

MA in Creative Writing

JUST ME AND YOU, MS W

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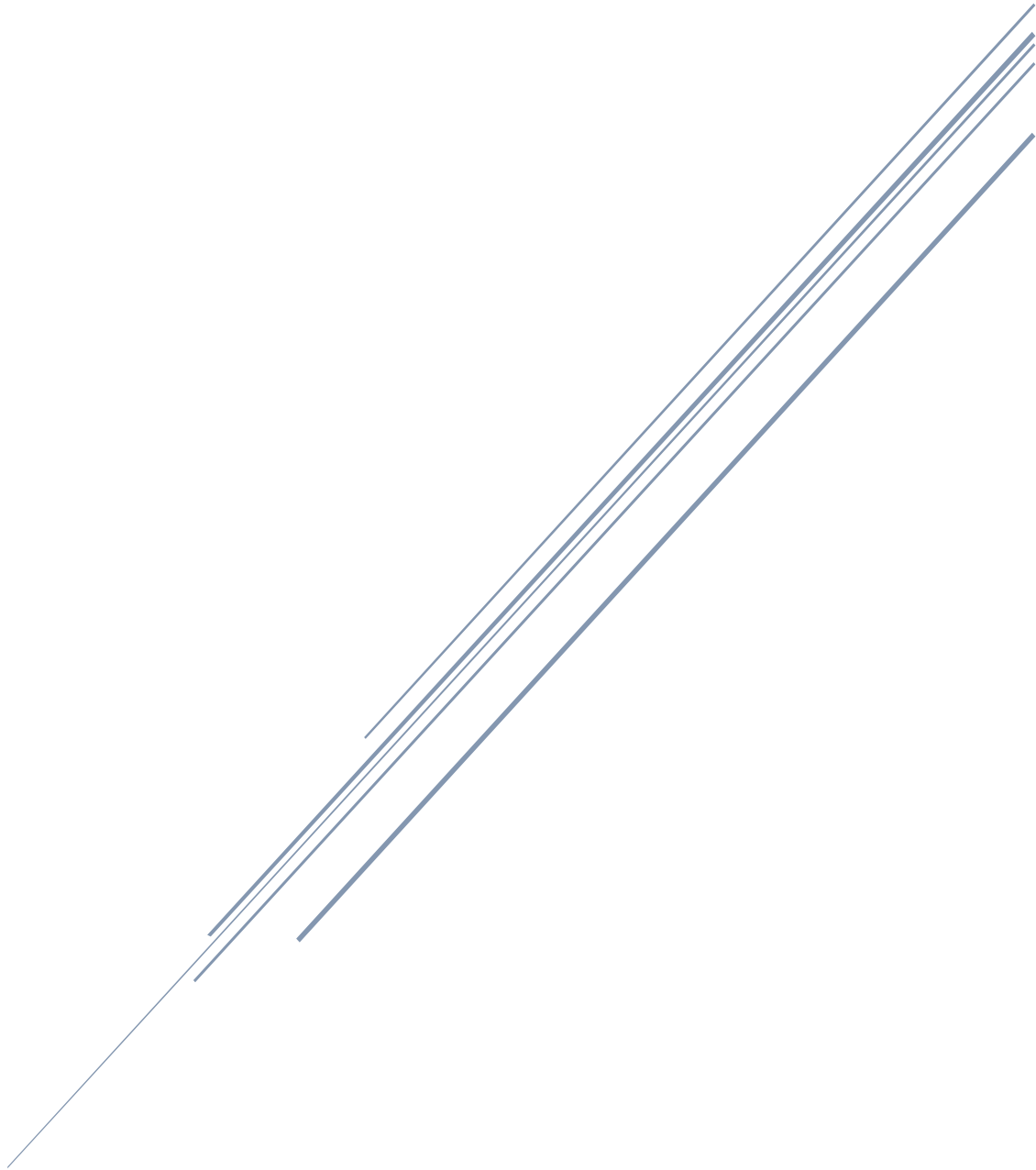
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Signature: Alex Hoffman Date: 14 March 2023

JUST ME AND YOU, MS W



CHAPTER ONE

January was, of course, the worst time of year. It was the time of year when all the grownups decided they had important resolutions to stick to: things that were going to change their lives if only they committed to them. And this year, 2009, was the year that they were actually going to stick to those resolutions. Never mind that in 2008, Juniper's mother, Pearl, had determined to go to the gym at least once a week and found herself going maybe five times in the entire year – the last time being only as far along as July, or that Pearl's sister, Auntie Larissa, had been resolute about quitting smoking for at least the past five years... As for Juniper, she was above all this New Year, New Me nonsense. She was 11 and a half, with an advanced reading level and a taste for '60s music. She read *Twilight* just so she could denounce it as a bodice ripper – and then wait for everyone else to ask her what a bodice ripper was. And she certainly wasn't about to become a simpering Bridget Jones panicking over which was the most flattering pair of panties to wear. Not like her sister, Grace, who was, as far as Juniper could tell, a total airhead.

But, anyways, the worst thing about January wasn't just the brainless lists of resolutions people lied to themselves about; it was this whole idea of a fresh start. Proper rubbish. Juniper's dad, TJ, didn't seem to have a fresh start. He was still living in his too-small flat all by himself, hosting his daughters on alternating weekends while he tried to find somewhere a bit more inviting to stay – or so he said. Juniper couldn't quite understand how difficult it could be to find an alternative abode. He and Pearl still seldom spoke to each other in full sentences. Most of their conversations were clipped, curt phone calls to do with boring grownup stuff like school fees and petrol. And Juniper? She didn't have a fresh start either. She just had another year of school at the same school she'd attended since she was five years old, a private all-girls school in the densely tree-ed Johannesburg suburbs where she was constantly reminded to note her privilege, be grateful, and remember the less fortunate – who it was hard to forget as the beggars she saw at robot after robot on the way to school, they hadn't had a fresh start either, had they? And when Pearl told her not to give them money because they'd only spend it on drugs and alcohol, Juniper began to look away from the scrawny people with their misspelled placards and she began to think instead of how the trees filled with green leaves and flowers and fruit, masking their ancient branches, but really, if you took all of that away, they were just stumps. And in a few short months, that much would be obvious.

But then, in spring, the trees really did have a fresh start, didn't they? Or, at least the leaves did.

As Juniper was driven to school by her mother for the first day of Grade 6, she looked at the trees without really seeing them. She listened to the radio without really hearing what was said, her mind not on her surroundings but on just how un-fresh January felt. The hem of her school dress was scratchy against her thighs and she felt a familiar sense of staleness as the old buildings of her school came into view. Stately grey buildings but without the grandeur of Hogwarts. Far too small to compare really. Yet, still they stuck out from the houses along the rest of the road.

When Juniper got out the car, Pearl asked for a kiss goodbye and she refused, as she always did, because she was not a child anymore and her gaudily dressed mother was going through some kind of bohemian Frida Kahlo phase and it was embarrassing. And besides, Ms W was watching with her large judging eyes.

Ms W was tall and wiry, and she always wore the most outlandish hats, as though she were permanently dressed for the races. Her face was gaunt and drawn, lined with deep creases though she didn't look old exactly, only tired. Juniper had tried to guess her age many times, but she'd learnt from her mother that one should never ask a woman her age. Naturally, she thought this a thick and sexist rule, but she had decided that grown women had many out-dated problems and she didn't want to insult anyone unnecessarily. Still, she'd often wondered about Ms W's age. Ms W always seemed to be there for every fumble, scabbed knee and bad haircut Juniper ever got. And Juniper had to admit that her current hairstyle, modelled off a photo of The Beatles that she really liked, did not do her justice.

"Not that most haircuts would," Ms W noted, her voice smooth as ice.

Juniper wasn't the prettiest, she knew, and her new bowl cut combined with her spectacles really didn't help her out.

"You think I'm being unfair?" Ms W smiled wryly, following Juniper down the school corridors along with the constant rumble of the girl's wheely bag.

"I didn't think fairness was your thing."

Ms W watched as Juniper struggled to lower the handle of her wheely bag. "I'm always fair."

"Well, I don't need a fancy haircut."

"Because you're special, or something?"

"Something like that," Juniper huffed. Finally, she got the handle down, and now it was time to unload brand new notebooks into her locker.

"Please. Thinking you're special is the most ordinary thing. Everyone thinks that."

Juniper slammed her locker door shut. Enough.

“How was the first day?”

“The same as every other first day.” Juniper clicked the lock of the car door into place, wondering if her mother would ever remember to do that if she weren’t there.

Pearl scrunched her nose. “Jeez, Juniper. Don’t need that tone.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” She began switching between radio stations in search of half-decent music. To no avail.

“Stop that, Juniper. I like keeping it on Highveld.”

Juniper switched the radio back to the inanities of channel 94.7, the channel all her classmates listened to, where they’d admire the ludicrous pranks of Wackhead Simpson in the morning.

“Bad day?”

“Not particularly.” She looked out the window. “What happens when the leaves dry and get all crispy?”

“What?”

“Do they stop producing chlorophyll or something?”

“I’m not sure.”

“And then – then they starve to death?”

“How can leaves starve?”

“I don’t know. Aren’t you supposed to know these things?” She was suddenly filled with immense disappointment.

“Not really...”

“You went to university, didn’t you?”

“To study architecture.” Pearl laughed. “Don’t you worry about the leaves. They’ll be okay. Besides, I don’t see any crispy leaves around.”

“Don’t treat me like a baby.”

Pearl sighed.

“I’m not a baby.”

“I know. I know, believe me... You act more like a teenager every day.”

Of course, it hadn’t been a great day, but why should it have been? Grade 6 was no different from Grade 5 really, except that it was the first year they’d write exams. This idea didn’t terrify Juniper, as it did many of her peers. Rather, it was exciting. A way to flex her intellectual muscles. Although Ms W had found the idea rather absurd.

“You know, most children get excited about cool music or the new iPod they got for Christmas,” she’d whispered in Juniper’s ear while she sat in assembly.

“Yes, most children. But that’s a stupid point to raise,” Juniper had answered, without looking back.

Ms W didn’t say anything more, but she didn’t go away. Juniper felt her eyes boring into the girl’s back.

“It’s stupid for two reasons: firstly, I’m not like most people. I’m unique. And secondly, I’m not a child.”

“Again with you and this unique business. Just because you don’t care about pop music or having a good haircut doesn’t mean you’re special.”

“But it does make me different.”

Ms W had only laughed quietly, but Juniper felt vindicated. Not that she was going to share this with Pearl. Ms W was her own private companion; the one thing she had to herself.

CHAPTER TWO

Once home, Juniper didn't have time to waste beyond patting Black Cat, named for the beloved peanut butter brand rather than his soft, inky fur. Her next stop was the office, where she needed to commandeer the family PC to look up what happened to the chlorophyll in leaves in autumn.

She was at least partially right. As the nights got longer in autumn, leaves would produce less and less chlorophyll until in the end, none was left. Then the carotenoids and anthocyanin within the leaves would be revealed. She wrote down the words carotenoids and anthocyanin so she could remember them at school the next day. The whole starving leaf thing wasn't so clear. She came across an article about leaf senescence and promptly had to look up senescence, which did appear to have something to do with ageing, but the details became tricky.

"What are you doing?" It was Grace, of course, long-legged, sleek-haired Grace, who insisted on outlining her eyes in kohl even for a school day, when she knew she'd be reprimanded by the teachers. Grace was leaning against the door frame, willowy. Or perhaps more like poison ivy. Grace's name fitted her too well, just like all her clothes did. She looked like a proper woman, Juniper thought. Fifteen years old, with long, glossy black hair, a tiny waist, and shapely legs from her afternoon sports. Grace had the same shade of brown eyes as Juniper, but hers were bigger and her lashes were longer. Grace was the glowing girl and Juniper, the ugly duckling. Grace was also a real pain in the arse. Juniper always insisted on saying arse and not ass to take a stand against the annoying American expressions floating into people's mouths from silly TV shows with fake funny jokes and canned laughter. The kind of shows her sister lapped up like a helpless infant.

"Looking up the life cycle of leaves. What are you doing?"

"Jeez. Someone's an eager beaver with homework."

"This isn't homework."

"What? Then why?" Grace moved to the back of the chair where her sister was perched at the screen. Her eyes began skimming the words and she narrowed them with disgust.

"Why are you reading about dead plants and the shelf life of vegetables?"

"Why are you wearing makeup?"

"I don't even know how you think those things are the same."

"I don't. Plants are far more interesting than makeup. And you clearly have no imagination."

"God, this is one of your crazy rabbit holes again."

“I can’t help it if you have no intellectual curiosity, Grace.”

Grace laughed. “Just as I can’t help it if I have a life outside of school.”

In a TV show, some annoying kid would’ve said “Burrn!” But Juniper had a better comeback than that. “Senescence doesn’t just happen to leaves you know.”

“What the hell is senescence?”

“The process of deterioration with age. Like when the leaves get all brown and crispy in winter. But that happens to people too. Bet you it’s happening to you right now.”

“Fuck off.”

Juniper smiled. She imagined beautiful 15-year-old Grace withering away like a winter leaf. No, no, back up, she told herself. First Grace would need to shed her outer colours and let her true pigments shine through, a few months of vibrant colour and then, bam, crispy brown leaf being crushed underfoot. She looked up from the computer with half a mind to describe this to her sister, but Grace had gotten bored and left the room. Typical.

Some trees are evergreen, like pine trees. They’re weird plants, doing exactly the opposite of what all the other trees do. These trees have strong leaves, Juniper read. The leaves seemed pretty clever too as they rolled themselves up into long, thin needles with waxy coats that enabled them to save water all year round. Juniper was telling her friends, Marcia and Lydia, about this in geography, not because it had anything to do with geography – but the opposite. The three girls hated geography and spent most of these classes drawing tombstones for themselves to be buried in after death by boredom. But today, Juniper only wanted to talk leaves and Marcia and Lydia were indulgent.

“Juniper, Marcia, Lydia,” Mrs Van Staden said sternly, swirling to face them in her skirt that looked like the drab blinds Juniper’s dentist had in his rooms. The combination of the grey blind-like skirt, the ugly brown sweater, and Mrs Van Staden’s greying hair made her look like she was well on her way past the autumn of her years. Senescence was not treating her well, and no wonder when she taught such a bland subject.

“Sorry.” They echoed each other with fake solemnity, or perhaps in Lydia’s case it was real. Lydia was a bit of a goody-two shoes with her perfectly neat handwriting, her soft blonde hair always swept up in an effortless high ponytail, her fingernails always the exact length the school rules said they should be. She wasn’t a pain about it though. She was drawing tombstones just as Juniper and Marcia were.

The school bell rang every 45 minutes until tea time, then again after 25 minutes to signal the end of tea, and then went back to ringing every 45 minutes until 1:15. Juniper had been trying to think of a good story to tell about leaves getting old and crotchety. Something with a grandmother leaf shouting at her grandchildren who were young and green. But nothing good had come to mind. School periods were not nearly as cool to contemplate as the periods of a leaf's life and dividing them up by the sound of a bell and the increasingly diminished levels of energy rather than colours and chlorophyll, not great. Deflated, Juniper packed her bag once more, closed her locker and began wheeling her way to the parking lot.

Ms W gave Juniper and her trundling bag a pointed look and Juniper felt her face flush. Wheely bags were definitely not considered cool. Everyone around her seemed to have those silly one-shouldered tote bags instead. Except Marcia and Lydia of course. They were the three musketeers – Harry, Ron and Hermione – up against the world.

"I found a cool idiom for you," Lydia said, appearing alongside Juniper, wheely bag in one hand and book in the other.

"Oh ja? What's that?"

"Salad days." She put down her bag so she could open the book to the page of the idiom in question. "It means your youth, which can also be called your Halcyon days. But I thought you'd like salad days because salads are leafy and with the whole leaf cycle of life thing..."

"Salad days. That's cool. Thanks, Lyd."

Lydia beamed. "Any time."

They walked together to the parking lot in companionable silence. Lydia spotted her au pair's car in the parking lot and began waving. She and Juniper said goodbye and then she was off into the wild, while Juniper waited for Pearl and another insufferable drive home.

CHAPTER THREE

Friday afternoon finally came and Juniper was hosting Marcia and Lydia at her house for a sleepover. Marcia spent most of the first half hour trying to coax Black Cat out of hiding, while Lydia sat quietly on a kitchen stool looking around her. Juniper offered them tea and snacks and Lydia noted how all the food in Juniper's house was organic, from the packets of raw almonds and dried mangos in the cupboard to the low-fat milk in the fridge. It's better for you, Juniper told her. What she didn't want to add was that it had all been Grace's idea and somehow, she'd convinced Pearl. But this had happened around the time Pearl had decided to change her entire dress code, so maybe the two went together.

After some tea and yoghurt-coated rice cakes, the girls decided that the best way to spend their evening would be to turn the living room into a cinema – naturally. They covered the skylight in tinfoil so that the sun wouldn't shine through and ruin their viewing experience, and they rearranged the furniture and brought in heaps of soft, fluffy pillows, even nabbing some from Grace's room, with some trepidation. Luckily, Grace was still at school.

Marcia oversaw the cooking of vast quantities of popcorn, while Lydia melted chocolate in a bowl over a saucepan of hot water.

"It must be in a bowl on top of the saucepan and not directly in the saucepan, or else you will burn the chocolate and my pan," Pearl had instructed them.

"Seriously?" An extra bowl made the whole thing seem like a real mission.

"Seriously. This is not where you take shortcuts." Pearl looked at her sternly.

"No problem," Lydia said quietly. "We want this to be the richest, most extravagant hot chocolate ever. So, no shortcuts. I want it to be like *chocolatl*."

"Like what now?" Pearl asked.

"That hot chocolate drink in *His Dark Materials*," Juniper explained. *Chocolatl* always made her mouth water just to read about it. It just sounded so warm and satisfying, reaching into the cockles of your heart – or stomach rather.

"Ah, right." Pearl undoubtedly couldn't remember what *His Dark Materials* was all about, even though her daughter had spoken about pretty much nothing else while reading the trilogy.

"Philip Pullman is the best," Lydia said.

Pearl nodded uselessly. "Please, no burning the house down girls."

"Promise," Marcia said.

Lydia nodded and Juniper suppressed a laugh as her mother walked away. Sometimes Juniper forgot that Lydia was also very bright, perhaps because she didn't go around telling the world about her great observations so much, but every now and then, she felt a stab of jealousy at just how many books Lydia had read surreptitiously and how much she remembered from them. Of course, Marcia was bright too. They probably wouldn't be friends otherwise. Intelligence was their thing.

Once the popcorn and *chocolatl* were ready, they settled into their supremely cushioned couches to watch the DVD that Marcia had brought with her, *Across the Universe*. It was a musical, Marcia's favourite kind of film, and all the songs were by The Beatles. Juniper thought it was okay, but the other two were in raptures about it. Lydia kept going on about how great the scene was where "Strawberry Fields Forever" played and, as strawberries were getting stabbed, it transitioned into footage of the Vietnam War.

"Oh, come on," Juniper said, eventually, "all that sugar must've gotten to your head, Lydia. It's really quite trite."

Lydia laughed. "Of course, you'd say that, Juniper."

"Ja, Juniper. You never like what other people like," Marcia said.

"That's right. That would be far too mainstream for me," Juniper joked. It wasn't really a joke though. Not altogether. Everybody had a good laugh.

Marcia and Lydia stretched out on spare mattresses on Juniper's bedroom floor and the three of them chatted about this and that into the small hours of the morning.

CHAPTER FOUR

In the morning, they were running late for a charity market they'd said they'd attend with Pearl at George Hay Park in the nearby suburb of Parkview. Marcia and Lydia showered together to save time and Juniper couldn't believe how quick they were. She was still rubbing lotion onto her body when they appeared in her room and she quickly turned around for modesty, modesty they didn't seem to have themselves just yet.

"Guys," she shouted, "you can't just barge in here unannounced! I'm still naked!"

Everyone was a little embarrassed. Marcia and Lydia had just seen each other naked in the shower and clearly not thought about it very much, but Juniper's nakedness was different. She was conscious of the pubic hair nestled between her legs, which she knew her friends had seen and pretended not to see. They teased her and called her a princess for using body lotion. She wondered if they ever bothered with lotion or even conditioned their hair. They didn't seem to care much about their appearances. They hadn't even washed their hair in the shower – to save time, they explained – and they were both wearing t-shirts and cargo pants. Juniper had washed and re-washed her hair, conditioned it, scrubbed it with a brown sugar scrub, and was now making sure every portion of her body was moisturised. She had washed her face with a cleanser and then a toner and had put on a sweet-smelling moisturizer. Marcia and Lydia had just used a damp flannel. Lydia explained she'd forgotten her face stuff at home, but Juniper couldn't be sure how often Lydia washed her face properly. And Lydia had horrible acne, so she really should have done a better job of it.

Juniper pulled on jeans and a t-shirt which clung to the straps of her training bra. She didn't reckon she had much of a figure. She felt stocky and awkward and when she looked in the mirror, she felt like swearing at her hairdresser for the way her hair fell lankly and unevenly over her ears. It really was an awkward cut. But at least Juniper's skin was smooth and soft. She was sliding her feet into a pair of pleather pumps when she heard the tell-tale signs of Grace, stomping across the passage towards her. Grace opened the door and Juniper was filled with annoyance, as always.

"Hey hey," Grace said, hanging in the doorway like an ornamental string of beads.

Lydia and Marcia greeted her simply and Juniper said a curt hi. It was not that Grace was mean to her, necessarily. It was just that she was everything Juniper wasn't – and she was very loud about it too. For every A Juniper got on a test, Grace had made another friend, been invited to another party. While Juniper looked ungainly and boyish with her badly cut hair, Grace had the poise of a film star.

When Grace had gone out, Juniper and her friends snuck into her room and giggled over her array of sticky, tacky lip-glosses and the magazine cut-outs of Zac Efron, the Jonas Brothers, David Beckham, and other male celebrities Presticked to the mirror of her dressing table and illuminated by a string of fairy lights.

