way conversations, but you couldn't have a real friendship if you were doing all the talking; it had to work both ways. So, like Ash and Foxy, Jess had decided to learn sign language. She'd found it really difficult to start with, but she'd stuck with it, and now she was starting to get the hang of it.

Spike was completely fluent, of course, and their exchanges were a bit like predictive texting, with Spike completing words and sentences for Jess with a questioning look as if to say 'Am I right? Is this the word you meant?' And then at other times – at the end of a long school day, perhaps, when Jess was just too tired to concentrate – they'd get out their phones and lie on their beds swapping texts, laughing about the hopelessness of boys and the boringness of geography and the most flattering cut for a leotard, and other vital matters. Spike was very sensitive to other people's moods. She could read Jess at a glance and seemed to know instinctively when to offer sympathy and when to keep her distance. It made her a very special friend.

Spike's summer holidays, in contrast to Foxy's, had been low-key. Her parents owned a cafe in a Highland village, from where, most days, Spike caught the bus into Inverness to take a ballet class at the dance school there. The rest of the day was spent helping her parents in the cafe or hanging out with the friends she'd grown up with.

And then in August, she told the others, she'd been to a summer school run by the Scottish Ballet. To begin with the teachers had been surprised to have a non-hearing girl in their classes, but then they'd seen her dance and everything had been all right. Spike was severely but not totally deaf, so although she couldn't hear music in the usual way, she was able to sense it. As she put it, she could 'hear the vibrations'.

'Any boys there?' Ash asked.

'Yes,' signed Spike. 'But no! How about you?'

'Well . . .' began Ash dramatically, and they all leant in closer. 'We went to Cornwall. And my dad got it into his head that we should all have surfing lessons. And I was like totally no way . . . until I saw the instructor!'

'Fit, by any chance?' inquired Foxy.

'Super-fit, with this streaky blond hair, and super-tanned skin, and eyes that just . . .'

'So what did he actually . . . *teach* you?' asked Jess.

'Well, basically, he'd hold the board, and I'd lie there, holding on tight. And then every so often a wave came along, and I'd fall off and he'd have to rescue me.'

'In his strong, super-tanned arms?'

'That sort of thing.'

'Tragic,' signed Spike, shaking her head.

'You're right,' said Ash regretfully.

'How old was he?' asked Foxy.

'Like . . . eighteen or something.'

'So did you actually learn anything?' asked Spike.

'I learnt that he had a girlfriend called Kerry. She came to help him teach one day, and he put her in charge of me. "This is Ashley," he told her. "See if you can get her standing up." I was soooo vexed – I mean, he couldn't even get my name right, that's how much he'd noticed me – so the next wave that came, I stood up on the board and rode it all the way in. Just to show him.'

'Sounds like he had you pretty well figured out,' said Jess.

Ash rolled her eyes. 'How about you? How was your summer?'

Jess shrugged. 'It was mixed. My dad was home, on his holiday break from Saudi, but he's with this new girlfriend now – I mean, I say girlfriend, she must be at *least* thirty-five – so she was kind of, you know, around the place . . .'

'How was that?' asked Ash.

'Oh . . . All right, I guess. She's being very careful not to rush things. Slightly scared of me, I think.'

'I bet she is,' said Foxy. 'If she can't make you like her, she's got problems. And I'm guessing she knows that.'

'Whatever. I just want . . . God, I don't know,' said Jess. 'I want things to be how they were before she came along, but I want my dad to be happy too, y'know?'

'So was she around the whole time?'

'No, just for a month or so, and then she had to deal with some family stuff, outside London, so Dad and I went to Suffolk for a fortnight. To the sea.' And that had been lovely. Long walks along the beach, seabirds, fish-and-chip suppers, wrinkling her nose and feeling the sunburn.

'So when did you snog the pet-shop boy?' asked Foxy.

'You *what*?' signed Spike.

'I didn't!' said Jess. 'When we got back to London I worked in this pet shop owned by my Auntie Rena, and there was a boy working there, but nothing happened. Well, not quite nothing. Like Foxy says, he tried to snog me, but I didn't let him.'

Ash rolled her eyes. 'So basically, despite our

beauty, talent and all-round fabulousness, not one of us got any summer loving at all.'

One by one they shook their heads.

'Spike?' said Ash.

Spike looked into the middle distance, the ghost of a smile touching her lips.

Ash folded her arms. 'Verity Nash, you're a sly and wicked woman, and I'm ordering you to tell us exactly what you got up to.'

'Let's just say that . . .' Spike spelt out with calculated slowness, her fingers extended in front of her. 'Texts. Have been. Exchanged.'

'Olly!' whispered Jess.

Spike nodded.

'For the whole summer?' Ash asked.

Spike nodded again.

'Wow!' breathed Jess. 'That's so great!'

'So have you seen him yet?' asked Foxy.

Spike shook her head.

