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Opening extract from

Shadow Girl

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Published by

Barrington Stoke Ltd

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With many thanks to Sarah Dodd

First published in 2014 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library upon request

ISBN: 978-1-78112-313-3

Printed in China by Leo

Contents

1. Before We Begin 1
2. Lost 2
3. The Way Home 7
4. Lyn 13
5. Truth or Dare 19
6. Best Friends 26
7. Loneliness 31
8. Hurt 35
9. You're Not Real 42
10. Alone 49
11. Fear 52
12. Found 59

1. BEFORE WE BEGIN

So, look.

This story is going to sound strange. I can't help that. I can only tell you what happened.

This is the story of how, when I was 14, I met a woman who'd known me for 20 years.

It's the story of how I lost one friend and found another.

It's the story of how I found a home.

Are you ready?

Let's begin.

2. LOST

The story begins with a horrible day. That wasn't unusual. I hated school. I'd been at my new school for two months, and I still hated it. All of the other kids had been there for years. They had people to sit with, and people to be partners with, and people to hang out with at break. I had no one.

I knew I should try to make friends, but I couldn't be bothered. There was no point – I'd be moving on soon. I was 14, and this was my third secondary school. I was in foster care – and I kept having to move. I'd lived in five different homes so far, in four different towns. You'd think

someone might want to keep me, but no one ever did.

It was better if I didn't make friends. It would make it easier when I had to go.

The reasons my day was so horrible were:

1. Catherine and Jade, who sat behind me in Maths and French. And were complete cows. And who thought it was funny to take the piss out of my shoes, and my bag, and my coat, and my hair, and anything else they could think of. It wasn't funny. It was pathetic.

2. Lunch. Or rather, the fact I didn't have anyone to sit with at lunch. It was like there was this arrow pointing at my head, with LOSER written on it. I wished I had the willpower to be anorexic. It would have made lunchtimes a lot easier.

3. Homework. Homework and me didn't get on. Homework thought I didn't put enough effort into our relationship and I thought homework always asked too much from me. Probably we were both right. Homework was another

thing I couldn't be bothered with. It meant I got put in detention a lot, but I didn't care. I would rather be in detention than stuck on my own with no one to talk to.

4. The school bus. The school bus was the worst bit of my whole day. I hated it. It was full of loud, silly boys and loud, silly girls. Kids were always throwing things or shouting things or breaking things. The bus driver just sat at the front and pretended he couldn't hear. You could have murdered someone and he wouldn't have stopped. He wouldn't even have made you clean up the blood.

When I got on the bus that day, the boys were in a silly mood.

"Clare!" they yelled when they saw me.

"Hey, Clare, will you be my girlfriend?"

"Is that your granny's coat, Clare?"

"Who cut your hair, Clare – a werewolf?"

Giggle, giggle, giggle.

"Do you go to a werewolf hairdresser, Clare? Awooo!"

And all the boys started making werewolf noises. The bus driver didn't even look round.

"Cla-are! I'm talking to you!"

So, you know how sometimes you just lose it?

I lost it.

"Shut up!" I said. I grabbed the biggest boy and slammed him into the side of the bus. The other kids went, "Ooooh!"

"Oooh, Clare!"

"Fight!"

"Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!"

I guess I was wrong about that bus driver. He let those boys yell stuff at me for two months. But the one time I did something about it?

He threw me off the bus.

I was so angry. OK, so I might have yelled some stuff at him when he told me to get off. I might have told him he was stupid and pathetic and sexist and ugly. The other kids might have

acted like this was the funniest thing they'd ever seen.

I stamped off down the road. I hated that stupid bus driver. I hated those boys. I hated them all.

I got to the end of the street and stopped. I'd never walked home from school before. I couldn't remember if the bus turned left here, or right.

I turned right. I kept walking.

The road ended. Left or right? I turned left. More streets. More houses. Dull, ordinary streets with dull, ordinary rows of houses. Streets that looked exactly the same as every street near where I lived.

Another road. Left? Or right? I kept walking. Left or right? I turned left. I kept walking. I walked, and walked, and walked, even though I knew it was hopeless.

I was lost.