“She’s boy crazy,” Marcia said.

“Totally,” Juniper said, rifling through the stack of *Seventeen* magazines on the floor.

“You think she’s been eating a lot of battery chicken then?” Lydia joked. One of their teachers at school had said that girls and boys were ageing more quickly now and developing breasts and other hormonal changes as a result of all the hormones pumped into food – like battery chickens. Lydia often called the few girls with boyfriends at school “battery chicken girls”.

“Please,” Juniper said, rolling her eyes, “you know my mom only buys organic.”

They all burst out laughing.

In the kitchen, eating peanut butter toast and drinking tea, Juniper turned to her friends conspiratorially. “You know, Grace has lots of guy friends now that she’s at high school, but she told me they’re so disgusting.”

“Why is that?” Lydia asked, cupping her hand lightly over her toast-filled mouth.

“Well,” Juniper said, feeling the power of her insider information, “apparently high school boys will only be friends with you if they think you’re hot.”

“That’s terrible,” Marcia said.

“And I hate that word,” Lydia added, “hot. That’s a temperature, not a description of what you look like. What ever happened to beautiful?”

“I thought you didn’t like being called beautiful?” Juniper raised an eyebrow.

Lydia scrunched up her nose. It was true. Lydia didn’t like it when her parents’ friends called her beautiful and asked if all the boys were falling head over heels over her, but that was because it was embarrassing, and she didn’t even know any boys, and no, as far as she knew, no one was falling head over heels for her. Lydia was beautiful though. She just didn’t know how to take advantage of it, and she had no interest in boys anyway.

“We’re in Grade 6,” Lydia reminded them.

“Saying we are too young to be called hot?” Juniper asked.

“Yes,” Lydia said.

“Nabokov would beg to differ.”

Marcia and Lydia didn’t know who Nabokov was and when Juniper began to tell them the story of *Lolita*, they were very grossed out.

“Why would someone even write that?” Marcia asked.

“To make you feel as uncomfortable as you are now, I’m sure,” Juniper said. That was the kind of environment Juniper did very well in. Talking about controversial writers or taboo subjects. She felt like the little girl from *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, her favourite book she’d read so far. Paloma didn’t mute her intelligence for anyone, so why should she?

Walking around the charity market at George Hay Park, Juniper forgot just how intelligent she was though. She forgot all the little positive encouragements her teachers gave her and all her private pep talks. As she weaved between stalls of second-hand books, hand-knitted sweaters, and home-made marmalade, she felt the pressure of an old friend at her side. Ms W, bedecked in a large hat as per usual, this time a straw sun hat to match the market environment, which was filled with women dressed in just that sort of hat with linen pants and expensive earrings.

“Ah, so so many people here, Juniper,” Ms W tutted, peering at the label on a jar of raw honey.

“Are there really?”

“Why, yes, yes there are. Lots of boys and girls around your age too. Not just their parents. And isn’t that Caroline over there? The one who teased you about your glasses last year?”

“Yes... She said sorry though...” Juniper adjusted the frames of her glasses as she thought about it. The lenses were far thicker than was usual for someone so young but then Juniper was pretty blind from all the reading and downright unlucky genetics.

Caroline was nothing more than a nuisance really, a girl in Juniper’s class who’d wanted to be part of her friendship circle at one point, and at finding that she wasn’t invited to play Putt Putt with them last year, she’d thrown a hissy fit in Maths and told Juniper she was an ugly four-eyes. Caroline may have been cute looking with her freckled face and auburn locks, but Juniper saw right through that now. She was all Strawberry Shortcake on the outside and prickly pear on the inside.

“Still, don’t you see her whispering in Genevieve’s ear? They’re probably talking about you!”

Genevieve was Caroline’s new best friend, a tall, slender girl who spoke with a posh accent and whose parents, according to Pearl, owned a mine. Juniper had seen her being dropped off at school in multiple different, flashy cars. Pearl had even said the one was a Rolls Royce.

“Why would they be?” Juniper pretended to busy herself looking at the different assortments of honey.

“Why would they not?”

Juniper moved away from the stall with the honey, trying to evade Ms W as best she could, but the woman beat her to the stall of home-made chocolate somehow. Must be those long legs. Marcia and Lydia had disappeared into the crowd.

“It hurts doesn’t it?” Ms W asked, trying a sample sliver of dark chocolate. “Being the perpetual third wheel, good friends with two girls who are each other’s best friends but not your best friend. Not either one of them.”

“Best friends are childish things, Ms W. I don’t need a dedicated best friend,” Juniper said, trying not to give away her attempts at looking for the girls in question.

“But everybody needs a best friend, Juniper. And everybody has one.”

“Even you?”

“No,” Ms W conceded, “I don’t have many friends.”

Juniper tried a sliver of white chocolate.

“You shouldn’t eat that,” Ms W warned. “It’s full of sugar. It’ll make you fat. And you’re already not much of a beauty.”

“Good thing I don’t care about beauty.”

“What lies. Everyone cares about beauty, especially ugly ducklings!”

Juniper’s face grew unpleasantly warm. She turned to shout at Ms W, who’d been standing just behind her, only to find that she’d disappeared. Marcia and Lydia came into view instead, holding ice-cream cones. Lydia handed her a slightly drooping soft serve with a smile.

“Sorry it’s a little melted, Juniper. We didn’t know where you were.”

“That’s okay. I didn’t know where you were either. Thanks for the ice-cream!” Her face cooled along with each satisfying lick of vanilla.

“Anything interesting happen while we were gone?” Marcia asked.

“No, nothing at all.”

“Well then, you’re in luck! We have a story for you,” Marcia beamed.

“Oh, hardly,” Lydia said, blushing.

“Now I’m interested,” Juniper said.

“Some guy asked Lydia for her phone number,” Marcia began with the theatricality of a true storyteller.

“What – out of nowhere?”

“Pretty much,” Lydia affirmed. “He was just standing next to me at one of the stalls.”

“And what did you say?”

“That I didn’t have a phone.”

It was actually true, but it was still funny. She could’ve given him her home phone number if she really wanted to, but obviously she didn’t. Lydia’s home number was reserved for calls about why one of them had missed school, what the Maths homework had been, and whether anyone felt like meeting at the Surf Shack on Club Penguin after dinner. Juniper began to grill Lydia about the interaction with this boy, what he looked like, what else he’d said, but Lydia was pretty useless. She described him as short and skinny and looking a little like Peter Pan, and she said he’d not even introduced himself before asking for her number.

“Boys are really thick sometimes,” Lydia said.

“Yes, I guess they are.”

“But not that thick,” Marcia countered, still trying to eke drama out of the story.

“Since he knew you’d be a good catch.”

Lydia blushed. “Oh, shut up, Marcia.”

They all broke into laughter.

That was the most exciting thing that happened at the market. After that, Pearl dropped the girls off at their respective homes and Juniper settled into a book with a cup of tea. It was a book that her Aunty Larissa had accidentally left behind after her last visit a few weeks before and it really was a bodice ripper, replete with descriptions that, by turns, grossed Juniper out and thoroughly intrigued her. Every time she heard the old wooden floorboards creaking in the passage, she would pause with the book clutched to her chest as though the authorities were onto her, but no one disturbed her or even asked what she was reading when she emerged, periodically, to refill her mug.

Grace came home just in time for lunch, beaming from ear to ear, and going on about her new best friend, Ashley, who sounded perfectly vain and vapid – just Grace’s type.

“You see,” Ms W hissed in Juniper’s ear, “everyone has a best friend.”

“The whole grade is friends with Grace.”

Ms W pressed her hands down firmly on Juniper’s shoulders but didn’t say anything else. Juniper felt a dull ache spread across her temples. Surely not everyone had a best friend, right?

CHAPTER FIVE

Grade 6 was beginning to feel just like any other grade had – normal, predictable, variable. Some classes were boring and inspired ever more morbid sketches of tombstones, and some led Juniper to wonder about really interesting things. They started learning about the reproductive lives of plants in Natural Science, which was super cool and gave her the chance to ask about leaf senescence. Genevieve and Caroline looked at her like she was mad, but she didn't care. Ordinary people often mistook greatness for madness, after all. Look at Van Gogh back in the day compared to how people revered him now – and he chopped his own ear off and sent it to a lover in the post. If fame could survive that stunt of madness, there was really nothing Juniper had to fear. Although Ms W seemed to disagree – but that was Ms W. She was disagreeable by nature. She'd have to be an upside down version of herself – Mr M perhaps – to be agreeable.

The ringing of the bell was the background to Juniper's life, dividing it neatly between breaktimes spent eating sandwiches and arguing about fictional characters in the library – like how could Cornelia Funke have killed Dustfinger? – and doing normal school things in a handful of classrooms. Mostly, it was doable, but then there was PE. It was bad enough being forced into the icy waters of the swimming pool in January, when the term had begun, but as time passed and February leaned ever closer to March, the air outside was not quite so warm anymore and the water was unendurable. Plus, the square-shaped, leather-skinned PE teacher, Mrs Briggs, actually expected them to dive in. She was a mad woman, Juniper was sure, and not in a good way. More like the mad woman in the attic, trying to burn the house down in *Jane Eyre* or creepy Mrs Danvers in *Manderley*. No ways would people look back in 200 years and think, hmmm, Mrs Briggs was just misunderstood.

"Come on, Juniper. The water won't bite." Mrs Briggs was watching her from the poolside, a cubic track-suited signal of doom with an ominous red whistle around her neck.

"I'm not so sure about that." But this was said under her breath. Mrs Briggs was kind of scary and she got increasingly scary as she approached Juniper, who was practically quivering with cold and the embarrassment of strands of pubic hair escaping her too-tight Speedo.

"You look like Humpty Dumpty," Ms W said, eyeing Juniper's swimming cap, which was shiny and white and did indeed make her look like a boiled egg. Ms W was wearing a much more befitting sun hat.

“Thanks...” Juniper took a deep breath in as she stepped onto the diving block and looked down at the turquoise water. She snapped her goggles onto her face loudly, hoping the suction would hold and no horrible chlorinated water would get into her sensitive eyes.

“Everyone’s watching you now,” Ms W hissed. “They can see you shaking.” Juniper shut her eyes and tried not to listen. She heard the water slapping the side of the pool as other girls swam laps, and then there was a big splash as someone dived in further down the pool.

“Come on, Juniper,” Mrs Briggs called again. Juniper opened her eyes. Unfortunately, the special torture of swimming training was not a dream, but something she must endure to get through the day. She got into the diving position and raised her hands into a point above her head. She took a deep breath and launched off the block. Belatedly, she realised she was meant to go headfirst and not all at once, and her body slammed into the water in a painful bellyflop. But at least she was in. And then she was doing her best to take long strokes across the water and kick hard, her body trembling with pain and cold.

When Juniper finally got out the water, she felt positively blue, and raced up the poolside steps to get her towel, feeling her costume creeping up her bottom unforgivingly.

“You alright, Juniper?” Marcia asked. She looked equally egg-like in her swimming cap, yet somehow not quite freezing.

“Fine, fine. Thanks.” Juniper tried to relieve her wedgy without too much fuss, underneath her towel.

Marcia nodded. “Let’s go sit in the sun.”

Juniper followed her to where Lydia was lying on her towel, catching rays on her pale skin. “My mom would kill me for sitting in the sun but I need to defrost.”

Juniper laughed. “Me too.”

After PE, they changed back into their uniforms and headed to their next class with cold, wet hair and the sting of chlorine on their skin. Juniper’s eyes were red and sore.

“So weak,” Ms W whispered.

Juniper shook her head, but couldn’t quite shake the feeling that Ms W was right. How was it that most of her classmates were perfectly fine with swimming – even without goggles? Surely, there was some deficit in her nature here.

CHAPTER SIX

The chlorophyll was still present in leaves all about the school when Founders' Day arrived. But not for long. Juniper was already beginning to wear her school cardigan in the afternoons and swimming in PE had become so unbearable that she'd considered faking having the flu on a number of occasions. The whole class was expected to write a poem for Founders' Day about what they loved about the school. Juniper was still thinking about it on the drive home, when Pearl scolded her again for being "disrespectful".

"Honestly, Mom. I don't know what you expect me to do. Clearly I'm just not a respectable child."

Pearl sighed. "Must you always be so difficult?"

Juniper thought about it. "Life is difficult."

"Tell me about it."

Juniper turned up the radio in the hopes of drowning out her mother's voice, but, unfortunately, there was only honeysuckle pop music on offer, as usual. "Why do you listen to this trash?"

"It's not trash, Juniper. It's nice, pleasant, melodic music. And this is exactly what I mean about you being disrespectful."

Juniper turned the radio all the way down. "At least Dad has taste in music."

"Oh, of course you'd say that."

"It's true." TJ was the one who'd introduced her to The Beatles and Pink Floyd and The Rolling Stones. He'd taken her to a Beatles medley last year and even let her bring Marcia and Lydia along for their education. Never mind that they'd all fallen asleep after their hot chocolate at interval time; it had been a late night.

"Why don't you ask your father to fetch you from school then, if his music is so great?"

"He has work."

"What do you think I do?"

Juniper scrunched her face. She knew her mom worked but it didn't seem the same as her dad. She'd always found a way to fetch her from school, even if it meant she was on the phone to people the whole drive home. Her dad's work didn't seem to be as compatible with dropping and fetching. Although, she only saw him on weekends.

"What are you in such a bad mood about anyway?"

"I'm not really in a bad mood."

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“Well, I do have a moronic assignment for Founders’ Day. We have to write a poem about what we like about school.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Well, what do you like about school?”

“The library is cool and the chess club... And I like my friends.”

“Okay and any classes?”

“Natural Science is interesting and History. And I don’t hate Maths.”

“What about your teachers? Aren’t they good?”

“Mostly. Except for Geography and PE – but those are lame subjects to begin with.”

“I think you actually quite like school.”

“How would you know?”

“Well, you get better marks than I ever did.”

“That’s got nothing to do with liking school. That just means I listen in class.”

“Well, at least you listen to your teachers, if not to me.”

Juniper sighed. Why should she listen to her mother when all she ever had to say was how disrespectful her child was and how she didn’t like her tone of voice?

Pearl’s bangles clanged against each other as she swung round a corner, reminding Juniper of windchimes.

“Why are you dressed like such a hippie?” Not an unfair accusation after all, given that her mother was dressed in colourful, motley clothing with unkempt hair and a large heart pendant round her neck.

“I thought you’d like the hippies. They’re from the same era as all the music you listen to.”

“True, but you’re not like that.”

“Like what?”

Juniper shrugged. This strange new bohemian style of dress was getting worse. Like her mom was trying on a new personality or something.

“I was tired of my old wardrobe. Wanted to try a bit of colour. Happy outside, happy inside, hmm?”

Juniper wasn’t sure that was how it worked. Despite the brightness of her harem pants and distressed hippie tops, her mom still emanated a dark cloud wherever she went. But maybe she just needed time for the colour to seep in. Maybe it wasn’t the worst idea, even if

it looked a bit ridiculous. Then again, maybe this was the phase where all her leaf pigments were showing and it would be followed by crunchy browns.

“I know something I *don’t* like about school.”

“Oh?”

“The uniform. If grownups can dress how they like, why can’t we?”

“Doesn’t it give you a sense of belonging?”

Juniper scoffed. “It’s a school, not a family.”

“It’s not such a bad uniform. Your sister’s is much worse.”

“True. So I have that to look forward to when I go to high school.” She was momentarily gladdened by the idea of Grace’s ugly green potato sack uniform.

“You could show a bit of gratitude, you know? Your school is expensive. Your father and I work very hard to send you there.”

“You want me to feel bad now?”

“No. I’m just saying. It wouldn’t hurt to appreciate what you’ve got. I never went to such a fancy school.”

“I know... I do appreciate it.” Juniper couldn’t bring herself to say thank you, not when Pearl was being so annoyingly... Pearl.

“Good. Oh, I think there might be some CDs in the cubbyhole.”

“Thank God.” Juniper sprang into action, scouring the contents of the cubbyhole for anything better than Highveld stereo. And there it was – one of her CDs – Queen’s greatest classics.

Pearl laughed.

The sound of “Bohemian Rhapsody” filled the car and Juniper breathed a sigh of relief.

At home, Juniper set herself up at her desk and began to compose the poem for Founders’ Day. She thought she’d start it as an anti-poem or an anti-school poem and then flip it somewhere.

*My school is not my home
I don’t choose the uniform or where I sit
I don’t choose my classes or who teaches them
I don’t choose what I’m good at or what I’m not
But I do choose who my friends are and to learn a lot*

We learn about how plants procreate and

*To sing the Lord's Prayer
We learn about the formation of rocks
And how to calculate sums in thin air
We learn to play chess and checkmate our foes
And at lunch time we eat away all our woes*

*I don't like my socks and I don't like my shoes
But the rest isn't bad
If I did it all over
This is still the school I'd choose.*

Juniper read it through a few times and then decided her teachers would murder her if she handed it in. Ms W chuckled over her shoulder.

"You should show it to your mom. She'd love the tone."

"Oh, shut up." Juniper slid the poem into her drawer and took out a clean sheet of paper.

The sun was out and about for long enough to give Juniper and her friends a nice tomato soup complexion during the Founders' Day gala which, thankfully, none of them had been selected to participate in – at least, not beyond chanting insipid war cries.

"It really is so idiotic. No one is going to war. Why would you say war cries?"

"Hey, where's your school spirit, June?" Marcia was way too enthusiastic.

"Can't say I have any of that." But she did try, half-heartedly, to sing along and when her house captain promised ice lollies to the loudest cheers, her voice got louder in spite of her reservations.

"Not that you need an ice lolly," Ms W noted. "You're filling out all on your own. Like a self-inflating beach ball."

She wasn't wrong. Juniper's body was certainly growing in all the wrong directions – sideways rather than up, expanding her thighs, her buttocks, her breasts. And all so swiftly too.

"At least you're not swimming today."

Never mind the cold; the humiliation of standing in front of everyone in tight nylon spandex stretched tautly across her chest and with nowhere to hide her legs... Not appealing. Thank God for small mercies.

After the gala, it was time for speeches in the assembly hall. The head girl, Christina Smith, spoke about the way she lit up every time she entered the school's "hallowed halls" and how grateful she was to attend this place. Her perfect ponytail bobbed up and down as her soft pink lips opened and closed, revealing pristine white teeth and the cooing affected tones of a wannabe linen-pants-wearing grownup. Insufferable.

Next, their grey-haired principal, Mrs Monday, spoke about the founders of the school – two sisters who came across from England with the 1820 settlers and thought it would be wonderful to set up a school for girls, who, of course, didn't have all the opportunities that boys had back then. That was all good and well but Mrs Monday's speech dragged on for nearly 20 minutes before she announced that she would be reading one of the poems that had been submitted as an example of what the school meant to its pupils. Juniper had rewritten her poem at least 10 times until she felt it was more appropriate to the occasion and that it rhymed nicely. It wasn't her poem that Mrs Monday read though; it was Lydia's. The words flowed mellifluously, in a clear pattern, even though not every line rhymed. It included words like "quintessential", which Juniper knew she would have to look up in the dictionary when she got home. It felt unfair to have been upstaged by Lydia, but then Lydia was so quiet and demure, barely looking up from her lap when the poem was read, that Juniper's sense of injustice quickly fled her body and was replaced by something close to pride.

"Well done, Lyd," she whispered.

Lydia's smile reached right into the corners of her green eyes. "Thank you."

Marcia clapped her on the shoulder, a massive grin across her sunburnt face. They really were best friends, looks passing between them without words being needed. But they were Juniper's friends too.

The assembly ended with them all singing the hymn "Abba Father". Marcia sang with more gusto than just about anyone, even though she was Jewish and wasn't actually obliged to sing any of the hymns. Juniper was technically Christian, although her family didn't do much in the way of reminding her of this fact, except for Christmas and Easter celebrations, which were now a little odd since her dad didn't stay with them anymore. Hymns were something she associated with school. They were okay, but she was glad when the singing was over and they could all go and join their parents and eat the cupcakes that had been laid out on trestle tables outside the hall. Pearl was there, bedecked in every colour under the sun between columns of parents in neutral colours. She was chatting to Marcia's parents, who were thankfully, also a little out of place in their jeans and sneakers, although they weren't quite as colourful as her mother.

“God, does she have to dress like that?”

“I think she looks nice,” Lydia said peaceably.

“Don’t lie, Lyd.”

“I’m not.” Lydia looked around for her parents and then waved them over. Her mother was petite and immaculately dressed with a pearl necklace and dainty diamond earrings, while her father was wearing a suit. He was maybe a bit overdressed, but then he was a lawyer and Juniper had never seen him not wearing a suit.

“Ah, Lydia,” Lydia’s mother gushed, engulfing her in a hug. “We’re so proud of you.” She released her daughter and then noticed Juniper. “Juniper, lovely to see you.”

“Likewise... Umm, sorry, I think I should go to my mom.”

“Of course.”

Juniper reached Pearl and reluctantly let herself be hugged. “Where’s Dad?”

“I’m not sure. Did you tell him about today?”

“Yep.” Juniper looked around, but all she could see was more of the same.

“Very waspy,” Marcia’s mom was whispering.

“Mom,” Marcia hissed. It was comforting to know that everyone had little arguments with their mothers.

“What does she mean by waspy?” Juniper whispered to Pearl.

“Ah, a WASP is a White, Anglo-Saxon – so, English-speaking – Protestant.” Which perfectly described 90% of the parents in attendance in their beige clothes and understated, but expensive jewellery.

“That’s a cool codename.” Juniper thought about it for a second before adding, “Are we WASPs?”

“No, not really. I mean, I was raised Catholic.”

“And me?”

“You can be whatever you want to be.”

“So, I’m not Catholic?”

Pearl shrugged. “I’m not sure how I feel about religion, but if you want to explore it a bit, you could ask your granny.”