'Ten weeks,' Ash breathed. 'You've been swapping texts for *ten weeks*!'

Jess smiled at Spike. Olly Francis was in their year at Arcadia, and Jess had seen the first signs of his and Spike's romance at the end of the previous term. He was a nice guy – he'd been particularly kind to Jess in the previous term, when she'd been having trouble with her

singing – and he was handsome too, with his red-gold hair and fine, sensitive features.

'So what's the last one say?' Ash asked.

Spike handed Jess her phone and they passed it round.

Back 6:00 CWTCUx♥

'*Be back six o'clock. Can't wait to see you. Kiss. Heart*,' translated Ash. 'What's the general opinion, people?'

'Hmm . . . Not bad,' mused Foxy. 'I'd have liked to see another couple of Xs, though. Ideally.'

Ash nodded. 'I agree. One seems a bit, I dunno. It's kind of the minimum. And that single heart symbol. It's like he's playing it safe. It's not like, say, MULU.'

'What's MULU?' asked Jess.

'Miss You, Love You,' said Ash. 'Don't tell me Johnny Finn never sent you that?'

'Never,' said Jess, a trace of regret in her voice.

'Probably couldn't spell it,' said Foxy.

Ash smiled. 'Last term, Zane texted me MULU and signed it LP.'

'Don't tell us,' said Jess.

'Lovesick Puppy!'

'Oh please!' murmured Foxy as Spike mimed sticking her fingers down her throat.

'And is the puppy still lovesick?' enquired Jess.

'We split up for the summer holidays,' admitted Ash.

'That boy's a fool,' signed Spike.

Ash stared at her tea. 'Things haven't been easy for him. At home, I mean. He . . .'

'He what?' asked Foxy.

'Doesn't matter. But I sometimes think just how lucky I've been, growing up with, y'know, so much love and everything. I'm pretty spoilt, really.'

'You're not spoilt,' said Jess. 'And you don't, like, *owe* Zane anything just because you come from a nice family.'

'Jess is right,' signed Spike. 'You can't . . .' She lifted both palms in front of her in a gesture Jess didn't recognize.

Ash shook her head. 'I'm not *sacrificing* myself. I just understand why he's . . .' She looked away. 'Forget it, OK? I did an audition in London last week. Backing singer for a Phoebe Skye charity concert in December. I'm through to the last nine.'

'That's . . . *amazing*!' breathed Jess. 'Why didn't you say?'

'They only want three of us. I don't dare even . . .'

'When's the final audition?'

'They're letting us know.'

'But, Ash,' said Foxy. 'What about the panto?'

'I don't know. I'm not likely to get both – you know what my dancing's like – and if I do I'll just have to see.'

'What exactly happens with the pantomime?' asked Jess. 'I mean, I know that the second years do it each Christmas, but how does the whole thing work?'

'It's at Reading,' said Foxy. 'At the Theatre Royal. The school chooses six boys and six girls. You have to sing and dance, including tap, and do character stuff. Like being sawn in half by the magician, or being the back end of the horse or whatever.'

'Are you going to try for it?'

'Yeah, definitely! And so should you. I was talking to a girl who did it last year – *Aladdin* – and she said it's the *best* fun. You, like, stay at the school in the holidays, but with no rules, and there are loads of parties and stuff . . .'

'It does sound fun . . .' Jess began. And then, catching Spike's eye, fell guiltily silent. No one was ever going to cast a deaf girl in a pantomime chorus.

Spike reached across and squeezed Jess's hand. 'It's fine,' she signed. 'You must go for it. You'd be perfect.'

Jess was about to answer when Foxy leant

urgently forward. 'We have company, people. By the door.'

Jess flicked a glance to her left. It was Olly, moving towards them.

Spike's fingers fluttered. 'Please. *Don't go*.'

'Hey!' Jess called out to the tall half-smiling boy. 'Join us.'

Olly came over. 'So how are you guys?'

He's nervous, thought Jess.

'Oh, y'know, OK,' said Ash.

'Jess, wow, you look . . .'

'Devastatingly attractive?' suggested Jess. 'Fatter?'

'I was going to say thinner, actually.' He looked at Spike. His mouth opened, but no words came out.

'I should unpack,' said Jess. 'Get back to the room.'

'Me too,' said Ash and Foxy together. The three of them stood, picked up their meal trays and moved smartly towards the door. Outside, the light was fading. 'Was that the right thing to do?' murmured Ash. 'Leaving her alone with him like that?'

'She won't thank us,' said Jess. 'But I think it was.'

'Kind of obvious, though, don't you think?'

'Obvious is good,' said Foxy. 'She likes him, he

likes her. He knows we know, she knows he knows we know . . .'

'I just hope he realizes how special she is,' said Jess.

'I'm sure he does,' said Ash. 'But you know what boys are like. They don't have fully functioning brains.'

'You're right,' said Foxy, hunching into her hot-pink coat. 'I can't think why we bother with them.'