Juniper shrugged. She’d been to church with her granny a couple of times, for Christmas and Easter. It had been boring and she hadn’t liked the frumpy dresses she’d been made to wear. “It’s kind of cool that we aren’t religious, I think.”

“Hmmm... You don’t feel a bit out of place here?”

“I do, but... It’s something different.”

“Yes. Difference is good. I wish your school had a bit more... Uhhh... Diversity,” she said, looking around her. “Do you only have one black girl in your whole grade?”

It felt like an accusation. “Yeah... Nokwanda. But why do you say it like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like it’s my fault?”

“I didn’t mean that it’s your fault. It’s just shocking in this day and age... You know, we used to have to go to all-white schools, but you’d think in the Rainbow Nation, there’d be more of a rainbow.”

“It’s better at government schools.”

“Yes, because the white people still have the money to send their kids here.”

Juniper wrung her hands.

Pearl sighed.

Marcia’s mother, Tali, came over and gave Juniper a big hug. It all happened so quickly that she had no way out and was overwhelmed by the strong fragrance of Tali’s perfume. “Juniper, so good to see you again!”

“You too,” Juniper half spluttered.

“Your mom was telling me how diligent you’ve been with your schoolwork. I hope you can encourage Marcia to do the same.”

Juniper smiled, not sure what to say.

“Is your dad coming?” Tali asked brightly.

Juniper looked around one last time, her stomach quivering with the beginnings of a small volcanic eruption. “No, I don’t think he is.”

“Oh, that’s too bad.”

“Too bad indeed,” Pearl said.

Juniper felt her hands prickle, her stomach gurgling more noticeably now. The outlines of things and people seemed a little fuzzy. She couldn’t remember if she excused herself or not, but she quickly made her way to the bathroom, just in time for the real explosion of her bowels and the simultaneous explosion of her tears. It happened sometimes, these strange and sudden sensations, explosions, feelings all over the show.

“Are you embarrassed that your dad isn’t here or angry that he isn’t here?” Ms W whispered from the stall next door.

Juniper blew her nose loudly. “I don’t know.” She waited for the horrible gurgling and all that accompanied it to stop before unrolling a great deal of toilet paper and eventually making her way to the basin to wash her hands.

Marcia appeared in the doorway. “Are you okay, Juniper?”

“I don’t feel so well. I think I might be sick.”

“Oh no! I’m sorry. Your mom was worried about you. I told her I’d find you.”

She followed Marcia back outside and meekly waved bye before she and Pearl headed home.

“Your tummy again?”

Juniper just nodded.

“Your bloody father.”

“It’s not his fault. I’m just sick.”

Pearl shook her head. “He can do no wrong for you, hmm?”

Juniper felt her hands tingling again, her eyes watering. She looked out the window.

“Can we please not talk about it?”

“Fine.”

They drove in silence.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was finally April. The nip in the air was pronounced, the leaves were definitely beginning their long dance through senescence, and Juniper would finally get a month's reprieve from school. Of course, it wouldn't be school holidays without Juniper's favourite pre-holiday activity – a trip to the library. Mrs Bloom's face broke into a Cheshire Cat smile when Juniper walked in and parked her wheely bag at the door.

“Was wondering when you'd get here,” the librarian said.

There was a queue for the checkout counter, for once, but most of the kids in it were amateurs – the kinds of kids who only took books out for the holidays. Lydia and Marcia were knee-deep in the fantasy section, Marcia grabbing every Darren Shan book in sight and Lydia carefully consulting the blurbs of books with pretty fairies on the covers before deciding if they were worth a chance. Juniper headed for the fiction section to see if she could find anything similar to Ian McEwan. She found an intriguing science fiction-sounding book called *Never Let Me Go*, which was strangely placed alongside other not very science fiction-sounding books. She read a bit about Kazuo Ishiguro on the inside cover of the book and decided it sounded worth the read. So did another of his books stationed next to it, *The Remains of the Day*. Next, she selected *The Kite Runner*, which she'd heard about, and after that, it was time for something a bit more fun. So, she joined Lydia and Marcia in the fantasy section and retrieved *The Magician's Guild* by Trudi Canavan, *A Great and Terrible Beauty* by Libba Bray, and a new book she hadn't seen around the library before called *Shiver*, by Maggie Stiefvater. Sometimes, she liked to dabble in supposedly age-appropriate literature, just to know what it was like... And just for some light reading over the holidays.

“Good choices here. A nice variety,” Mrs Bloom said, as she began scanning the books' barcodes. “I think you'll like *Shiver*. I really enjoyed it. And Kazuo Ishiguro never disappoints.”

“Plus, Trudi Canavan is the best,” Marcia said with glee. “She's my favourite author.”

Mrs Bloom nodded. She'd need to be blind not to notice the number of Trudi Canavan books Marcia had taken out in her time.

“About time you tried her,” Marcia added.

“Yeah, yeah. Don't set my expectations too high.” She grabbed her pile of books with both hands and waddled awkwardly towards the door. Another bag would've been a good idea, but it was too late now. Juniper tried fitting as many of them as possible into her wheely bag, which ended up being three. The other three would have to be carried in her other hand.

“Wow, Lydia,” Mrs Bloom said, “that’s got to be a record number of books.”

Lydia grinned. She appeared to have taken at least a dozen books off the shelves. Most of them were, admittedly, books aimed at teens, but still, Juniper marvelled.

“You girls going away for the holidays?”

“Going to visit my gran in Cape Town,” Marcia said.

“I’m going on a road trip through the Karoo,” Lydia said.

“That’s why so many books. Sounds deathly boring,” Juniper noted.

“I hope not... But maybe.”

“I love the Karoo, and it’s the perfect quiet destination for a good read,” Mrs Bloom said with a matronly smile. “What about you, Juniper?”

“Going to Ballito with my mom and my sister.”

“Nothing like a good beach read.”

Juniper wasn’t much of a fan of the sand or the sticky memory of seawater on her skin, but she loved being able to lie down for hours at a time, reading, uninterrupted. “It should be good. With any luck, my sister will be gallivanting with her friends the whole time.”

“Or her boyfriends,” Marcia added.

Juniper and Lydia laughed. Silly Grace.

“I remember your sister,” Mrs Bloom said, scanning the last of Lydia’s books finally. “A bright young girl, a little feisty.”

“Sarcastic more like.”

“Not so different from you, Juniper.”

“I like you, Mrs Bloom. Please don’t compare me to my sister.”

“Oh, alright. I guess no one likes to be compared to their siblings.”

“It’s one of the worst things about being the second born.”

“Well, she certainly never read half as many books as you.”

At that, Juniper beamed. “That’s for damn sure.”

“Language please, Juniper.”

“Sorry.” Only for a teacher would Juniper apologise for using the word “damn”, even though she knew damn well that teachers swore in their own time.

“Go on then. Have a lovely holiday, girls.”

“Thanks, Mrs Bloom,” they each said, not quite in harmony. And then they were out the library doors, wheeling over the cobblestone courtyard with a clatter and immediately talking loudly and animatedly about how glad they were to be done with the first term. Thank God.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Juniper was up before anyone else in the rented house, the sun peeking through the sheer white curtain over her bedroom window. Just like at home, she shuffled through to the kitchen to turn on the kettle for coffee. Unlike at home, she was grossed out to find a light coating of sand covering the kitchen tiles, which was soon stuck to the soles of her feet. But she had to admit that the view of the turquoise sea was spectacular. She slipped out onto the balcony with her cup of coffee and breathed in the muggy sea air. Here, summer lingered on and the waves crashed onto the beach in a comforting timeless rhythm. If her dad had been there, he would've been up then too, trying to convince her to do something crazy like try catch fish in the rockpools with a silly little net. He could be a real pain sometimes with all these unnecessary activities. Although, she had enjoyed their trips to Ushaka Marine World in Durban, where she'd braved getting into a donut-shaped floaty and tubing down a giant waterslide – multiple times.

"You're up early." It was Pearl, wearing her strange, loose-fitting beach dress over her pyjamas, as though it were a dressing gown.

"My curtain doesn't really block out any light."

"Ah, that's annoying. Maybe we can put a towel up or something." Pearl sat herself down beside Juniper at the white plastic table, picking up one of the seashells and admiring it.

"Can we go to the beach yet?"

"Mmmm... Soon. I think we need some breakfast first and to wait for your sister to be awake."

"That could take hours." And Juniper did not want to enter the dragon's lair to wake Grace either.

"Not too many, hopefully. I told Grace we must get there early before the sun is too hot."

"Like she cares."

Pearl laughed. "Go easy on your sister. Being a teenager is tough."

"I'm nearly a teenager."

"Nearly, but not quite."

"Why does it matter? What magical thing happens when you turn 13?"

"Well, there are a lot of hormones rushing around your body..."

"And I don't have that too?"

Pearl put the shell down and looked out to sea a moment before she answered, "I suppose you do." She looked pensive. Juniper hoped she wasn't about to launch into some speech about hair in funny places and all that. A needless worry, as it turned out, because soon Pearl decided to start getting breakfast together and wake the dragon.

They got to the beach around 9, an hour later than was ideal, but at least it wasn't burn-your-feet-on-the-sand hot yet. Juniper laid out her towel and settled in to read, while Pearl set up the umbrella and a couple of beach chairs. Grace stripped down into her teeny tiny triangle bikini and proceeded to cover her slender, sinewy body in sun cream before settling down to tan and admire any mildly attractive teenage boys or young men who walked past them.

Pearl set off on a walk, which neither of her girls opted to join.

"She needs that sea air," Grace said.

Juniper didn't answer. The idea of needing sea air was ridiculous. Sure, it smelt different from Joburg air but air was air. Next Grace would be saying their mother should be drinking sea water to cleanse her bowels. For that, she may as well have drunk Black Forest tea.

"And you don't need any tea to do that at all," Ms W said, wearing her shadiest floppy hat to protect from the KwaZulu-Natal heat.

"Hey, that's different." But the memory of her gurgling bowels was too fresh and painful.

"I feel bad for whoever went into the bathroom after you that day."

"It wasn't my fault."

"Your dad's then? Like your mom says?"

"No." She thought about her dad. He would've walked along the beach with Pearl if he'd been there. Well, if he'd been there and it had been two years ago and not today. Today, Pearl would have told him not to.

"He's not here because he doesn't want to be here," Ms W said.

"Or because she doesn't want him to be here."

"Both can be true at once."

Both probably were. They'd had an amicable separation, as Pearl always called it. Juniper had had to look amicable up and decide on its appropriateness... It was right for the most part, except if she ever suggested her dad was better at something.

"Amicable doesn't mean you never see your dad though," Ms W said.

"I don't never see him."

"You don't see him that often."

“He’s busy.”

“Too busy for his daughters?”

Juniper shrugged. She reached into her tote bag for the sunblock.

“Oooh, nice abs,” Grace whispered, as a tall young man jogged past them and leapt into the sea.

“You’re disgusting,” Juniper said, looking up from her sticky sun-cream-covered arm.

“I’m just enjoying the view,” her sister replied. “No harm in that.”

“He’s like a proper grownup.”

“Hardly. Can’t be much older than me.”

“He’s at least 18.”

“That’s not that old.”

“Eeuw.”

“Oh, go back to your book then.”

So she did.

The holiday was day after day of sunshine, sticky feet, and delicious reading with the occasional crispy crunch of sand landing between musky book pages. Grace spent hours swimming in the sea and chatting to an abundance of friends she’d amassed at the beach. Pearl went for long walks and spent hours sketching pictures on the balcony with a glass of wine. Every so often, TJ called to see how his girls were doing, not including Pearl, who never seemed to talk to him for more than was necessary to convey him to her daughters. And Ms W seldom made an appearance, waiting only for such rare occasions as Juniper getting dumped by a wave and feeling her bikini bottoms rise up into the crack of her bottom, filled with sand, or for when she got a truly terrible sunburn and was peeling skin off herself for three days afterwards, like a snake shedding its skin all wrong.

“It’s really bad,” Ms W told her. “You look disgusting. You can’t possibly go to the beach like that.”

But Juniper didn’t entertain the thought long. Pearl handed her some AfterSun lotion, which she smoothed into her skin, feeling the satisfying, cooling sensation that gave her the sense that all would be well. That, plus a gargantuan tie-dyed t-shirt borrowed from her mother made the next couple of days at the beach totally bearable, much to Ms W’s disappointment.

CHAPTER NINE

On their second last evening in Ballito, Juniper smelt something strange. Not strange in the sense that she didn't know what it was – she knew well enough what cigarette smoke smelt like – strange because Pearl was dead set against tobacco, always had been. Ever since her aunt had died of lung cancer when Pearl was still in university. Juniper closed her book and set it down on the low coffee table next to the couch that had become her go-to destination in the early evenings when Pearl was generally napping and Grace talking on the phone. She tiptoed in the direction of the smoky scent, her nostrils pricked, ears alert for the sounds of sudden movement. The smoke wasn't emanating from the balcony, as she had expected, but from the bathroom. The door was firmly shut, of course, so Juniper let herself out the house and walked around the side, down a garden path between the wall and the rose bushes, trying to be as dainty as possible so as to avoid being lanced by thorns. The grass felt prickly and uncomfortable, her smooth, pedicured feet vulnerable to the elements. But she persevered. Sure enough, she could see the faint wisps of smoke emanating from the bathroom window, their distinctive vomit-inducing stench carried away by the warm evening breeze.

Juniper stood on her tiptoes to see if she could catch a glimpse of the offending cigarette. Grace's delicate, long-fingered hand came into view, her wrist twirling around in a slow flamenco pattern, the cigarette perched between her index and middle fingers. How Juniper wished she had a camera right then! This could've nailed Grace for sure. But then, not only did she not have a camera, but she lost her footing too. The ground was uneven and as soon as she tripped, Juniper knew it was all over, for there was nothing to grab onto but the threatening stem of the nearest rose bush. A scream inadvertently escaped her lips as she tumbled into the treacherous bush and felt the wrath of several thorns.

"Hello? Juniper? Is that you?"

Juniper began to cry.

"Oh, what a baby," Ms W murmured, as she struggled back to her feet, still crying.

"Juniper?" Grace called again.

"Here! I'm here! I fell in the rose bushes." She winced as she discovered a thorn lodged in her thumb and tried to extract it.

Grace peered down at her from her perch on the window sill, swore, and quickly stubbed out her cigarette.

Juniper heard the sound of the toilet flushing followed by a lot of toilet spray being sprayed before Grace's feet pounded through the house and then outside, down the same path Juniper had just taken.

"Are you okay?"

"Bloody sore and this one is stuck." Juniper showed her the thorn in her thumb.

"Hold still," Grace said. She yanked the thorn out swiftly.

Juniper cried out, but then, at least, she felt a bit better.

"God, you're covered in scratches. Let's go inside and wipe you down."

She nodded and followed her sister limply back inside.

"What were you doing there, anyway?" Grace asked as she turned on the kitchen tap and dipped her finger in the stream of water to test its heat.

"Nothing."

"Yeah right. Come here." She'd wet a cloth under the water and reached for Juniper to begin dabbing her various scratches.

Juniper winced with each dab. "You were smoking."

"What?"

"Don't play dumb. I saw you and I smelt you."

Grace stopped her dabbing for a second and looked Juniper straight in the eye. It was a bit unnerving as Grace was more than a head taller than her and had to look down through her thick eyelashes to do this. "Juniper, you can't tell Mom."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Please." Her eyes were big and round with a slight sheen to them, as though they were considering whether crying would help her cause.

"I don't do secrets."

"Oh, come on. I'm your sister. Please."

Juniper sighed. Not that long ago, she'd been wishing she had a camera so she could document her sister's exploits and now Grace was stamping out the idea.

"It destroys your lungs, you know."

"I know."

"Then why do it?"

Grace sighed and continued to press the warm cloth over Juniper's scratches. "I don't know. A couple of my friends smoke and it's quite... calming."

"It's gross."

Grace nodded. "I won't do it forever."

“Why not stop right now then?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

Grace moved back to the sink to rinse the cloth and ring it out. She hung it over the tap and then turned around to face Juniper resting her back against the countertop. “I tried to.”

“And?”

“It was horrible.”

Juniper shook her head. “That’s so lame.”

“Please, June. Don’t tell Mom.” Grace looked strangely deerlike with her big wide eyes and lanky limbs. Her voice was soft, plaintive.

“Fine, but you owe me.”

Grace nodded. “Thank you.”

Juniper nodded and clasped her arms, noting all the small red scratches across them.

“But please do me a favour, June. Don’t spy on me in the rose bushes again.”

“Oh, no worries there. Those bushes are enemy number one now.”

Grace smiled, her eyes returning to their normal size, her body looking once more like it was composed and capable of the necessary wickedness of older sister duties. “I have plasters in my room if you need.”

CHAPTER TEN

While Juniper had vowed not to tell her parents about the cigarette incident and had claimed she was chasing a lizard in the garden when she'd fallen in the rose bushes, she'd never said she wouldn't tell her friends. This was of course, the juiciest gossip of the holidays.

"Inside the house, even?" Marcia still couldn't believe it. "My mom would have lost it."

"Mine too, if she found out." Juniper bit into her apple with relish.

"But how could she not know?" Lydia couldn't believe it either. "It smells!"

"Tell me about it. I knew right away. But you know my mom... She's been a bit distracted."

"By the hippie stuff?"

Juniper pinched her face in reflexively. It was alright for her to say her mom had gotten into hippie stuff, but she didn't like to hear it from her friends. "Yeah... Well, it's not just that." She didn't want to add that her mom had slept more than could possibly be normal that holiday, so she said simply, "She's got work stuff I think. Makes her very tired."

"My mom gets that way too," Lydia said. "My dad calls her a workaholic sometimes."

"Is she?"

"Well, she does work a lot. Even when we're on holiday."

"That's just a good work ethic, isn't it?" Marcia asked. Of course, she'd say that. Her dad was pretty much always working.

"Everyone needs a holiday," Lydia said.

"Yeah." Maybe it wasn't so weird how much her mom had slept, or how many solitary walks she'd been on.

"Did you see your dad at all during the holidays?" Marcia asked.

"Only before we left and after we got back. Mom told him it wouldn't be fair for him to come to Ballito too. But I did speak to him on the phone a couple of times." She hadn't asked him why he hadn't come to Founders' Day though. She'd already heard Pearl scolding him for that in the same tone she used for Juniper's "tones". It hadn't seemed fair.

"Would you tell him about the smoking?"

"Nah. I can't keep it from my mom and then tell my dad... That wouldn't be cool."

"Mmm... True."

"Neither of you can tell your parents, hey? Otherwise they'll definitely tell my parents and then Grace will know I told."

Lydia and Marcia both swore they'd never tell. Now that the gossip was over, they resumed eating their food and debating which movies to rent over the weekend.

The days went back to being divided by the sound of the bell and the variations of lunches Pearl packed. If Juniper got a tuna mayo sandwich, she'd sometimes swap it for a packet of Lays that Marcia got. Or she'd trade her packet of organic almonds for a nice ripe peach from Lydia's lunchbox. Every now and then, she'd ask her mom for a few R5 coins from the car guard collection in the car cupholder so she could buy a chocolate brownie from the tuckshop, but she tried not to do it too often after Pearl warned her she'd put on weight.

"Too late for the warning, don't you think?" Ms W had chided, smilingly. Juniper was standing in front of the full length mirror on the inside door of her cupboard.

"I'm not getting fat," Juniper said, noticing Ms W's eyes on the reflection of her chest. It was true that that particular area was coming to take up more space, which was embarrassing but not the same.

"I wonder if they use battery chicken eggs in the brownies," Ms W mused. "The way those breasts are growing..."

Juniper stuck fingers in her ears.

Ms W laughed. "Don't be a child."

Juniper removed the fingers from her ears. "Stop it."

"Stop what?"

"Saying that."

Ms W smiled. "That you're a child or that you have breasts?"

"They can't both be true!"

Ms W shrugged.

Juniper took off her t-shirt and examined her training bra. She'd noticed it a couple of weeks before but had tried not to think about it. Now, there was no denying, the underwire was cutting into her skin and the triangular cups were too small. She was overflowing her bra like water breaking a dam wall. She sighed and made her way to her mom's bedroom.

"Mom?"

"Yes?"

"I need new bras."

"Oh. I see that."

"These ones are too small for me now and the wire is cutting into me."

“Yes. Not good.” Pearl paused the video she’d been watching and reached for her handbag. “Let’s go to Woolies quickly.”

The Woolworths trip was excruciating. The lady at the underwear section insisted on measuring Juniper, restating with her every protestation that girls and women very often got their bra sizes wrong and suffered horribly as a result. Finally, Pearl was able to talk Juniper into it. So, Juniper raised her arms and tried to ignore the tingling sensation in her palms or the hot blood rushing to her face as big-bosomed Prudence unrolled her yellow measuring tape and began to measure underneath her training bra and then around the biggest part of her chest.

“You’re ready for a proper bra now,” she said with a smile.

“Yay for me.”

Prudence didn’t seem to detect the sarcasm or, if she did, she ignored it. Instead, she busied herself with finding suitable options for Juniper.

“Nothing lacy,” Pearl told her. “And nothing pink. She only likes very plain things.” Prudence brought back three options, the first of which Juniper instantly hated as it was a push-up bra with a massive chunk of padding. As if she’d want to make her breasts look bigger! The other two were okay though. The one was padded but only very slightly and in a non-offensive grey, while the other was plain white and silky soft. She read the label and felt a swirling sense of dread in the pit of her stomach. 32AA.

“So, what do you think, June? These two?”

“Yeah, these two are good.”

“I can check if they have them in other colours. Maybe we can get a third one?”

“No, these two are fine.”

“Okay.”

“Turn around so I can change.”

Pearl obliged and Juniper began the laborious task of unhooking herself and changing back into her too-small bra, which now felt noticeably wrong after such a nicely fitted one. She pulled her Pink Floyd t-shirt back on over her head and gathered together the two chosen bras.

A proper bra. What did that even mean? It reminded her of the time she’d moved on from picture books to chapter books. That was a big deal. Those were proper books, or so she’d thought then. But did that mean that now she had proper boobs? Like her mom? Like the topless women she sometimes saw in the movies? Like that scene in the original *Romeo and Juliet* where Olivia Hussey was bare-breasted? And Juniper had felt her insides squirm, but she hadn’t wanted to show it because her friends were there and it was supposed to be a classic.

They drove home to the sounds of Pearl's Fleetwood Mac CD, the one CD they'd both agreed was good. At least Pearl's taste in music wasn't completely hopeless.

"Don't let your dad put the bras directly in the washing machine when you stay there," Pearl said.

Juniper winced at the idea of her dad seeing her bras but then realised he must've seen the training bras she'd been flinging in the washing basket too.

"They need to go in a special bag inside the machine," her mom said. "I'll lend you one to take with you this weekend. Just remind me."

Juniper nodded. "Doesn't Grace have one?"

"Oh, yes, she should. Although Grace isn't always very good at taking care of her things."

Juniper smiled. Was her mom saying she was the more responsible one?

"Don't tell your sister I said that."

Damn. It would've been nice to rub it in her face. "Fine."

The sky was darkening outside the window. It was darkening earlier every day, which meant soon, Juniper's new bras would be hidden beneath layers of clothing to fend off the cold. And under layers of clothing, who'd even notice if her boobs had grown?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Juniper was bundled up in a thick hoody, scarf and beanie, squinting at the piercingly bright blue sky. Her hands were frozen and as withered as the hands of an 80-year-old. It was the Roaccutane. She'd been on it for nearly a year now for her acne. It worked like a dream. The only problem was the dry skin. As April turned a leaf into May, her hands began to turn scabby. They were cracking, harsh as sandpaper. She was worried they'd start to bleed. Instinctively, she reached for her shoulder bag for a tube of hand cream, but then she remembered she'd left her bag on the shore (if you could call it that). She was on a little rowboat in the middle of the Zoo Lake. This was a horrible idea from the start. If they fell overboard, the water was sure to be icy, and besides, she'd heard the stories. The Zoo Lake was the communal dumping ground. Several ducks had died from drinking the water. She'd seen empty milk bottles bobbing on the surface, and it was rumoured that once someone had committed a murder and deposited little plastic bags of chopped up body parts into the lake to hide the evidence. Juniper wasn't a fan of the Zoo Lake.

She was a useless companion on the boat, far too caught up in her own thoughts to do anything practical – like row. Luckily for her, Marcia and Lydia were taking care of the rowing. Lydia was almost as useless as Juniper, truth be told, but Marcia was surprisingly strong and adept at rowing. Marcia was the most outdoorsy of the three of them and her skin was perpetually sun-baked and full of vitality. Lydia barely saw the sun and had such a fair complexion that her mother refused to let her outside without a ridiculous floppy hat on. Juniper and Marcia teased her about the hat mercilessly, but Lydia took it in her stride. She'd look like a beetroot without it.

“God, it's cold,” Juniper said.

“You'd be warmer if you helped with the rowing,” said Marcia.

“True, but then I'd have to remove some layers. Or roll up my sleeves. So much effort.”

“You sloth,” said Lydia, who was being just as slothful herself.

They were approaching the middle of the lake and had a good view of the island of geese in the middle.

“They are geese, aren't they?” Lydia asked.

“I thought they were ducks,” said Juniper.

“Egyptian geese,” Marcia corrected.

There were, in fact, a combination of ducks and geese and Egyptian geese, all sitting on the island having a grand old time. They were safe from the perils of the water out there. Occasionally, they'd be tempted to the embankment by a child with bits of bread crust, or else they'd waddle across the pedestrian path and deposit small green droppings everywhere. But the island in the middle of the lake was their haven.

"Tell me again why we thought rowing on the grossest of gross lakes was a good idea?"

"You're no fun, Juniper."

It was way too cold to be outside. All the same, she enjoyed herself. It was tranquil, even with the tinkling sound of the bell on the ice-cream man's bicycle. Once they finished their boat ride and removed the offensive neon floatation vests that they'd been forced to don, the three of them bought ice-creams. They came to the conclusion that it didn't matter how cold it was; ice-cream was always good. Juniper bought a Jive, a gorgeous cerise-coloured, strawberry flavoured ice-cream. She held the stick firmly in her hand as they walked along the lakeside path. Lydia and Marcia had both opted for King Cones.

"Sometimes," Marcia said, "it's good to get out of your comfort zone."

"I agree in theory," said Lydia, "but then that would mean I should take on public speaking or join the hockey team or something horrible like that."

"You might be good at public speaking," said Juniper. "Hockey not so much."

They all laughed. Lydia had zero hand-eye coordination and ran in such a peculiar style that she made the Egyptian ducks look graceful.

"I did think about public speaking," said Lydia.

"Oh, really?" said Marcia.

Juniper bit through the hard pink skin of her Jive. The softer pink flesh underneath met her tongue, a sweet strawberry coldness engulfing her whole mouth.

"I do like speaking. Just usually only to you guys."

"That's selective mutism," Juniper said. She tried to discreetly lick ice-cream off her chin.

"Not funny, June. I'm not mute."

"I know, I know. I didn't mean to be mean." She'd read about selective mutism somewhere, she wasn't quite sure where.

"Talking in front of the class is..."

"Scary?" Marcia suggested.

"Terrifying. I don't know how you do it, June. I wish I could be like you."

“Don’t be ridiculous. Half the people who talk in class are total philistines. It would be such a nice change to hear from you once in a while, Lyd.”

“Not to sound like a... fil-is-tine... but what is that?” Marcia asked.

Juniper laughed. “It’s someone who’s uncultured.”

“Like me?”

“You’re not uncultured, Marcia. You’re just way too into going outside.”

The ducks squawked as if in agreement. The girls laughed and kept on walking, chatting, and eating their ice-creams.

Juniper got warm enough to take off her hoody and consider the strangeness of walking in her tight-fitting long-sleeved shirt which accentuated her rapidly growing bosom. Usually, she felt very self-conscious of this, but today she felt good, almost like a young lady. She couldn’t bring herself to think the word “woman”. It seemed somehow too serious. But “lady” she could think, never mind that this word was very old-fashioned and not really used beyond the confines of posh private schools, like hers. Lady reminded her of the characters in books she read, of knights in shining armour, and maidens in towers. Of course, Juniper preferred Tamora Pierce’s books about Keladry of Mindelan’s journey towards becoming a knight to any old stories about maidens in towers. It would’ve been lame if Keladry had had to sit pretty in a tower like Fiona did in *Shrek*... Although she also loved Fiona’s bad-ass scene where she fought off Robin Hood and his men. Nonetheless, Juniper still thought in terms of ladies and not women. Women had too many uncomfortable connotations for her somehow. Like saggy breasts and children and age.

Marcia and Lydia had to pee, but Juniper hated public bathrooms, so she waited for them outside the cold grey building. She pictured them shivering over cold porcelain toilets with no seats, cursing because there was no toilet paper – not that she’d ever heard either of them curse any worse than “damn” or “bloody” (which she was sure they only used because of *Harry Potter*). Propped against the wall of the bathroom building, she saw a familiar figure under a nearby tree. Her hair seemed almost to glow from the sun shining through behind it. Long chestnut-brown hair. It was Ms W, and she’d seen Juniper and was walking towards her.

“Long time no see, Juniper,” she said.

“Long time...” Although it hadn’t been that long really. Not long enough by far.

“Are you not happy to see me?”

“Not especially.” Juniper shifted her weight between feet, rubbing her chapped hands together for some electric warmth.

“Come now, Juniper. It’s not good to hold a grudge.”

“You called me an ugly duckling, Ms W. And fat too.”

“Ag, well. Water under the bridge.”

“Perhaps.” Juniper looked across the park at the tangle of overgrown grass and the many fallen leaves.

“You do look a little old for your age with your breasts emphasized like that,” Ms W said.

She glanced down instinctively. “There’s no cleavage,” she said, “and besides it’s not even an A cup.”

“Ah, but still, it’s a proper bra, you know. You’re such an early bloomer. Must be the battery chickens.”

“Shut up.”

“Come on, Juniper,” Ms W cooed. She was smiling as if all this were totally reasonable and fair.

“I’m not a battery chicken girl.”

“You’re not a girl anymore, are you?”

“Of course, I am.”

“You’re a woman, Juniper.”

“I’m eleven.”

But then, there it was, a strange feeling between Juniper’s legs. Something was happening and it didn’t feel normal. Had Ms W somehow made this happen? She wanted to shout at Ms W but when Juniper looked up from her navel, Ms W was gone. Juniper felt like she had to pee suddenly. She didn’t want to go into the bathroom, but the feeling was too desperate now, as though she’d wet her panties already. So much for being grown up. Juniper dashed into the bathroom and slammed herself into a stall. She’d gone straight past her friends who were both attempting to coax water out of the frigid old taps in the bathroom sinks.

“Juniper, are you okay?”

Juniper hovered cautiously over the seat-less toilet, trying her best not to gag at the awful smell of the Zoo Lake lavatory. She pulled her panties down and there it was, as though bestowed as a curse by Ms W, a dark reddish-brown smudge. Juniper didn’t feel horrified. She knew what it was. She almost felt excited even. But then, she knew she couldn’t tell her friends. She just couldn’t.

“Juniper?” Marcia was just outside the cubicle door.

“I’m fine,” Juniper said, finally, “was just desperate. Does anyone have a tissue for me?”

Marcia passed her some tissues under the door and Juniper lined the gusset of her panties with them. She didn’t talk about any of it with her friends, but as soon as Pearl picked her up, she spilled all the beans without preamble. No “Hi, Mom” or anything. She just got into the car, closed the door, and, while her mom was still reversing out of her parking space, declared, “I got my period.”

“Oh, wow. Are you okay?”

“Fine. It’s... weird.”

“No cramps?”

“No. Should I have cramps?”

“No, no, not necessarily. I hope you never do. I always go the worst cramps. Do your friends know?”

“No, I didn’t tell them.”

“Why not?”

“It’s private.”

“Okay. Well, let’s go to Dischem quickly.”

“Okay.”

It was a strange trip, a little reminiscent of the time they went to buy Juniper’s first bra more than a year ago. Now, they headed down an aisle of Dischem that Juniper had never traversed before. Come to think of it, she’d hardly ever set foot in Dischem before, being of generally good health and seldom interested in joining her parents on shopping trips that involved a pharmacy. While Woolworths had had warm lighting and neat piles of colourful clothing, Dischem was illuminated by harsh fluorescent lights and had an overwhelming number of white-shelves with everything from herbal teas to pantyhose to vitamins. Yet, it still felt familiar because Juniper had the same lump in her throat as she followed her mom as she’d had in Woolworths, the same feeling of trepidation.

There were four or five rows of shelves laden with packets of pads and tampons, lots of pink and purple and blue, with the occasional hue of red. It was overwhelming. Pearl was reminiscing about how she used to love a certain type of pad when she was younger and then about how great it was to be able to use tampons because she could swim with them in.

“I don’t want a tampon,” Juniper said.

“No, no, of course not. That’s too difficult for a beginner.”

A beginner, as if Juniper were starting out at a new sport or had just joined an advanced Maths class. Beginner level. Round one of some flickering computer game. She reached for a small blue packet of Always maxi pads. She'd seen the adverts on TV. "I always use Always." It was a corny catch-phrase but it gave her something to hold onto.

"How about these?" Juniper picked up the nearest packet to her.

Pearl inspected the packet. She showed Juniper the little drawing of levels of flow and asked her how heavy her period was.

"Not very, I guess. But I don't know really..."

In the end, they got five different options. The normal-flow packet Juniper had selected, two special "teen" packs from Kotex, an extra-long overnight Always pad, and some thin Libresse panty-liners. Pearl explained to Juniper that she should always go for unscented pads so that she didn't get an allergic reaction or an infection. She also told her not to wash down there with soap; just hot water would do. Juniper nodded. She was tired. Standing at the till with her mother felt very awkward. She kept seeing Ms W out of the corner of her eye and turning swiftly away.

"You're a woman now," her mother told her as they drove back home.

Juniper rolled her eyes.

"We should all go out for dinner tonight to celebrate."

"Can we please not?"

"Oh, Juniper, it's nothing to be embarrassed about. I'm proud of you."

"Proud of me. For what? Bleeding?" Juniper looked out the window. The sky had clouded over now with only a few patches of blue remaining. Johannesburg was done pretending that it was still warm.

"I'm proud of how calmly you handled it all. Very mature," Pearl said.

Juniper sighed. People were always calling her mature or mature for her age. All it really meant was that she wasn't squeamish and didn't giggle when someone said the word "vagina". It didn't mean she was okay with the realities of dealing with all that "vagina" meant. But at least she wasn't afraid to use the word.

"It's going to be okay," her mother said.

"I know, Mom. I just don't want to make a big deal out of this."

"Okay."

"Thank you."

As soon as she got home, Juniper had a hot shower, being extra careful not to let any soap get between her legs, but plenty of hot water. She covered her dry skin in body lotion and pulled on a clean pair of panties, sticking the adhesive maxi pad down with care. She felt a bit like she was wearing a nappy, but after a while it felt more comfortable. The feeling of fluid leaving her body didn't cease to feel weird. Before she went to sleep, she switched to an overnight pad. She slept like a log and dreamt of Egyptian geese flying far above her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Juniper's school dress had finally gotten too short for her and Pearl had had to let out the hem she'd sewn back when they bought the dress the previous year. Now, there was no longer the scratchy feel of the hem on her leg but there was the slight concern that if she grew any taller, she'd need a new uniform and Pearl had told her she would absolutely not be getting any new uniforms so close to the end of her time in primary school. So, now there was that. Then there was the fact that the uniform itself was just a travesty of taste.

"I hate this bloody uniform. It's bad enough that we have this ugly dress. Why do we need to wear brown shoes and stockings with it?"

"You're very privileged to go to this school, you know, Juniper?"

Juniper sighed. "That's not fair, Mom. You know I can't argue with that."

"I didn't ask you to."

The indicator made its usual ticking sound in the background while Pearl waited for oncoming traffic to slow down or for someone to let them through. It was peak hour and Joburg at peak hour was horrendous. They'd be stuck at this intersection for a while.

"I didn't choose to be privileged," Juniper said, fiddling with the radio as she said so. The Fleetwood Mac CD had gotten scratched somehow and Grace seemed to have ransacked the cubbyhole so, now, all that was left was the damn radio. Not that there was anything on anyways – except the news, which Juniper didn't feel like listening to. She turned the volume down to 2.

"You chose this school," Pearl said, too busy looking for a gap in the traffic to complain about the radio.

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"I was five years old! You shouldn't have listened to me!"

"Maybe not. We'd have saved a lot of money sending you to a government school instead."

"I mean, I don't hate the school... It's okay. But the uniform."

"I know, June. It's awful. You look like a sack of potatoes." Her mom started laughing.

"Mom, Jeez! You didn't have to go that far." But then Juniper was laughing too. She was grateful to go to her school. She had wonderful and eccentric teachers there and had made good friends and it was a great place to learn and to play. One of the best things about

school was also the cosy library filled with books where she, Marcia and Lydia often ate their lunch. You weren't really meant to eat in there, but Mrs Bloom turned a blind eye when it came to those three. She'd wanted to include that bit in her poem for Founders' Day but had left it out in case it would get Mrs Bloom in trouble.

Juniper also knew that her school gave her a better quality of education than a lot of other schools. She'd visited some of those other schools for community service. Schools that were run down and didn't have science labs or computers. She'd also watched a news programme once about schools that didn't have running water or proper toilets. She'd had to ask Pearl to explain what a pit latrine was and was still horrified by the thought of using one. No wonder so many girls simply didn't go to school when they got their periods. Juniper wasn't sure she could stomach the period, pit latrine combo either. None of this made her feel any happier about the chequered frock she had to wear though, not right now when she was on her way to another school to play competitive chess against other kids – boys – her age.

Pearl finally turned onto the busy road, and they began to wind up a steep hill. There were great stone walls and mansions along this road and lots of leafy green trees on either side. Juniper suddenly got the sense that the school they were approaching was out of her league. Yes, she went to a private school, but this was a school for people with serious money. As they approached the school, she noted the cars parked outside. She didn't know car names, but they looked fancy. She saw someone's mother dressed in an immaculate skirt and jacket with shiny black court heels on. They drove through the large, black gate and into the parking lot.

"Wow," Pearl said.

The buildings were old and made of stone. They were large and intimidating, flanked by sculptures three times as tall as Juniper. There was even a fountain with a little stone cherub peeing water in the centre of the courtyard.

"It looks like Hogwarts," Juniper said.

"It's a Hughie Melville building," Pearl said.

"Who's that?"

"A famous architect from about a hundred years ago." Of course Pearl would know this. Architecture was to her what books were to her bespectacled daughter.

"Wow."

Pearl parked her Citroen Picasso in between a sleek sports car and a large four-by-four, adjusting her pashmina around her shoulders as she got out. Juniper tried to brush her hair into a decent position using the car's side mirror. It was looking a bit flat, and she was

beginning to think that short hair really didn't suit her, even though she'd thought it would be cool to try at the time she got it cut. As she and her vibrantly dressed mother began to walk towards the large stone archway which they took to be the entrance of the school, she thought back to earlier in the afternoon, when she'd been trying to make her hair look better with some butterfly clips.

Grace had caught her in the act of clipping her hair in the bathroom and started laughing like a hyena. The clips weren't cooperating with Juniper's vision. Instead, they made her hair stick up all over the show, giving her a wild look rather than a stylish one.

"What are you fussing over that mop for?" Grace asked.

"Shut up, Grace."

"I'm serious. Maybe I can help." She didn't sound serious, of course. As per usual, Grace had a dry sarcastic edge to her voice. She was leaning in the doorway in her high school uniform with her skirt rolled up at the waist to make it about two inches shorter than it was meant to be according to school rules.

"I have a chess match tonight."

"Oh, shit. A chess match. Of course."

"What's wrong with a chess match?" Juniper began pulling the clips out of her hair. She didn't want to admit that Grace was right about them, but Grace was right.

"I mean, be any nerdier," Grace said.

Juniper rolled her eyes and began brushing her hair again. It looked a mess after all the clips.

"Maybe if someone hadn't put a bowl over your head to cut that, you'd look less like a schoolboy."

"Ag, go away, Grace."

"Here," Grace said, reaching into the bathroom drawer and pulling out a tube of mascara. "At least this way your eyelashes can distract from your hair."

Juniper reluctantly accepted the mascara and began to put it on. She'd never worn mascara before and realised that applying it was more difficult than anticipated. Not getting it on the patch of skin beneath her eyes was complicated. There was a certain dexterity she sorely lacked.

"Look down when you do it," Grace told her. Eventually Grace ended up applying it for her, instructing her to look down and up when appropriate and swiping the wand masterfully across her lashes until they were dark and glossy.

“What are you getting all dressed up for anyways? I mean, you’re still in school uniform. What’s the point of fixing your hair or your eyes? Will there be boys there?”

“Yes. It’s at Maslow Brothers Prep, but that’s not the point.”

“Bullshit. That’s totally the point. You never try fix yourself up to see friends.”

Juniper didn’t want to admit to Grace that she was excited to meet boys. That was Grace’s thing. Grace with pictures of boys stuck up all over her bedroom wall. Grace who went to concerts and screamed like a crazy person when a cute boy walked onto the stage and frequently told people how she was going to marry David Beckham or Brad Pitt or Orlando Bloom... It was moronic. That was what morons did – waste all their time on boys and parties and makeup. Whereas, if there was anything Juniper had to her credit, it was her brain. She couldn’t be stupid. But then, she had butterflies in her stomach at the thought of meeting boys at the chess match.

“What boys do you imagine you’ll meet at a chess match?” Grace asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the kind of guys who play chess are usually losers. Your type I guess.”

“They’re not losers. You have to be strategic and intellectual to play chess.”

“It’s a retarded way to spend your time.”

“You can’t be both intellectual and retarded, Grace. If you were at all intellectual yourself, you’d know that that’s an oxymoron.”

“You’re an oxymoron.”

Juniper laughed. Grace clearly didn’t know what an oxymoron was. She felt momentarily superior.

“Whatever, Juniper. Good luck finding a hot guy to date at chess.”

“Good luck not getting in trouble with your stupidly short skirt.”

“Oh, grow up.” Grace marched out of the bathroom and down the passage to her room.

Juniper looked at herself in the mirror. Her eyes looked strangely bug-like with the mascara, until she put her glasses on. Then the mascara felt like a bit of a waste, but at least everything was in focus again. She hoped Grace wouldn’t mention their discussion about boys to anyone. She also hoped Grace would have a miserable evening or flunk a test or something so she could see who was really retarded.

Juniper walked gingerly into a large hall filled with desks and chairs. Pearl had been made to wait outside with all the other parents. They weren’t allowed to watch their children play in

case they put them off. Juniper was a little relieved by this. Now, if she did meet a nice boy, her mom wouldn't be there watching her. Juniper wouldn't be flustered by the sound of her voice or the jangling of her bangles as she moved, or the thought that her eyes were on her.

A tall boy with a light hint of downy hair above his lip handed her a juice box as she walked through the door. "There will be more refreshments served after the matches," he told her. His voice sounded deep and she wondered if he were in Grade 7 or Grade 6 like she was.

"Thank you," Juniper said, trying out her voice. She felt suddenly small and feeble. Her voice was a few octaves higher than his.

"Juniper!" It was Marcia calling from across the room. She and Lydia were standing together with a couple of other girls from school, all drinking from their juice boxes and not mingling with anyone.

"Hi, guys," Juniper said. "Ready to win?"

"I don't think I've ever won at chess," Lydia said. Her voice was softer than usual, probably because there were so many people around and she was nervous.

"There's a first time for everything," Marcia said, buoyant as ever.

"Yes," agreed Juniper.

"You look nice," Lydia said. "Are you wearing makeup?"

"Thanks. Just mascara. Grace talked me into it."

"Wow. Didn't know Grace could talk you into anything," Marcia said.

"Eh, it's just mascara." Juniper slurped on her juice. "She didn't know what an oxymoron was. She called me one."

"Oh my God. That's brilliant." Lydia giggled.

Just then, a teacher announced that everyone had to take their positions at the tables they'd been assigned to. Juniper was at Table 3, playing against a player of a similar rank to her.

"Hi," she said as she reached the table. "I'm Juniper."

"Chris," he said.

They shook hands and then sat down opposite each other. Chris wasn't much of a talker. They played in total silence. He had lank blond hair and glasses so thick that Juniper was sure he must've been nearly blind. Maybe I *am* an oxymoron, she thought to herself midway through their game, smiling at her own joke. She beat him easily and looked across the room towards where her friends were. Both of them were lower down the ladder than she was. Lydia had a pained expression on her face. She'd been thinking too hard for too long and was paralysed by indecision. Marcia, on the other hand, was chatting away to her opponent as

though they were lifelong friends. She had a knack for conversation, even in the most unlikely of places.

The next match Juniper played was more promising. She even kept up a conversation with her opponent, Raymond. He had curly brown hair and a lopsided smile. There was a gentleness to him in the way he spoke, the way he slowly, ponderously picked up pieces or pushed his cowlick away from his eyes. They were blue, she noticed, the kind of eyes that you didn't want to look at for too long for fear of somehow sinking into their depths. To avoid sinking, Juniper spoke.

"I'm sure my one friend hasn't opened her mouth since the matches started." She was speaking too quickly, the words chasing each other out of her mouth.

"Really? She likes to concentrate super hard?"

"Yeah. I don't think chess is her forte really. But also, she's super shy." Juniper swallowed the spit that had inexplicably gathered in her mouth, praying that she wouldn't choke.

"Oh, shame. That must be tough." Raymond moved his bishop into a very opportune position.

"Dammit. Why didn't I think of that?"

"It happens. You're still winning though."

"Barely." Juniper looked hard at the board. Her eyes kept wandering over to Raymond's hand, resting on the table. She couldn't decide why but it seemed like a good, steady hand. Finally, she figured out a possible comeback, something she hadn't seen before. She moved her knight to challenge Raymond's bishop.

"Not bad," he said, with a smile.

Juniper couldn't help but smile back.

"What were you saying about your friend?"

"Oh, umm... What was I saying? I guess, she's quite funny sometimes, if you can get her to talk. But she'd never talk to someone here."

"Lucky she's got you then."

"Guess so." Juniper felt her face get warm and she was happy that Raymond's gaze was firmly set on the chess board and where he should move his pieces and not on her. She was relieved to not have to look too closely at his eyes.

Raymond beat her in the end, but she wasn't too upset about it. They shook hands and said "Well played" as they did at the end of every game and Juniper felt her fingers tingle with a strange sense of accomplishment – and sweat.

She played one more match against a scrawny, seemingly mute boy called Steven, which they drew, and then found her way to the refreshments table while the teachers calculated the scores. Raymond found her when she was standing in line to get a cupcake and a cup of tea.

“Juniper, can I get your number?” he asked.

She tried not to look happy as she filled her details into his Samsung. “Here you go.”

“Thanks,” he said. “I’ll give you a missed call so you have mine.”

“Oh, don’t bother with that. It’s only a landline.” Usually not a point of embarrassment but as she said it, she felt a small tremor in her cheek, which soon turned into an eye twitch.

“Ah. Well, I’ll call you later then. I’ve got to go home now but it was nice meeting you.”

She tried to will the eye twitch away, but at least, he didn’t seem to have noticed it. “You too.” She watched as Raymond dashed for the door.

“Who was that?” Lydia asked. “Your new beau?”

“What old books have you been reading?”

“Only a bit of Jane Austen and *Anne of Green Gables*.”

“Ah. Well.” Juniper didn’t really want to tell Lydia about Raymond. Liking boys was daft. A battery chicken girl liked boys, not Juniper. But then she was feeling pretty chuffed.

“June?”

“Raymond. Isn’t he cute?”

Lydia scrunched her mouth up like she was trying not to laugh. Juniper felt suddenly angry. Like Lydia knew anything about boys! Like Lydia could even talk to a boy if she wanted to.

“Oh, come on, Lydia.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

You never do, Juniper thought, but she couldn’t bring herself to say it.

“What’s going on?” Marcia appeared, armed with a teacup and saucer and icing sugar all over her face.

“Juniper has a beau.”

“Ooooh! Juniper!”

“You’re acting like babies. Both of you.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Lydia said. “I won’t call him that again.”

“I can like boys, you know.”

“Of course you can,” Marcia agreed. “So, tell us about him.”

Juniper felt herself begin to relax. Lydia had only been teasing her a little. She wasn’t Grace. And now, she felt ready to retell her match against Raymond and him asking for her phone number as a grand story.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Birthdays are intrinsically silly. Juniper had always thought so. What was the point of celebrating another year on this ancient planet? Turning 12 wasn't such a great achievement. If anything, it felt like an affront.

This was now day nine of her period – nine! Periods were only meant to last a week; she was sure she'd heard that from the FAMSA lady. But, no, apparently that didn't apply when you were just starting out. A beginner level player in the great menstrual Olympics. No, at this meagre, amateur level of the monthly terror, Juniper had to deal with irregular periods and stomach cramps that made her imagine little gremlins throwing great buckets of her stomach acid around – even though she knew that, technically, the cramps weren't coming from her stomach. Whatever. Picturing devious little creatures inside her... Womb? That word felt wrong and weirdly biblical. Cervix? Wherever it was, the imagining helped, if only by bringing a smile to her face.

What was the point of celebrating her 12th year? She wasn't yet a teenager, which was the age of every movie character worth knowing – except, she had to admit, Harry Potter and his clan, but even they had grown past that age now. And nothing good happened to you if you were 12, unless you were Jewish like Marcia and would have a bat mitzvah. Marcia had always said bat mitzvahs were the worst though. Every single one she'd been to (and she'd been to a lot in the past months) had been filled with insipid little brats dolled up and covered in makeup, with curled hair and less brains between their ears than actual Bratz dolls – at least according to Marcia. Juniper remembered telling her that that was just because Marcia didn't know any of them properly because she didn't go to school with them. But, no, Marcia had assured her. She went to Cheder with some of them to learn Hebrew and about the different Jewish holidays and she'd heard stories about how they got all dressed up on the weekends to go to parties. Some of them even had eyelash curlers! They were the worst possible sort of girls – and worse still because they now thought that they were *women*.

There was a bang on the bathroom door which shook Juniper out of her reverie.

"What the hell is taking you so long in there?"

"Shut up, Grace."

"Fuck's sakes, Juniper."

Somewhere further down the passage, Pearl yelled, "Watch your tongue, Grace."

Grace groaned.

Juniper began the now oft-repeated, monotonous process of peeling her sanitary pad off her panties, rolling it up and placing it on the side of the bath while she opened a fresh one and stuck it down.

“Juniper, this isn’t funny. You’ve been in there for ages and I need to pee.”

“I’m nearly done!” She deliberately took her time rolling the old pad up into a sausage shape and wrapping it in the new wrapper before throwing it in the bin. Pearl kept scolding her for leaving her pads in the bathroom bin because she said they smelled like rotten fish. Juniper was too tired after nine days of feeling like a rotten fish to cart her used pads off to the kitchen.

“Juniper!”

With a sigh, she was up, flushing the toilet and scrubbing her hands with soap and water. “I’m done. I’m done.” And out she went, pushing past her sister, who was tall and slender and glowering at her.

“Chill out, Grace.”

Grace dived into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Ah, the beauty of a life spent on the toilet, Juniper mused. And tomorrow was her birthday. A great time to celebrate the embarrassing confluence of ugliness in her life and body. She was at once a menstruating, bosomed woman with the intellect – or so she thought, anyhow – of an adult and a bumbling, bespectacled, pimple-prone, oily-haired not-yet-teenager. A “tween”. That’s what they were calling Miley Cyrus in the newspaper reviews of *Hannah Montana*. In between. In limbo. The purgatory between childhood and adulthood.

Juniper slouched towards the kitchen holding her stomach, her womb, her gremlins’ nest.

“Sore tummy?” Pearl asked.

“Oh, you know, the usual.” Juniper put a beanbag in the microwave. It was a cute thing, painted to look like a ladybird with big eyes and twirly eyelashes. It said Bed Bug on it. And boy, were she and Bed Bug close these days.

“Hopefully it’ll get better. Maybe when you’re older and your cycle is more regular -”

“Mom, you’ve said this a million times. I hope that by ‘older’ you mean tomorrow. That’s all I want for my birthday.”

“Did you take a Buscopan?”

“I’ve taken Buscopan, I’ve taken Nurofen, I’ve taken Panado. I’ve drunk peppermint tea, I’ve drunk chamomile tea. I am immune to treatment. I am a reverse vampire – living solutions have no effect on me.” She laughed at her own joke.

Pearl screwed up her eyes. “What do you mean ‘a reverse vampire’?”

“Normal vampires suck humans’ blood, you know, like Dracula or everybody’s favourite Edward Cullen?”

“Yes...”

“But reverse vampires don’t suck blood. They just leak it everywhere. I’m an excellent reverse vampire. In no time, I’m sure I’ll be bloodless.” She laughed again.

Pearl smiled. “You always have had a weird sense of humour.”

“Yes, at least I have that. A weird sense of humour and a talent for bleeding.”

The microwave pinged and Juniper snatched her Bed Bug out and pulled it over her bloated belly.

“Excuse me, mother. I must go lie flat on my back on the floor.” She said this in a tone she thought Victorian, or as though she were Elizabeth from *Frankenstein* or, more fittingly, Mina from *Dracula*.

Juniper returned to her room and lay down flat on her back on the scratchy oriental rug. Strangely, lying in this position with the Bed Bug secured perfectly over her lower abdomen seemed to be the only thing that helped relieve her cramps. She was uncomfortably aware of the persistent leaking from her lower region into the monstrosity thick pad she’d chosen. It felt like some kind of karmic punishment for a terrible crime she’d committed in a past life. Maybe arson? Armed robbery? Piracy? Actual vampirism? Every two hours, she needed to change her pad. She’d never had to ask to go to the toilet so often at school before. She wondered if the teachers or other pupils thought she had a weak bladder.

“Oh, no, they know.” Ms W was standing next to the window, peering out as though there were some interesting sight outside and not just overgrown shrubbery. She’d chosen to wear a beret this time as though the winter weather turned her French.

“How could they know?” Juniper didn’t even bother sitting up. She was enjoying the sensation of not being in pain – or at least, the illusion that the heat pressed upon her belly was numbing out the pain.

“It’s written all over your face. Literally. Have you seen how many pimples you have?”

“I’ve been taking my Roaccutane.”

“Hormones don’t care though, do they?”

The least the universe could have done, Juniper figured, was to alternate the plagues in her life. One week pimples, the next week period. Now even her boobs were tender.

“Boobs.” Ms W laughed.

“What?”

“Why can’t you call them breasts like a grownup?”

“Lots of grownups call them boobs. And what does it matter? I’m not a grownup.”

“Clearly.”

Ms W turned to face her, looking down her long pointy nose at her. “You’ve gotten chubby. Too much chocolate. It’s why you’ve got pimples on your face I’m sure.”

Juniper scowled. “Go away. I don’t have time for you and your silly hat.”

“Time? Who said I needed time?” Ms W sat down on the ottoman at the bottom of Juniper’s bed, right behind her head, adjusting her beret slightly.

“You’re not real,” Juniper told her decisively. “I’ve had enough of you.”

Ms W was sitting comfortably and nodding her head ever so slightly, as though to music that Juniper couldn’t hear.

“You’re not real.”

“Yes, I heard you the first time. But if I’m not real, what is this, Juniper?”

Juniper reached her arms back towards the ottoman behind her head. Nothing, of course, nothing. Only air. But she felt a tightness in her chest that she knew was Ms W. Ms W never really left.

“Not real, not real.”

But Ms W was real. Even when Juniper couldn’t see her, she was there.

The last evening of her eleventh year was nothing she would’ve penned in a letter to her beloved Jonathan Harker while he was in Transylvania. Juniper had a hot bath, changed into her pyjamas and clambered into bed with her book. She was rereading *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* for the third time. There was something soothing about reading a book she knew so well. It was like going back in time, to a much simpler phase of her life, when the worst thing to happen was discovering that Voldemort had not really died – and she didn’t have to worry about reverse vampirism.

Everything was set for the party tomorrow. Pearl had insisted they have a party. Juniper always had a party. Usually, there was a themed cake and they’d play pass the parcel and everyone would go home with a little party pack filled with sweets. Juniper thought that seemed infantile now and dumb. She’d told Pearl to scrap the party altogether, but no.

“Let’s compromise,” her mother had said, gently but firmly. “You’ll have a party but there will be no party packs or party games.”

“Fine, but then also no you or Dad. And no Grace.”

Grace had been only too happy to get out of the way. She was going to her best friend, Olivia's house for a sleepover, which, if her phone calls were anything to go by, was really an alibi for a party at some boy called Clinton's house. Juniper's dad, TJ, had protested though. He wanted to be at the birthday party. Her parents had been separated for a little over a year now and she didn't see TJ nearly as much as she had thought she would, but she was sure this couldn't be his fault. TJ was a busy man, not that she was entirely confident in saying what exactly he did. Something in finance was what she always said. But, in any event, she'd had to concede that he could have some say in the party. So, then there had to be another compromise. Her parents could be present and join for the cake and candles but, otherwise, they must leave her alone.

Juniper was just getting to Harry's first quidditch match when she heard her name being called from the kitchen. There was someone on the phone.

"Coming!" She scuttled out of bed and down the passageway, immediately regretting leaving her room barefoot as the floor beneath her newly bathed feet felt dusty.

Pearl was standing in the kitchen doorway, her great bush of frizzy hair fluffing out around her head like a dark cloud. She held the home phone in her hand, her palm cupped over the receiver. "June, it's a boy."

"A boy?"

Pearl raised her thick black eyebrows and handed her daughter the phone.

Juniper tried to figure out who it could be in the itching seconds it took her to lift the phone to her ear. "Hello?"

"Hi, Juniper! It's Raymond. Remember me?"

Juniper tried to surreptitiously move herself into the passage outside the kitchen and close the door on the spiralling cord of the telephone. She didn't meet Pearl's inquisitive eye as she did so. "Raymond, yes, hello!" Raymond, the boy from the chess match. It had been nearly two weeks since their match and she'd assumed this call would never come.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to call..." He cleared his throat.

Juniper wondered if she should wait for an explanation. When nothing was forthcoming, she fiddled with the cord and pondered how to fill the static, empty air between them.

"Well, uh... I... It was nice to meet you." His voice sounded scratchy and tight.

"You too."

"Ah, thanks."

She didn't know how she could tell, but Juniper heard a definite smile in Raymond's voice and this made her smile too.

“I was wondering if we could maybe hang out sometime?”

“Yeah, sure... Ummm... Actually, tomorrow’s my birthday.”

“Oh, really? Happy almost birthday.”

“Thanks... I’m having a little... Party thing. You could come if you wanted to.

Maybe bring a friend with you?”

“Oh, wow, yeah! That sounds cool.”

“Great. It’s at two o’clock tomorrow afternoon. 55 12th street, Parkhurst.”

“Perfect. I’ll see you then.”

“Right, yeah.”

“Okay.”

“Okay... Umm... Bye.”

“Bye, Juniper.”

She wondered who should put the phone down first. She could hear herself breathing loudly into the receiver. Thankfully, Raymond put the phone down before she had to think about it any longer. She let out a long breath. She felt a smile paint itself across her face with the warmth of a freshly heated Bed Bug. And then she became aware that someone was watching her. It was Grace, standing a little further down the passage, dressed in low-rise jeans and a crop top, her long hair straightened so that it fell past her shoulders like a sleek black curtain. The expanse of skin between the waist of her jeans (if you could even call such a low fitted waistband a “waist”) and the bottom of her crop top was vast and flat as an ironing board, glistening with lotion. Her eyelids were blue and glittery, lashes thick with mascara.

“Got a boyfriend then?” Grace asked, twisting the tassels of her cowgirl-style leather belt around her fingers. Even a question as seemingly benevolent as that felt laced with acid. Something about the way her sticky lip-glossed lips moved as she said it, the way her large brown eyes flicked up and down Juniper’s bloated body.

“Shut up, Grace.”

“Just asking.” Grace sauntered towards her and pulled open the kitchen door. “Is he cute at least?”

Juniper hung the phone back on the hook and leaned her back against the kitchen counter. The stomach cramps were starting again and combining with Grace’s snark to cancel out her briefly good mood. “Cute is such a dumb description of a human being.”

“Oh, spare me your smart-assery.” Grace was pouring herself a glass of TAB. She did not offer Juniper one.

Pearl, who'd been hunting for her favourite chopping knife in the scullery, emerged, knife in hand, and intrigue written all over her face. "So, June?"

"Arggh, will you both calm down?! It's just a boy I met at the chess match. I told him he could come to the party tomorrow and bring a friend with." After a pause, she looked at Pearl and asked, "That's okay, right?"

"Of course."

"Oooh, Junie's got a little cru-ush," Grace cooed, pinching Juniper's cheek.

"Fudge off, Grace!"

"Juniper!" Pearl gasped.

"What? I didn't actually say the F-word. I said 'fudge'."

"It's basically the same thing. In fact, you may as well have said the word. 'Fudge' seems worse."

"How can it be worse?! And how come Grace can make fun of me and pinch my cheek like I'm a baby and that's okay?" Juniper's faced puffed out like a puffer-fish, a great red puffer-fish. Angry tears were forming in her eyes.

"It's not. Grace, apologise to your sister."

Grace rolled her eyes. "Chill out, both of you. God. Can't anyone take a joke?" She slurped loudly on her TAB.

"It's not funny!" Juniper seethed, hands clenching into fists at her side. Nothing about this felt fair. And to make matters worse, Grace began to laugh. Juniper felt the injustice of it, her nitwit, pretty sister with her cretinous catty comments and high-pitched laugh. She was trying to think of something clever to say when Pearl came around the counter and seemed to notice the great expanse of Grace's torso for the first time.

"Grace, what in God's name are you wearing?"

"I'm not a fucking child anymore, mom. I can wear what I want."

"Grace, language!"

"Yes, we've established that 'fuck' is better than 'fudge', so fuck off." Grace smiled as if she'd won a gold medal.

Pearl was momentarily stunned, standing stock still next to the chopping board like Neville Longbottom when Hermione froze him in the common room.

"You think you're so clever because you use that word, but it just shows you have a limited vocabulary," Juniper said.

“And you, little miss fudge? Come on!” Grace gulped down the rest of her TAB and slammed the glass down on the counter. Then, she whipped her flip phone out of her jeans pocket and started typing away as if nothing had happened.

“Grace, you are 15 years old. You are still my child. And I can see your underwear sticking out of those jeans. Either find some pants that fit you properly or put on a longer top, or you’re not going anywhere tonight.”

At last, her mother had come unstuck.

“Oh, please, Pearl.”

Grace liked to call Pearl by her first name. Juniper supposed she thought it made her seem all grown up, the same way telling everyone else to F-off did. Pearl had had enough of this act though. She asked Juniper to leave the room, which made Juniper smile just a little bit, because she knew that meant Grace had had it. She grabbed her Bed Bug and set off down the passage with what was left of her dignity.

Juniper was relieved to not feel like a zombie when she woke up, and was positively ecstatic to find that she wasn’t as bloated as she had been the day before. Pearl woke her up with a cup of tea and told her that her dad was on the way over.

Juniper’s dad walked in about half an hour later with a big smile planted across his face and a small, beribboned gift in his hand. He was a full head taller than her mom, with thinning mouse-brown hair that was beginning to turn grey, and creases that formed next to his grey eyes when he smiled. While Pearl was voluptuous and brown, he was skinny and pale. But he was always full of energy and stronger than you’d think by looking at him.

“Happy birthday, Junie!” He swept her up in a crazy hug and spun her around the room like she was a little girl.

“Thanks, Dad.” It always felt good to see her dad again. Even if it had only been a week since she’d last stayed at his flat, some ten minutes’ drive away.

“Hi, TJ,” Pearl said, offering him a small, brief hug. “Want some tea?”

“Sounds good. Thanks, Pearl.”

Sometimes, seeing them together like this made Juniper wistful. She’d never understood why they had to separate when they could be so friendly, but she didn’t like to ask them about it too much anymore, not after Grace had told her that if she was more mature she’d understand. Juniper hated the idea that Grace, who thought peak adulthood was going out at night and sneaking into bars, could be more mature than she was.

TJ and Juniper moved into the living room to open presents while Pearl dashed to Grace's room to wake her up.

"How was the last week of school?" TJ asked. It was half term now, thank God. This meant that Juniper had taken four books out of the library and was planning to read them all and put off her homework until the day before school went back.

"Eh. Fine. Mrs Gregory said I should try out for the Mini Council for next year."

"Oh, really? What's that?"

"This council of Grade 7s from different schools in Joburg who work on community service projects and stuff like that. She said it's related to the Rotary Club or something."

"Sounds like a good project. You might meet some nice people there."

"Maybe. I'd have to write a speech and present it in front of the class and ask them to vote for me. Only two representatives get to go per school."

"Good thing you've never been scared of speeches then."

Juniper had been doing public speaking since Grade 4. She was basically a pro by now. But still, applying for the Mini Council was daunting. It was a big deal.

"I'm sure it would look great when applying to high schools."

"Sheesh. No pressure, Dad."

TJ laughed. "You're an A student, June. I never was. I don't know how you do it. But I think if you can manage that then you can handle the pressure of Mini Council."

Juniper shrugged.

A very groggy-looking Grace made her way through a few minutes later in mismatched pyjamas, with makeup smeared all over her face.

"Someone had a late night," TJ noted with a smile.

"Whatever, Dad." They hugged. There was no malice in this "whatever".

TJ was the "cool" parent, the one who let Grace get away with pretty much anything, as long as she made her way home and passed all her subjects. Not that she ever got A's. At least Juniper had that over her.

The presents were pretty great. TJ had bought Juniper three different books - *The Hunger Games*, *Anne Frank's Diary* and the third book from Lemony Snicket's *Series of Unfortunate Events*, which was great because Juniper had managed to track down the first, second, and fourth, but not the third, and she'd been looking for it for months now. Pearl had bought her a very elegant looking chess set and a cosy, lilac knitted sweater. Grace had bought her a tube of mascara, whether this was to serve as a reminder that she sucked at applying it or

encouragement to try more often, she wasn't sure. With Grace, she seldom considered kindness to be a motivating factor.

They ate breakfast together in the kitchen. Pearl oversaw the tea and coffee while TJ made flapjacks and Grace schooled Juniper on how to use the mascara wand.

"You want to impress your boyfriend, don't you?"

"He's not my boyfriend."

"Whatever. Just remember to look down while you apply it."

"How the heck am I supposed to see what I'm doing then?"

Grace laughed and demonstrated on her own long lashes. "Like this."

She looked like there was something mentally wrong with her, pulling her lips in a weird position in her intense concentration and looking down, as she'd said, while drawing the wand across her eyelashes.

Juniper tried again. "This is hard." She messed some under her eye.

"Don't use water. Wait here." Grace ran down the passage to get some cotton wool and eye makeup remover. "Never try clean it off with water. It'll just make a total mess."

"Glad to see you two are getting along," TJ said.

"Don't get used to it."

"Alright, birthday girl."

Grace was back and began dabbing under Juniper's eye with cotton wool. "Stop blinking. You're making it worse."

"I can't just stop blinking."

Grace sighed. "There you go. All done."

It was probably the nicest she remembered Grace being since... Well, since the incident with the thornbush in Ballito. The memory of that secret day was a delicious, treacherous thought, a piece of Grace's wickedness she'd kept all for herself. Her parents might never find out about the cigarettes and that knowledge made Juniper feel powerful – until she remembered that smoking was a moronic and dangerous activity that Grace would royally regret. But that was Grace's problem then, wasn't it?

After presents, Juniper showered and scrubbed her face, inadvertently messing up the mascara work of the morning. Grace was already at Olivia's house and probably getting ready to go to Clinton's party, but Pearl helped Juniper to reapply the mascara and blow dry and curl her hair. The curls made it look shorter but also more feminine. Juniper imagined for

a moment that she was a brunette Marilyn Monroe – and then remembered to put her glasses on. More like a curly haired Harry Potter now.

TJ helped them blow up balloons and decorate the house and garden with streamers. They laid out a few bowls of chips and popcorn and wine gums. Juniper had insisted on wine gums as the more sophisticated sweet – obviously preferable to Jelly Tots or Smarties. She luckily wasn't experiencing any cramps and her period seemed to have calmed down to just a few little splotches every couple of hours, which generally meant that Juniper felt better – more human, less Dracula.

The doorbell rang just after two o'clock. It was Marcia and Lydia, both dressed in bootleg jeans and t-shirts, just as Juniper was. Lydia had swept her long blonde hair up into a high pony, which she only did on special occasions, and Marcia was wearing her favourite red Converse All Stars and carrying her tattered Beatles bag.

"Happy birthday!" they said in unison, each handing Juniper a present. Juniper hugged them and put her presents in a pile in the entrance hall.

"I have to tell you something quickly," she whispered, as soon as they'd each helped themselves to some Coke. They scurried towards the swings at the bottom of the garden, ready for the conspiracy.

"What is it, June?" Lydia whispered.

Juniper waited until she was sure they were out of earshot before whispering, "Raymond called me last night."

"Raymond! From chess?" Marcia rubbed her hands together like a Disney villain.

"Yes. He asked if we could hang out."

"Oooh. Hang out."

"Shut up, Marcia." Juniper laughed. "Anyways, I invited him today and said he could bring a friend."

"Wow."

"Wow."

"He's not my boyfriend though, obviously."

"Obviously. You hardly know him."

"But it wouldn't be so bad if you did get to know him."

"You don't think I'd be just like all those other girls?"

"Which other girls?"

"The battery chicken girls."

Lydia laughed. "You could never be one of them, Juniper. You're way too smart."

Marcia nodded.

This was as close to a blessing as she'd ever get, and she felt she needed it. Boys were Grace's domain and she always teased her about them, so if she was going to dabble in that territory, she needed to be sure that she wasn't as boy-crazy and senseless as her sister. Or any of those vacuous girls at school. She saw Ms W out of the corner of her eye, lifting a glass in the air in a silent "cheers".

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When Raymond and his friend arrived, Juniper felt her hands prickle with nervous energy. Raymond was as she remembered him, tall and slim with a mess of light brown curls. After Pearl had buzzed the gate for him, he stood for a moment in the doorway, a gangly mop-like shadow in the sunshine. Juniper rushed down the garden path to greet him and his friend, Paul, and lead them into the house.

“Hi,” she said, for once at a loss for words.

“Hi, Juniper. Happy birthday.” He handed her a small package wrapped in silver wrapping paper with a little blue bow stuck on top. His smile was small but noticeable in the corners of his eyes and his lips.

“Oh, thank you.” She took the gift from him and gestured for him to come inside, with Paul following suit. She closed the door behind them with trembling hands, the gift wedged under her armpit.

“Happy birthday! I’m Paul.” Paul held out his hand like a businessman and Juniper shook it uncertainly. Paul seemed to have a lot more gusto than Raymond did. He was almost a head shorter than Raymond with a smile as broad as his round, freckled face.

“Hi, Paul. Thanks for coming. I’m glad you guys could make it.” She looked somewhere in between their two faces as she spoke, suddenly uncomfortable with the idea of eye contact, especially when it came to Raymond’s drowning eyes. Luckily, Marcia and Lydia appeared next to her then. Marcia had on her brightest beam, a smile that lit up her whole face like a solar-charged Console jar.

“Hi, I’m Marcia. And this is Lydia.”

Lydia nodded her head in lieu of words, as she so often did when meeting new people. The three of them led the boys to the snacks table, and Juniper went to put her present down in the entrance hall.

When she returned, Marcia was asking Paul and Raymond what their toothpaste preferences were.

“Aquafresh isn’t bad,” Paul said thoughtfully.

“God, Marcia. I’m sure no one cares this much about toothpaste,” Juniper said, her laugh catching in her throat, alongside her heart.

“It’s definitely not something I get asked about a lot,” Raymond said diplomatically.

“Juniper thinks she’s above questions of toothpaste, but she brushes her teeth just like the rest of us.”

“I should hope so,” Paul said.

They all laughed timidly.

Juniper’s hands still felt tingly. She thought that perhaps if she busied them with something, the tingling might stop, so she began to offer everyone drinks and insisted on pouring for everyone. Marcia and Lydia both wanted Appletiser for a change, while Paul and Raymond had Coke. Juniper had cranberry juice.

“Of all the options, you went for juice?” Raymond asked.

“I like juice. Not all full of bubbles.”

“You don’t like bubbly drinks?”

“Not particularly. Or they don’t like me.” And she really couldn’t risk any bubbles in her stomach what with her tingling hands. Now was not the time for diarrhoea, if ever there was a time.

Raymond laughed.

“Juniper always has to be different,” Marcia told him.

“Not true.”

“Is too.”

“Nothing wrong with different,” Raymond said.

“Thank you. A boy with sense!”

“Are we very rare?” he asked with a smile.

“What do you mean?”

“Boys with sense?”

“Oh, yes, no, I think so.” She laughed.

It didn’t all feel so terrible now. Her hands felt a bit more hand-like and the taste of cranberry juice, her favourite, was reassuring. They moved into the living room and settled on couches and armchairs. Paul and Marcia were deep in conversation about their respective pets and Lydia was sitting next to them, silently listening, while munching on popcorn from the bowl she’d snatched from outside. This was about as close as she got to speaking to strangers, sitting and listening attentively to their conversations. A few other girls from school were milling around, chatting, and munching on chips. Even Caroline and Genevieve had deigned to make an appearance, though they looked very out of place in their miniskirts and leggings, trying to find something to do in a room with walls lined with books about architecture and law and politics.

Juniper’s new chess set sat on display on the coffee table.

“This is beautiful,” Raymond said, admiring the shiny new pieces.

“Thanks. It’s one of my birthday presents.”

“Great present. I hoped we might get a rematch anyways,” Raymond said.

“Of chess?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“Okay.”

They moved to either side of the coffee table, perched on cushions on the floor.

“White or black?”

“You can be white since it’s your birthday.”

“Okay.” She sat up on her heels and moved her pawn forward two blocks to E4.

Raymond moved his pawn to E6 in response. Juniper moved another pawn to F3 to defend her first pawn. Raymond mirrored her structure on the other side of the board by moving one of his pawns to D5.

“I see what you’re doing,” Juniper said.

“Protecting my pawns?”

“You’re trying the French Defence.” Juniper had read about it in chess practice just the week before.

“Ah, yeah. Not sure I’m that good at it.”

She resisted the urge to take one of his pawns and instead brought her one knight to C3.

Raymond placed his bishop in B4, challenging her. “I tried to memorise a few famous chess matches.”

“The whole match?” Her fingers hovered above the pieces, debating whether to move her knight to safety or try to threaten him in some other way.

“Yep. Hard though. But this is a lot like the one game I studied. At least so far.”

Juniper sighed and moved her pawn forward into E5, where it was face to face with Raymond’s pawn. The two pawns squared each other off like cowboys at high noon.

“Interesting.” He looked as though he were about to take her knight with his bishop, but then he realised her pawn could eat him. Raymond closed his eyes for a second, thinking. Then, he retracted his hand and returned to the back of his line of troops, opting to move his knight from F8 to E7. She noted the scabby parts of skin on his hands, the way they seemed reddish and chafed in places – severely dehydrated and in need of some Nivea! Yet there was something endearing about the way they moved, strangely.

“Hmmm.” Juniper needed to get back into the zone. She moved her furthest left pawn up to A3 to challenge Raymond’s bishop.

“Aggressive.”

“Hardly. Haven’t taken any of your pieces – yet.”

“Yes, emphasis on the *yet*.” He held his chin in his hand for a moment, surveying the battlefield.

“Are you always so considered?” she asked.

“In chess or in general?”

“In chess – or both, I guess.”

“Mmmm...” He took the knight finally, with his bishop.

“Only sometimes,” he said.

“Now that was aggressive.”

He laughed. “Sorry, that knight was getting to me.”

“I’m not holding back any more now.” She swiftly moved her pawn across diagonally to eat his aggressive bishop.

“Fair enough.”

The last car reversed out of the driveway around six pm, as the sun was setting. Juniper waved tiredly as Lydia and Marcia disappeared down the drive, encased in Lydia’s mother’s old Volkswagen Beetle.

“Punch-buggy,” she said, punching Pearl half-heartedly in the arm.

“Every time, Juniper?”

“Every time, Mom.”

Pearl laughed and shook her head. “Come on. Let’s go inside.”

“Thank God.”

“Juniper!”

“What? I’m tired.” Juniper’s social battery was totally drained, on life support basically. She imagined she could hear a machine beeping to keep it alive. Sometimes, she wholeheartedly loved human company, but right now, she just wanted a cup of tea and a nap. Thankfully, Pearl had been her mother for a long time, which meant that she’d already switched the kettle on.

“Five Roses?”

“Yes please!” Juniper dived onto the couch and buried her face in its pillows for a moment.

Pearl yawned. “I wish your father could’ve helped a bit with the dishes. But then that never was his forte.”

Juniper rolled over slowly and looked blearily in the direction of the slowly boiling kettle. She didn't like it when Pearl complained about TJ. "I'm sure he had more important stuff to do than the dishes."

"You sound just like him." Pearl sighed. "Did you have a good party?"

"I did, thanks."

"Good."

The kettle clicked and Juniper sprang into action as Pearl began pouring water into their mugs.

"I saw you and Raymond playing an intense chess match."

"Mmm."

"Is he any good?"

"Yeah... He won, unfortunately."

"Did you let him win?"

"Mom, I'd never let anyone win if I had the choice!"

"Right, no, of course not." Pearl chuckled as she squeezed the teabags. "Do you like him?"

"He seems nice." Juniper thought back to his scabby red hands moving the pieces, to his gangly stature, his quick words, his slightly scary blue eyes. "I think he's clever."

"That's good. I can't imagine you liking anyone who wasn't."

"Only above-average IQs will do," Juniper joked.

Pearl looked up from the milk bottle in her hand to give Juniper a disapproving look. "You know IQ isn't the whole picture, June?"

"Ugh, I know, I know. It's all bullshit and we should care more about EQ and bla bla bla."

Pearl inhaled sharply. She looked like she was going to respond but thought better of it. Instead, she shook her head gently, her cloud of black hair floofing out around her as she passed Juniper her tea. "Happy birthday, my girl."

"Thanks, Mom."

Juniper knew she shouldn't have made a joke about IQ and EQ. Her mom was very touchy on the subject. Juniper wasn't quite sure she got why her mom was so touchy, but perhaps she didn't get it because for her IQ was paramount and she suspected that her people skills were not that great. Pearl was always going on about the importance of EQ though and how being able to talk to and work with other people was so vital. Maybe one day Juniper would get it. For now, she didn't want to see other people at least until tomorrow.

After dinner, Juniper stole into her bedroom with the one present she hadn't yet opened – the small silver package from Raymond. She peeled the paper away gently, trying her best not to make any tears. Bit by bit, she began to uncover a book. It was an old-looking book, definitely second-hand, with yellowed pages and a faded cover. It was *Logical Chess: Move By Move*, written by Irving Chernev. He must've already known he'd beat her at the chess match, Juniper thought. He clearly read a lot of chess theory, and here was her first ever book about the art and science of chess – written by a Russian, so it must be good. She examined the book from every angle and inhaled its musty old pages. She didn't care that the inside cover had R25 written on it in faint pencil or that Raymond hadn't given her a card but had instead written, on the first blank page of the book:

Dear Juniper

Happy birthday!

From Raymond

She felt a warm delight rush through her, filling up her rib cage. He'd given her a present, he'd written her a note. He'd actually thought about the present – and in the very short time he'd had to think about it. Perhaps birthdays weren't so terrible and meaningless after all.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Contrary to her previous reservations, Juniper applied to be part of the Johannesburg Mini Council. She told herself and anyone who asked that it had been her dad's idea. She submitted her name to Mrs Gregory and asked Marcia and Lydia for their vote. Pearl helped her design badges that they could get printed for everyone that said "Vote for Juniper" and she began rehearsing a speech to say in front of the whole class.

"You'll definitely get in," Marcia told her. They were sitting in the library as per usual, looking through old school yearbooks to see if there was anything about the Mini Council in them. There were a few pictures over the years and one article one of the ex-council members had written specifically for the yearbook.

"It sounds like a lot of community service and fundraising stuff," Lydia said, peering out from behind the 2006 yearbook.

"I can do that."

Lydia nodded. "Do you want to though?"

"Why not?" It was not like she had anything better to do really and this was a leadership position, something that would put her on the map for high school applications. Her dad was right about that.

"Do you want to practice your speech again?" Marcia asked.

Juniper shook her head. "If I say it any more, I'll go crazy."

"Perhaps you'll forget the entire speech, or drop your cue cards in front of everybody, or hold them in the wrong order," Ms W whispered in her ear.

Juniper shook her head, closing her eyes momentarily.

The bell rang to signify the end of break and Juniper felt her pulse flicker in her throat. Show time.

Juniper was up against a handful of other girls, all of them far more popular and sporting than she was, all with matching high ponytails swinging effortlessly behind them as they spoke. At least two of them were terrible public speakers though. Poor Alison Smith was visibly shaking as she spoke and could hardly string a full sentence together. Juniper would've felt sorry for her if it hadn't made her feel reassured in her own oratory skills.

"Don't drop the cue cards, hmm?" Ms W reminded her as she walked to the front of the class, holding her lined cue cards in sweaty hands.

The cue cards were another point that assured her, though. Pearl had bought her the proper cue cards from CNA that were somewhere between cardboard and paper, which meant

they were much firmer than the cue cards other girls were using, which were just flimsy old printing paper. Plus, she'd handwritten everything on her cue cards, which was meant to make it easier to remember – and she'd only written key words so that she wouldn't read the whole thing, like Sally Beatty had. As she began her speech, she tried to imagine her dad standing at the back of the classroom watching her. Make eye contact with your audience, she imagined him saying. But it was hard to picture him knowing that it was her mom who'd given her that advice, her mom who'd helped edit her speech, who'd bought her the cue cards, who'd listened to her rehearse it four or five times the previous night. TJ, on the other hand, had done no more than send an SMS to Pearl's phone saying, "Wish June good luck today". But still, she tried to imagine him watching her.

"Thank you, Juniper," Mrs Gregory said.

Everyone clapped as they had for every speech – except Lydia and Marcia, who clapped extra loudly.

"Will everyone please write down the names of two candidates for the Johannesburg Mini Council and put them in this hat." She passed a floppy felt hat around as well as a pile of paper stubs to write names on.

Juniper settled back into her seat and wiped her sweaty palms on her dress.

"If you applied to be in the Council, you can only cast one vote," Mrs Gregory reminded them solemnly, "and it cannot be for yourself."

Juniper voted for the only Indian girl who'd put herself forward, Ria. She'd spoken very well, without stuttering or swaying her legs back and forth and she at least wasn't as obnoxious as the hockey club girls, even though Juniper knew Ria was still quite athletic. If she really thought about it, Juniper had voted for her because she was a bit different from the others, whether that was because she was good at cross country and not the more popular sports or because she was Indian, she couldn't be sure. But she was different, almost like Juniper.

"No one is as different as you," Ms W whispered.

Juniper rolled her eyes. "Whatever. They'll vote for me 'cause I'm smart."

Ms W laughed.

Mrs Gregory spent some time counting the votes and turning them into tally marks on the blackboard. The squeaking sound of the chalk set Juniper's nerves on edge and she began to pick at her cuticles under her desk. So far everyone was looking pretty even, except for shaky

Alison Smith, who'd only received one vote so far and seemed to be sliding right down into her chair.

"Very close," Mrs Gregory announced. "Only three votes left."

Juniper was tied with two other girls, Ria and Clare, while a third girl, the ultimate all-rounder, Marie, was ahead of them all. Mrs Gregory unfolded the first piece of paper and drew a tally next to Ria's name. Juniper crossed and uncrossed her legs, holding her breath. The next piece of paper also said Ria, making Juniper wish she'd never added to those votes. The final piece of paper had Juniper's name on it but it was too little, too late. Ria had beat her by two points. Ria, the cross country athlete could now run both literal and figurative circles around her. Juniper wanted to scream. Her uniform felt tight across her chest, holding her in place. She thought about asking to go to the bathroom, but that would be too obvious. And now, now that her speech was over and all her hard work had been for nothing, now she could picture her dad watching her clear as day. Ms W shook her head knowingly. Juniper sucked in all her feelings, zipped them up tightly, and waited for home time.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Juniper just managed to keep herself together to get to the car. She even managed a smile as she waved bye to Lydia and Marcia and nodded in their direction while popping open the boot of the Picasso and lugging her bag and lunchbox in.

“How did the speech go?” Pearl asked as Juniper got in the car.

“I thought it went well... Apparently no one agreed with me.” Juniper felt the repressed heat rushing to her face, a sudden surge of red hot blood filling out her cheeks and neck.

“Oh, Juniper.”

Pearl’s sympathy felt like an attack, as though Juniper should’ve known better than to think she’d make it onto the Council. Juniper caught Ms W’s eye in the rear-view mirror. Ms W had her typical *I told you so* face on.

“So insane. Freakin’ Ria beat me by two points!” Juniper huffed, her eyes prickling with indignant tears.

“Sounds like some people thought it was good then.”

“Pah.” No point mentioning she’d voted for Ria herself.

“I’m sure you were excellent.”

“You have to say that, Mom.”

“But I happen to know it’s true.”

Juniper sighed. “If I can’t be in the Mini Council next year, I probably won’t get to be a prefect either.”

“Did I not tell you that months ago?” Ms W hissed in her ear. “Stop kidding yourself Juniper. You’re not prefect material.”

Juniper began to cry.

“That’s not true,” Pearl said calmly, as though she’d heard what Ms W had to say, but of course, Ms W was now nowhere to be seen.

Juniper turned to look out the window. The naked trees looked back at her, their trunks grey and grisly. She began to play with the ladder in her brown school tights absentmindedly, stretching it so wide that she knew she’d need new stockings ASAP.

“It’s just not fair.”

“What’s not fair?” Pearl asked slowly.

“I’m way smarter than Ria. I get better grades. I read more books. And she already has athletics. Why can’t I have this?”

“That’s not really how it works, June. Besides, you have a lot more going for you than you think.”

Juniper laughed sarcastically. “Like what?”

“You don’t need everyone’s approval. You are your own person.”

“That’s lame.” Juniper reached into the cubbyhole for the ever-present packet of emergency tissues and blew her nose loudly.

“What do you feel like for dinner? How about some spag bol?”

Juniper wiped the tears from her face. “Yeah. Will that fit with Grace’s diet though?” Grace was trying some new crazy eating regime from one of her many magazines. Some blood-type diet or something.

“Actually Grace isn’t eating with us tonight.”

“What?” Suddenly there was something more interesting to contemplate.

“She’s going on a date.”

“A date?”

“A double date, at Adventure Golf.”

“She sucks at Putt Putt.”

Pearl laughed. “It must be genetic.” Juniper and her mother were also horrible at Putt Putt. TJ wasn’t so bad though. He had enough hand-eye coordination to make up for the three of them.

“Who’s she on a date with?”

“Someone called Clint. And then her friend Amy and a boy called... What was his name again? John or Jack or something? Your dad took her.”

Juniper nodded. She could picture her sister wearing her maroon, corduroy pinafore dress and her polka dot tights with her favourite pair of Converse All Stars on her feet, swinging a golf club clumsily, knocking the ball into the water feature and then giggling like a bimbo until her date took pity on her and went to retrieve the missing ball.

“So, she’s got a boyfriend now?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that. This is only their first date as far as I know.”

“As far as you know?”

“Believe it or not, Juniper, I do allow your sister some privacy.”

Juniper scoffed. “And what about me then? Why do I need to be chaperoned whenever I want to go to the movies with my friends?”

The corners of Pearl’s lips peaked up ever so slightly. “One day, you’ll be in high school too.”

Juniper sighed. “I’m sick of school. High school doesn’t sound much better.”

“Maybe you’re right about that. But I think you’ll like it.”

Juniper shrugged and turned back to the dead trees outside the window.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The weekend was bitterly cold, but TJ seemed determined to make it a good one. Juniper could tell from the big grin on his face when he fetched her from school and announced that they could get Sprinkle Pops from the KFC drive thru, something they hadn't done since Grace and Pearl decided to eat all healthily. The drive thru was heaven, the Sprinkle Pops warm and crispy with the lovely fruit chutney spice that Juniper adored. And TJ was playing a CD by The Beatles in the car, so for once there was no need for his daughter to fiddle with the radio.

For the first time in a long time, both TJ's daughters were staying with him simultaneously. This wasn't ideal in terms of capacity in the small flat he was renting, but he made it work. The guest room that they usually alternated only had space for a lone single bed, which became Grace's due to her seniority. However, TJ had bought a brand-new blow-up mattress just for Juniper which he set up in the lounge.

"You can even watch TV in bed now!" His enthusiasm for the mattress could do nothing but bring a smile to Juniper's face. For all that her mother had been moody, sullen, and sunken into herself the past few weeks, TJ was light and springy as ever. Or at least, so it seemed. The mattress was kitted out with a fitted sheet and a soft down duvet – also brand-new – with a black duvet cover to match the black pillowcases of the two new pillows he'd bought.

"Do you like the black? All the other options seemed a bit juvenile for you, I thought."

"It's great, Dad. Thanks." Juniper loved the fact that TJ didn't try to dumb down his language around her. She hugged him, and he kissed the top of his daughter's head. Sometimes, Juniper forgot what it was like to have her dad in the house. Seeing him only every second weekend seemed a cruel and unwarranted punishment.

"So, I got us some popcorn and Astros and I thought we could go pick out some movies from Blockbusters for the weekend. What do you say?"

"Sure."

TJ went to pick Grace up from school while Juniper settled into place on her blow-up mattress, still trying to convince herself that the devastating turn of events in *Atonement* could turn around. After this book, she definitely needed some lighter reading. Maybe Maggie Stiefvater might have another book out.

Grace's arrival spoiled the grownup feeling she'd had of being home alone. Pearl would've had a heart attack to know she was home alone at all but it really hadn't been for very long and TJ's flat was in a super secure complex with security guards and everything. Plus, Juniper had locked the front door behind him and even put the chain in place across the door.

"Why is the chain on?" she heard her sister complaining.

"Juniper?" TJ called.

"Coming!" She felt cool undoing the chain to let them in, even though TJ told her she really didn't need to do it up in the first place.

"Did you feel unsafe?" he asked her.

"Not at all. I just like the chain."

"Egghead," Grace said, pushing past her with her chunky school bag.

"That insult doesn't even make sense! At least pick something that has meaning."

"Egghead, egghead, egghead!" her sister called back.

TJ shook his head as he closed the door behind him. "Don't take her seriously, Junie."

"I never do."

He placed his hand on her shoulder momentarily. Then, as if sensing something, he moved to the side of the open plan living-kitchen area and turned on the kettle. The most reassuring sound that served as a background to life.

"We'll go to Blockbusters just now," TJ promised her, after handing her a mug of tea. Juniper nodded, hoping Grace wouldn't feel like coming with them.

The large clock on the kitchen wall ticked away obnoxiously as Juniper lay on her bed, belly full of popcorn and Astros, mind full of night terrors. Choosing movies had been tricky. In the end, they'd agreed to watch a horror movie that Grace really wanted to see (and because Juniper wanted to prove to her dad and to Grace that she was grown up enough to watch something rated more than PG13) and a silly comedy that TJ insisted on to prevent the horrors of the first movie seeping through into their dreams. It was a good idea in theory, but in reality, no amount of toilet humour could keep the terror at bay when Juniper tried to sleep. She rolled onto her side for the umpteenth time, wondering how much more tossing and turning the mattress would take.

"You're such a baby," Ms W whispered.

The woman was so close that Juniper was startled by her – but not too startled to retort. "Oh, please. I'm just a bit uncomfortable on this mattress."

“If you say so, princess.”

“I’m not a princess.” Juniper hated being called a princess. Lydia and Marcia often called her one because of how long she spent cleansing and moisturizing and making sure her nails were perfectly clean and tidy.

“Is there a pea under your mattress that’s causing you distress?”

“You’re so lame.” Juniper rolled onto her other side, pulling the duvet up to her chin.

“No, no, of course, it’s the zombies. They’re coming for your brain.”

“I’m not a child. I know zombies aren’t real.”

“They’re plausible though, aren’t they? I mean, how different is it from rabies?”

“They’re dead.”

“Undead, technically. But so? Myths and legends have to come from somewhere.”

“I think you’re confusing myths with stereotypes...”

“Oh, so you think stereotypes are based on reality? Interesting.”

“Oh, don’t get me started. I’m not justifying antisemitism or whatever.”

“Or whatever indeed.”

Juniper closed her eyes, but all she could see were zombies. They clawed at the insides of her eyelids, making horrible animal grunts, sniffing the air in pursuit of brains.

“Don’t worry, Junie. They don’t like to prey on children. Your brain is far too small.”

“I’m not a child!”

“Yes, yes, well... Good luck with the zombies then.” She was gone and Juniper was alone with her scratching, biting zombie thoughts, trying her best to ward them off with the sky-black duvet as the clock kept up its incessant ticking.

“Enjoy your night on the floor?” Grace was leering over her with a hot cup of coffee in hand.

“Jesus. Get off of me.”

“Give you a fright?” Grace laughed prettily as she walked over to the kitchen, setting herself down on a bar stool beneath the dreaded clock. As most of the flat was open-plan, the kitchen bled into the lounge with the only differentiating factor being the change in floor – wooden floorboards in the lounge and tiles in the kitchen. Juniper wasn’t used to open-plan setups. She was used to walls and closed doors – privacy. Being awoken by her wretchedly attractive sister standing over her was not high on her list of fun activities to say the least. It was nicer on the weekends she had her dad all to herself. He knew to give her some space.

Juniper was tempted to tell Grace that she’d almost begun to like her before this incident – which was true – but she knew better than to reveal her hand. Grace was a tricky

creature and though she'd been nice to Juniper about the thornbushes and Juniper still hadn't told on her, that didn't necessarily change anything. If anything, it made Grace a more difficult rival. After all, a rival with a soft side is far less predictable than a rival who's pure evil. So, instead, Juniper rolled her eyes and pulled herself gracelessly out of bed.

"Good morning, sleepy-heads," TJ called as he shuffled into the room in his dressing gown and slippers.

He seemed abnormally chipper, an affront to everything true about the world. Mornings were for pessimism, world news, more pessimism, and coffee. They were for acknowledging the unfairness of a world in which families still lived without water and electricity, children continued to die of hunger and malaria, murderers got away with their crimes, people went on strike for being paid too little, and yet, at the same time, Juniper could sit at the kitchen table eating Cornflakes. Mornings were for remembering that though she lived in the so-called "Rainbow Nation", there were only a handful of black pupils at her private school and only one in her class. They were for feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed by this fact and by the countless times that relatives asked her about the demographics at her school and then tutted about how unacceptably white it was – as though this were somehow Juniper's doing. Yes, mornings were for pessimism, shame, despair, embarrassment, anger, and general cynicism, in that order. They were for calibrating Juniper's view of the world as a troubled, unjust place and then putting this knowledge aslant by saying, well, here I am anyways, and eating the damn Cornflakes.

What mornings were not about was everything that TJ had going on, from his pathetically fluffy gown to his orthopaedic Dischem slippers to his bizarrely American suggestion that he'd cook breakfast for them on the stove.

"Don't be daft, dad."

"Excuse me?" Even the fact that he said "excuse me" and not "what?" was an affront.

"You don't need to cook breakfast. It's breakfast." This should have explained everything he needed to know but TJ looked generally confused, disappointed even.

"You ungrateful brat." Grace was of course playing the goody-goody this morning – apart from the name-calling.

"Grace."

"Sorry, Dad, but you know I'm right."

"No. No..."

But he did look like he kind of agreed, Juniper thought. She sighed deeply. "Alright, fine. Cook breakfast then. I'm going to watch the news."

TJ began to laugh in surprise. Juniper wasn't exactly sure why he was surprised but then, perhaps he didn't know her habits as well as she'd thought he did. While she sat watching her daily piece of doom and gloom, the smell of sizzling bacon, sausages, eggs and tomatoes wafted through from the other side of the room. She could hear TJ and Grace whispering about her and her strange aversion to a cooked breakfast and her weird obsession with the news, or at least she assumed that was what they were talking about. Their voices were muffled between them whispering, a million things cooking all at once, and eNews.

She ate her breakfast in silence, or at least she tried to. TJ kept trying to ask her mindless questions about school – typical parental nonsense – while all she wanted was to contemplate the nature of existence and the certainty that she and everyone else she knew would one day die. Juniper didn't like to admit this, but she thought a lot about death these days. It featured a lot in the books she read and, of course, the daily news, and since Pearl's mother had died the previous year of a heart attack, she'd thought about it more and more. Not to mention Nostradamus's prediction of the world ending in 2012. She'd watched a riveting documentary series about that on the History channel and, well, it was the History channel, not MNET, so there must've been something worth considering there, surely.

"Do you like the breakfast?"

"Mmm? Oh, yes, very nice, thanks." She didn't want to confess that the bacon was a little more charred than she would've liked or that she really would've rather had eggs the way Pearl did them – a bit softer that is. Pearl was undoubtedly a better cook than her not-quite-ex-husband. Juniper realised she could become a statistic, a child from a broken home. Perhaps she'd have less to be ashamed of then, having lost a few privilege points that surely must've been attributed to her living with two parents, not one. And didn't everyone blame all their psychological issues on their parents splitting up? How convenient.

Juniper's feet were quick to weary traipsing about the mall. Her dad had insisted that he only had to buy a couple of things and quickly get his license disk renewed at the post office but the "couple of things" had taken nearly two hours to get and the post office line was long. Juniper wished she'd had the foresight to bring *Atonement* with her.

"Will this line ever move?" It seemed a mile long, snaking out of the post office and into the rest of the shopping centre.

"If you think this is bad, wait till you see Home Affairs. The last time I had to get my passport renewed, I waited for three hours in the sun, got sunburnt, was finally third in line and then was told they'd closed because the system was offline."

“I remember this story. I never want to renew my passport.”

“Yeah, well, don’t we all wish that? You’ll have to get an ID though, one of these days.”

“No thanks.”

“You don’t look forward to citizenship?”

“You can’t even vote with an ID. You still have to wait till you’re 18.”

“But you get to feel all official.”

“Oh, goodie... Three hours of sunburn and being turned away to feel official. I can’t wait.”

TJ laughed. “When did you learn to be sarcastic, June?”

Juniper had the disconcerting suspicion that her father hardly knew her at all. It had been building up all morning. First the overly American movie-style breakfast and shock at her watching the news, then the insistence that she join him at the mall, and now this.

“Did you only get eyes this morning?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, were you blind before? Or deaf or dumb? Or worse – oblivious?”

TJ crinkled his nose and shifted his feet uncomfortably.

“Are you now incapable of speaking too?” She refrained from calling him a cretin, just.

“Juniper...”

“What?”

“What’s gotten into you?”

“Oh, this is ridiculous!” She felt her voice rising, her fists clenching and unclenching, blood rushing to her face and tears rushing to her eyes. She knew this wasn’t the place to make a scene, but she knew with even more conviction that her father knew nothing about her. “You don’t know anything about me! You don’t even try to. How did you spend twelve - or okay, eleven - years living with me and learn nothing about who I am?!”

People were beginning to stare at the teenager throwing a seeming tantrum. Usually, Juniper would’ve felt embarrassed, but she was too angry to feel embarrassed now. TJ wasn’t. He made awkward apologetic gestures towards the other people in the queue before turning back to his daughter and putting a hand on her shoulder.

“I don’t know where this is coming from --”

She was about to interject with a myriad places that this was coming from, but he got there first.

“I’m sorry if I’ve upset you, June, but now’s not the time for this. Why don’t you go buy yourself an ice-cream or a hot chocolate or something and meet me back here in half an hour?” He reached into his jeans pocket for his wallet and pulled out some cash, which he handed to her briskly.

Juniper, suddenly aware of all the gawking bystanders, felt her face flush the deep tomato of humiliation as she wordlessly took the money, wiped a stray tear from her cheek, and made the minutest of nods in TJ’s direction before stalking away.

As Juniper stood in yet another queue – this time for a hot chocolate from Seattle – she fumed with the indignity of it all. At first, she’d thought that trying to placate her with hot chocolate or an ice-cream was yet another faux pas; I mean, what was she, five? But then, sugary treats did seem appealing... Still, she felt humiliated, and she knew she’d behaved like a child even if her reasons had been sound. To be effectively paid to go away seemed a new low. To have her own father pay her to go away... The heat left Juniper’s cheeks with this sobering thought: her dad was embarrassed by her.

“What would you like, sweetie?”

“A hot chocolate please.” Her voice came out croaky and small, fitting for her new title of “sweetie”. The woman behind the counter had to ask her to repeat herself twice.

“Size?”

“Small please.” This one came out a little louder but not much. It was as though the emotion had sucked her voice out of her.

“Anything else?”

“No thank you.” She handed the woman her money and waited patiently for the change before moving to the side to wait while they made her drink. Leaning against the counter, she mused that her dad didn’t even realise how little he knew about her. He was totally unaware of his ignorance. He’d never paid her any attention, she thought. He’d been too busy breaking up the marriage to think about his younger daughter. In her mind, her dad morphed from the friendly, easy-going parent in his preposterous fluffy slippers to the careless, selfish man who’d broken up the family. How long had he been planning to break things off, she wondered? A month, a year, several years? Why had he settled for seeing his daughters so seldom when they separated? After all, it wasn’t yet a matter of legality. Would he fight for them if there were a court case? Would he cry? Did he spend days in bed rewatching old movies like Pearl? Did he care about Pearl at all?

“Hot chocolate!”

Juniper snapped out of her reverie and retrieved her order with a timid “thanks”. She wandered through Exclusive Books, absentmindedly trailing her fingers over the spines of books without really investigating them as she normally would. Perhaps, she thought, her mom wasn’t so bad after all. She checked her second-hand watch with the big face and kiddie-friendly numbering, an unfortunate reminder of being the second child, and realised her time was up. Time to head back to the post office. Her dad was just leaving as she got there, sliding his new license disk into a plastic folder.

“There you are,” he said, gently. “How’s the hot chocolate?”

“It’s nice... thanks.”

“Good. Let’s go home.”

They didn’t speak at all on the drive home. Juniper adjusted the aircon so the heat came out in full force, engulfing her body in an artificially warm cocoon. TJ closed the vent in front of his right hand but said nothing.

Juniper desperately wished she had a room to go to, but there was only her laughable blow-up mattress on the lounge floor. She sat herself down there with a big sigh, still holding her cardboard takeaway cup. TJ sat down on the opposite end of the mattress, looking down at his shoes.

“What’s wrong, June?”

The most idiotic of questions, she reckoned. Surely he should’ve figured it out by now.

“I already told you and I don’t feel like repeating myself.” Pearl would’ve called this her taking a tone again. TJ was, thankfully, not as big into the whole “tone” thing.

“Okay... You said I didn’t know you. Why did you say that?”

“Because you don’t. How thick are you?” She put her cup down on the ground, hand trembling. All the emotions of earlier had returned as though they’d never left.

TJ sighed and shook his head. “I’m just trying to understand why you would think that.”

“Okay. Tell me this: what do I eat for breakfast every morning?”

“Cereal? Eggs? I don’t know.”

“Exactly. Even though, except for a few rare occasions when Mom cooks something special, I always eat Cornflakes with hot milk heated in the microwave... Even though that’s pretty much all I’ve eaten since I was like five, you don’t know that?!”

“You’re upset because I didn’t give you Cornflakes?” He looked up from his shoes with big, round eyes.

“No. I’m upset that you don’t know that. You don’t know that I drink coffee in the morning or that I like to watch the morning news. You don’t know anything.”

“That’s not fair, June. I know so many things about you.”

“Yeah, like what? Name one thing!”

TJ laughed ruefully and rubbed his forehead. “I know exactly where and what time you were born. I know that you were a big baby, that you arrived later than you were meant to. I know that you were a difficult baby. Kept your mother and me up half the night – more – with all your crying and carrying on...”

“That’s easy stuff. What about something more recent?” She crossed her arms over her chest with authority.

“More recent? Fine, okay. I know you’re in the chess club at school and your best friends are Lydia and Marcia. I know that you like The Beatles and Queen and Pink Floyd and you spend a lot of time reading.”

“And what am I reading now?”

“That I don’t know. You didn’t say.”

“You didn’t ask.”

“Okay. What are you reading now?”

“*Atonement*.”

“*Atonement*? By Ian McEwan?”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t that a bit... old for you?”

“No.”

“If you say so... June... I’m your dad. I know you like the back of my hand. I can’t read your mind and, okay, I didn’t know you have such a strict breakfast routine, but I can get on board with it. But you need to know that I’m on your side, okay?”

“What does that mean?”

“That I do care. And I do want to know you and the things you like. Okay?”

“Okay.” Juniper breathed out deeply. The Earth seemed settled on its axis once more, the good dad returned to his good dad status, her doubts and fears brushed aside. They hugged it out for good measure.

“I know it’s not an easy time for you with everything that’s going on with me and your mom. It’s not easy for me either.”

Juniper nodded, her eyes stinging at the words. She wished he hadn't said them out loud, and, despite her better instincts, she found herself saying, "Can't you guys just work it out?"

"Oh, June..."

It's not some fairy-tale, Juniper, she thought, imagining hitting her head with a wooden spoon like a cartoon character – or one of those hectic Catholic priests she'd read about who punish themselves for their sins.

"June, this has been a long time coming. It's hard to explain it to --" He stopped himself before he insulted his daughter by calling her a child. "To you," he said instead.

"Did you just stop loving her?"

"No. No, I still love your mom very much. And you and Grace. You know that, right?"

"It doesn't make any sense then." They'd had this discussion before and she'd thought she'd resolved it as just one of those peculiar adult things, but now it resurfaced in all its illogicality.

"I love your mom. We just... we just don't work well as a couple anymore. It happens to people all the time."

"What's the point of getting married then?"

A beat. TJ thought this over. "Well, marriage is about giving the relationship a fighting chance. And we wanted to have kids."

"So if you didn't have me and Grace, you would've split years ago?"

"No, no, that's not what I meant."

"I want to be alone now. And this is my room. Can you please leave?"

"Okay. If that's what you want." TJ hovered for a second as though he expected Juniper to change her mind. She didn't. So, he retreated into his own room, effectively banished from the rest of the flat.

Juniper lay down on the mattress to cry.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

There were few things that irked Juniper as much as geometry. It was right up there with geography (coincidence that their names sounded so alike?) and taking tablets instead of syrup medicine... Juniper had always struggled to swallow tablets. Pearl's annoyingly cheerful friend, Eunice, had tried to teach her to swallow them by telling her to pretend she was a goose and to glug the pills down with weird goose-like neck movements. The suggestion had made Juniper feel like a dumb child – and trying out the goose movements only to fail had made her feel even worse. She'd held a grudge against Eunice ever since.

Once, Juniper had had a teacher who told her not to worry if she couldn't see the shapes properly yet because it took time for that part of the brain to form. It was meant to reassure her, but it filled Juniper with ire – to think that her brain was malformed when some of her peers, who were perfectly useless in just about every other way, had more developed brains... First of all, that was surely impossible, and secondly, if that's what development looked like, to hell with it and geometry. Unfortunately for Juniper, she needed to finish her geometry homework in preparation for upcoming tests and she needed to pass those tests to get the top marks she wanted to so that she could hopefully get a scholarship to a good high school. No pressure.

"I just don't see it, Lydia," she moaned, twirling the cord of the telephone round her finger and staring at her notebook in exasperation. It was nearly nine o'clock on a Tuesday night and she was not meant to be up and working on her homework, but there she was.

"Turn the page around, June. I'm telling you, you'll see it better from a different angle."

"I've turned the page every bloody way, Lydia. I don't see a damn thing." She was glad to have Lydia to help her, but at the same time, she hated that this was something Lydia was better at than her. All things intellectual were supposed to be Juniper's territory. Lydia was the more fanciful one, smart for sure, but always up in the clouds somewhere, thinking of fairies and witches and magic.

"What's your mom's phone number?"

"What?"

"I'll send you an MMS of what I did on my page. Then maybe it'll make sense."

Lydia had not detected any irritation in Juniper's voice. She was only too happy to help.

Juniper sighed and gave her the number, then she thanked her softspoken friend and hung up. Within two minutes, Pearl was calling her from halfway across the house to ask why

she was receiving pictures of annotated triangles on her cell phone. What a life this is, Juniper thought. Surely there must be something better to learn at school than all things Pythagoras.

Juniper's rotated triangle problem got her 3 marks out of 5, while Lydia got full marks. Geography entailed a full hour dedicated to the composition of rocks including a long anecdote from Mrs Steyn about an excursion she'd taken to the Cango Caves in which the most interesting thing Juniper learned was the difference between a stalactite and a stalagmite. Yawns abounded. And PE... Well, PE took Juniper's boredom and despondency, rolled it into a sweaty, polyester ball and chucked it out the window. It was, in a word, excruciating.

Now that there was no pretending it was anywhere near summer any more, PE meant that all the girls had to go to the gym at the far end of the school, past the Grade 0 classrooms and the hockey fields, where they shuffled into the change room to change into the requisite navy skorts, sports shirts, white socks, and takkies. It meant taking off her clothes in front of the whole class and acting like this was a perfectly natural thing to do, even though she could sense eyes flitting skittishly over breasts and thighs and bare nipples – for some girls didn't wear bras yet. She noticed one girl, Angelina, seemed to have no breasts at all. In fact, her chest appeared to behave in the complete opposite way to Juniper's with nipples that concaved inwards, inverted almost. Juniper wondered briefly if this was normal or if something had happened to her. She knew she shouldn't look but she found it hard not to. Simultaneously, she felt a stab of jealousy over Angelina's body. She was taller than Juniper and thinner, with a long, straight torso atop long elegant legs, and her hair was fine and dirty blonde. Though she was as flat as an ironing board with her strange, indented nipples, she still looked feminine, with her soft dimpled face and her delicate, feline gestures. She also looked a bit like Keira Knightly. Juniper loved Keira Knightly. She'd watched *Bend it Like Beckham* so many times that she'd scratched the DVD and Pearl had had to buy her another copy.

On the other end of the room, Juniper felt as expansive as a whale, bloated, pimply, and very conscious of the ever-growing mounds on her chest. She was again reminded of how she'd outgrown her training bras and was wearing a proper adult bra that was padded and fleshy. When she took it off at home, it looked like some kind of slinky, chewy animal, curled up on her chair. She remembered how the shop lady had offered her every variety of pretty bra at Woolies but Juniper had insisted on the plain ones. Like Keira Knightley

insisting on a sports bra. Only Juniper, at 12 years old, was sure she had bigger boobs than Keira Knightley.

PE only got worse when they began their fitness exercises, running around the gym, throwing and catching balls, climbing ropes, going up and down stairs, and finally heading out onto the field to play rounders. Juniper was wheezing, her chest and throat singed with a cold fire from the wintry air. At least Marcia and Lydia were equally unfit, although Marcia had undoubtedly good hand-eye coordination and actually seemed to enjoy rounders.

After PE, they changed back into their uniforms in a mute state, energy sapped and armpits moist. Juniper felt disgusting getting back into her white shirt, navy pinafore and thick woollen stockings without so much as a wet flannel dragged across her body. She could smell the sweat that glistened on her skin and in her short armpit hairs. She could feel the sweat that had pooled at the base of her bra.

“We should really shower after PE.”

“Ag, it’s not that bad,” Marcia said.

“Not all of us feel like dandelions right now, Marcia.”

“You look like a dandelion to me.”

They both laughed. Lydia was too busy trying to pack everything away in her bag to comment.

“Where are you off to in such a hurry?”

“Choir practice.”

“Choir? I thought you quit?”

Lydia’s face scrunched into a grimace. “I tried to, but they turned it into like an intervention with my mom...”

“For quitting choir?”

“Mrs Butler said I’ve got talent and that I shouldn’t give up. They said it’s good for me to learn to persevere when things get tough.”

“Tough? Didn’t Mrs Butler say you’d be the downfall of the choir last week because you were slightly out of time?”

Lydia nodded meekly. She’d lost the battle and the war. “She said she was sorry, so... I’m going to try not to think about it.”

“That’s rubbish, Lydia. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay...” Lydia looked around the changeroom quickly before leaning forward conspiratorially. “My dad called Mrs Butler a grumpy old cow. Now every time I see her, I picture her mooing.”

They all laughed at the idea of the sour, strict choir instructor as a cow.

"I can kind of see it in her features," Juniper said. Mrs Butler couldn't be described as large or bulky, certainly not ungainly like a cow. But, if Juniper really thought about it, Mrs Butler did have a pretty square jaw. Perhaps she secretly spent lunches munching on grass from the sports fields.

"My mom called my dad a sexist for saying that."

"A sexist?"

"Yeah. She said he'd never call a man a cow. Or a bitch."

"Did he call her a bitch too?" Marcia whispered. They were all aware now of using language that was forbidden at school.

"No, but my mom said it is basically just as bad to call a woman a cow."

"That's ridiculous if you think about it. They're both animals. And dogs are actually way cooler than cows if you ask me. Plus, aren't bitches the dominant ones in dog families?"

"Really? I didn't know that."

"Yep."

"Of course you'd know that, June. Anyways, I've got to run before I get mooed at again." And so she was off, leaving Juniper and Marcia to finish packing up their bags and making their way to the locker room to retrieve their lunch.

Lunch break without Lydia felt precarious. Without their third musketeer, Juniper and Marcia were open to the vultures of break-time, people like skinny, grinning Naadirah and tall, cackling Jessica who were way too into fashion and pop culture, or, far worse, greasy-haired Miranda, who just seemed to ooze negativity and yet, for some reason, loved latching onto Juniper and her friends. Juniper didn't mind Naadirah too much. She was friendly and innocuous enough, but Jessica was never far behind her and she was incredibly annoying with her loud voice and her endless references to Lady Gaga, Paris Hilton and whatever inane movie was popular on the Disney Channel. They'd given code-names to all the girls to avoid at break, of course, so that no one would ever know who they were talking about. Naadirah and Jessica were named Peanut Butter and Honey, respectively, while the detestable Miranda went by the codename Jam. It wasn't that these girls didn't try to sit with them if Lydia was there – they did. It was just that they were far more likely to try if their circle was smaller, as though to fill a gap in their friendship circle. They were vultures who preyed on open spaces and the timid politeness of Juniper's friend group.

“Time to go to HQ, do you think?” Marcia whispered. The vultures were drifting towards them, school-issue lunchboxes in hand, mandated floppy hats on head.

“Yes. I’ll meet you there.”

They split up in an attempt to confuse the vultures and hopefully lose them. Juniper went around the junior classrooms, while Marcia took the more scenic route across the lower sports fields. HQ was nestled against the fence between the outermost tennis court and the road outside the school. It was a small ledge really, hidden from view by overgrown hedges. Juniper had found it by chance one day when Pearl had forgotten to fetch her from school and she’d gotten bored of the afternoon tennis matches the aftercare teacher suggested she watch. As far as the girls knew, nobody else had discovered this place. It had the feeling of danger about it, so close to the outskirts of the school and secret, as far as they knew.

Juniper got there a couple of minutes before Marcia did, walking quickly and taking sudden turns until she was sure that Peanut Butter and Honey must’ve thought she had an appointment with the school speech therapist or the physio or something and they’d stopped following. When Marcia arrived, she was out of breath and flustered.

“What happened?”

“Bloody Jam is what happened.”

“What now?”

“Ughhh...” Marcia paused to poke a straw through her Ceres apple juice box and take a long sip. “So, she wanted to tell me about how Mrs Wilcox thought she should see Miss May about her... moods? Lack of concentration... General misery... Something. I don’t know.”

“She probably should see Miss May.” Miss May was the school guidance counsellor, a scrawny, tranquil woman who occasionally came to address their class about bullying or dealing with stress. She was so flimsy and quiet that Juniper was sure she was the last person she’d go to about dealing with bullies, but maybe she could help Jam, who seemed to have something wrong with her as far as Juniper could tell.

“Right? If anyone should, it’s her. But of course she doesn’t want to.”

“Of course.” Jam seemed to love her misery and sharing it with others so much that Juniper was sure she’d never be interested in actually resolving whatever was making her miserable to begin with. If she couldn’t complain about the unfairness of life, what would Jam ever talk about?

“And she wanted me to be like, *Yes, Miranda. What rubbish.* But obviously I couldn’t say that... But I also couldn’t tell her, you know, *I think you have problems.*”

“I don’t get it. Why does she always turn to us about this stuff? Miss May is actually qualified and we... We don’t really want to talk about it.”

“I don’t know. She’s always moaning. Nothing’s ever right with her. I’m just glad I could get away.”

“I wish she had other friends.”

“Yeah... But who would want to be her friend? She’s always so negative about everything.”

“At least we’re only negative about like three things.”

Marcia laughed.

“Actually, not negative. Sceptical.”

“Sceptical?”

“Yeah. It’s when you question things. Like, I don’t get the point of geometry or geography or PE or forcing Lydia to be in the choir when she’s constantly shouted at for such minor things. That doesn’t make me negative. It makes me sceptical.”

“I get why we do those things though. It’s to get us to think... And to move our bodies. And to build toughness.”

“Urrgh, boring. I’d rather read books all day or come sit here and talk about real things.”

“Like the vultures and why they’re always after us?”

“And how you should read more so you know words like sceptical.”

“Juniper, I don’t think I’ll ever know as many words as you.”

Juniper laughed and bit into her peanut butter sandwich with relish. If she wasn’t happy with her body or the school system or the vultures she had to avoid every day, at least she was happy with her vocabulary.

“Juniper, it’s past 9 o’clock again.”

Juniper sighed and put her hand over the speaker of the phone. “Doing homework, Mom.”

“I don’t care. You should be in bed.”

“It’s maths homework. I can’t go to bed without doing it.” She sighed and resumed her call with Lydia. Once she finished, she went to make herself some rooibos and found her mom standing in the kitchen with a dark shadow across her face.

“What?”

“Don’t use that tone with me, Juniper.”

“What tone?” She wondered briefly if Pearl would ever cease accusing her of using a *tone* with her. It seemed ridiculous the way her voice sounded should be so important. And, besides, she seldom deliberately selected a tone just for her mom to be able to call it *a tone*.

“Why are you always procrastinating? You should’ve done your homework straight after school.”

“Oh, come on.” She reached for the kettle.

“Juniper, this is very irresponsible.”

“Irresponsible? Me?” Juniper felt the blood rush to her face, angry tears welling in her eyes. “Are you serious? I’m trying to do my bloody homework before I go to bed and I’m irresponsible?”

“Don’t say *bloody*.”

“Why not?! You say much worse things.” She wasn’t sure which would let off steam first – her or the kettle.

“Juniper, it’s bad to leave your homework so late that you’re doing it after 9 pm. You need your rest.”

“How would you know what I need? You don’t even know what homework I’m working on. And besides, I don’t hear you calling Grace irresponsible and she’s always up past 9 – and I can guarantee you she’s not up doing her homework!” Juniper was shouting now, her face flushed, her hands clenching and unclenching. She was ready to storm out, but then the kettle clicked, and she realised she really did want that cup of tea. She poured the water into her mug with a trembling hand and began to stab at the teabag to speed up the brewing process.

“I’m not talking about Grace. I’m talking about you. And Grace is in high school. She doesn’t need as much sleep as you do.”

“Oh, right, right... And she doesn’t need to work as hard as I do or to get grades as good as I do either, does she?” Tears were running down Juniper’s face now and she hated it because it felt like they were undermining everything she was saying and turning her into a blotchy, snotty mess.

“Juniper -”

But Juniper had had it. She gave the teabag a final squeeze, flung it out of the mug, grabbed the mug and spun around. She had half a mind to tell her mother to “talk to the hand” like someone out of a movie, but instead she simply said, “I’d like to do see you do my maths homework. I bet you’d fail.” And then she was out of the kitchen, stomping down the passage

to her room, and slamming the door so hard she accidentally spilled tea all over the carpet. Only then did she realise she'd forgotten to add milk.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Goddamn Jam again. Swooping into Juniper's way as she was trying to exit the classroom after the final lesson on the final day of the week. Seriously? All Juniper wanted to do was get to the locker room, cram her books into her bag, and head out. Actually, no, screw that. All she really wanted to do was get home, make hot chocolate, and get into bed with that Ian McEwan book she'd pilfered from TJ's shelf the last time she went to stay with him. But, of course, greasy-haired, bug-eyed Jam wouldn't let her go.

"Exciting weekend plans, Juniper?"

"Not really." Juniper tried to make a move but Jam was blocking her exit.

"Oh, I'm sure you must be doing something cool."

"Really, I'm not." Couldn't she take the hint?

"Oh, well, if you're free, there's this market I thought I'd go to..."

"Oh, no. Uh, I didn't mean I wasn't busy. Just... You know, nothing interesting. Got a whole lot of family events and stuff."

"Oh. Okay then." She lingered as if deliberating whether to continue her doomed quest to get Juniper to hang out with her, twirling a strand of that dirty, mousy brown hair around her finger.

Juniper wondered when last Jam had washed her hair – if ever – and whether she knew how much tacky black stuff was under her fingernails. Where were Lydia and Marcia when you needed them most? Hell, where was Grace? She could've shut Jam up in a heartbeat if she felt so inclined.

"Well... I really have to get going. My mom's waiting." Juniper wished she had a cell phone to pull out of her pocket so she could pretend to consult SMSes from an impatient mother. She'd put cell phone at the top of her wish list for Christmas. She didn't really care which one it was or even if it was second-hand; she just wanted some way to talk to her friends without the whole house eavesdropping. And she wanted a way out of situations like this. Pity Christmas was still so far away.

"Maybe next weekend then?"

God, she was still trying. Juniper must've been a brilliant actress if Jam still thought they could be friends. Or maybe Jam was just delusional. "Yeah, maybe."

Jam smiled. There was nothing especially ugly about it. It just seemed abnormal. Like wearing a tank top and hotpants to the North Pole.

“Okay, bye!” Juniper half-pushed past Jam to reach the door and made her way swiftly to the locker room without looking back.

“So, how was school?”

“The same.” Juniper began skipping tracks on the CD currently in the player, trying to find something that wasn’t rubbish. To no avail, of course. It was one of Grace’s *Now That’s What I Call Music* CDs, the most inappropriately named CD out there. She began rummaging through the cubbyhole till she found the least offensive CD, *Mambo Number Five*. TJ had lent her some CDs for the car but she’d forgotten them in a pile at the door to his flat.

“The same? What does that mean?”

“It means you think you’d know what school was like by now. God, is that all adults can ever think to ask you – how’s school?”

“Don’t blaspheme.”

“Whatever. You do it all the time.” Juniper looked out the window with an itching irritation. Pearl’s hypocrisy loomed large as a billboard in her eyes.

“I don’t understand, Juniper. The other day you accused me of not knowing what school is like and now you don’t want to talk about it. How am I supposed to know what your day is like if you don’t tell me?”

Juniper laughed half-heartedly. “Like you care.”

“Of course I care.”

“You just want to have something to talk about.”

“Juniper.”

Juniper rolled her eyes. “If you’re going to lecture me on attitude or whatever, save it. I know.”

“You’re vicious.”

Juniper felt a lump forming in her throat. That was a new low blow, not a comment she remembered hearing before. “Oh please. I’m not vicious.”

“You are. I can’t talk to you when you’re like this.”

“I can’t talk to you when you only pretend to listen and when you only pretend to care.” The lump in her throat began to harden and her eyes prickled threateningly.

“What?”

“I’ve told you a million times before what school is like and what do you even remember? You never pay attention to me!”

Thankfully, Pearl parked the car at that point and got out immediately. Juniper half expected her to slam the door and walk into the house without her, but she waited agitatedly for Juniper to get her things out of the boot, so she could lock the car first. Juniper surreptitiously wiped her tears on her jersey sleeve when Pearl wasn't looking.

There was no apology.

Juniper spent the better part of two hours trying to calm herself by learning famous chess games by rote, attempting to read Darren Shan's *Cirque du Freak*, and giving herself a facial with all of Grace's nicest smelling skincare products – to no avail. She was still flushed with anger and the word "vicious" kept ringing in her mind. After her third time reading the same sentence of *Cirque du Freak*, Juniper accepted that she wasn't going to take anything in. She wanted to do something rebellious, something that would hurt her mother and make her feel bad for calling her vicious, but at the same time, she wanted Pearl to come crawling to her with an apology of soap opera proportions. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right. Juniper was many things, things not common to many girls her age, she knew. She was unconventional, she was clever, she was outspoken... But not vicious.

She pulled open her bedroom door, leaving her nest of books, chess sets, and eclectic ornaments in search of something to fuel her quest for insubordination. She wasn't vicious. She was murderous.

Halfway to the kitchen, she stopped at the sound of Grace's voice. Grace was on the phone, as she seemed to be most of the time, talking about a party. "Oh, damn. I wish I could be there, dude. I really do."

Dude. It was such an unintelligent, infantile phrase – something Juniper would never use.

"No, you know how it is. Kudzai would be so pissed if I missed the final rehearsal."

How out of character. Juniper stood with her back pressed against the passage wall just outside her sister's room, intrigued. Was her supposedly badass moron of a sister actually missing out on a party to attend the last rehearsal before her choir recital? Even the idea of Grace being in the school choir seemed absurd, but stranger things had surely happened.

"Fuck, man. What a shit show."

Dude, man, damn, fuck, shit. This was how Grace spoke. This was how she actually spoke to – undoubtedly – female friends of hers.

“Do you pity her or envy her for using this language?” Ms W whispered, standing alongside Juniper against the passage wall. This time, she’d opted for a kind of fluffy Russian snow hat that somehow suited her lined face.

“Pity, obviously. It shows her total lack of vocabulary or imagination.”

“Yet it also shows a certain level of freedom, no? Something you don’t have.”

“Please. She’s not free. She can’t even attend this dumb party because of choir.”

“But you could then?”

“What? Attend the party?”

Ms W smiled hauntingly but said nothing.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Grace had appeared, ghostlike in the doorway, cell phone still clasped in her hand.

“Just passing by.”

“The fuck you were.” Grace was already most of the way to the kitchen, her too-short school skirt swishing about her slender thighs as she moved. Clearly, she didn’t really care if Juniper had been eavesdropping. She had places to be.

Juniper inhaled deeply and then followed her. “Grace.”

Grace looked up from the kettle she was filling. “What?” She replaced the kettle on its holder and pressed down the button automatically.

“Where’s that party you can’t go to?”

“What?”

“The party. You said you couldn’t go because of choir.”

“You were eavesdropping on me.”

“Just answer the question!” Juniper felt the colour return to her cheeks once more, tears threatening in her eyes.

“Jeez, take a chill pill, man.” Grace poured hot water into her cup of instant coffee.

“Tea?” she asked, an afterthought.

“Sure.” Juniper could, unfortunately, never turn down a cup of tea.

As Grace stirred the coffee, squeezed Juniper’s teabag and gave them both a healthy helping of milk, she seemed strangely poised and thoughtful. Juniper was almost scared to break the spell. But then, when she had her tea in hand and saw Grace edging towards the door, she knew it was now or never.

“Grace, I need to go.”

“What are you on about?”

“I need to go to that party.”

“Need to go? Don’t you know the difference between a want and a need, Juniper?”

“I’m serious. Mom needs to see that -”

“Woah, woah, woah. You’re not going to any party to prove something to Mom.

What do you think this is? *The Parent Trap* or some shit?”

“She needs to know! She needs to -” except Juniper wasn’t quite sure what it was that her mom needed to know any more or how going to a high school party would help... Or anything. Before she knew it, she was crying great big baby tears and getting snot all over her face.

“Oh, Jesus.” Grace put down her coffee and retrieved Juniper’s shaking, dribbling cup of tea from her hand. “Come here.” She led her sister into her lair, flicking the switch for the fairy lights on the wall instead of switching on the main lights. She sat Juniper down on the end of her bed and began wiping her face with strongly scented, seemingly alcoholic wet wipes.

Juniper began hiccupping from all the crying. Grace sat beside her rubbing her back and stroking her hair until she quieted. “Are you okay?” she finally asked.

Juniper nodded meekly. The anger had left her body. Now she just felt sad. “Mom doesn’t get it.”

Grace snort-laughed. “Tell me about it.”

“No really. She doesn’t. She asks about school like she cares, like she ever listens... She never listens.”

Grace nodded.

“And when I tell her that, she says I’m vicious.”

“Ouch.”

“Ja... Big ouch.”

“I’m sorry.” They sat a moment in silence. Juniper admired the pattern the fairy lights made across the wall of cut-out photographs on Grace’s wall. It looked so corny but also very pretty, she had to admit. It was like stumbling into a real-life Pinterest board.

“Do you ever ask Mom how her day went?”

“What?”

“Like, when she asks you about school, do you ask her about work? Or whatever?”

Juniper thought about it. “No, I mean... Not really.” Juniper wasn’t even really sure she knew what her mother did for work beyond drawing up plans for buildings.

“Well, did you know that the client she’s working for at the moment is a dick?”

“What? Really?”

Grace nodded.

“Who’s her client?”

“Some guy called Willem. I found him on Facebook. Looks really nasty. Posted some super dodge jokes on his page.”

“Oh.”

“I’m not saying you need to know that, but she’s going through some shit too. And that’s not even counting the divorce.”

“It’s really happening?” The dreaded D-word. Till now, Juniper had only ever heard the kind of shaky S-word – separation – never divorce.

“Does she not tell you anything?” Grace sounded pissed, but Juniper felt too tired now to be angry anymore.

“Look,” Grace said, big brown eyes zeroing in on Juniper’s, “Mom shouldn’t have said what she said and I’m sure she regrets it, but don’t try get back at her. It won’t help. And the sneaking off to parties thing – that’s my shindig, not yours.”

Juniper found a small laugh escape her lips despite Grace’s serious tone.

Grace smiled. “We can’t have two fuck-ups in this house. Only one.”

“You’re not a fuck-up.”

“Language.” Grace winked at her. “But thanks.”

The F-word felt strange and delicious on Juniper’s tongue.

The two sisters sat together in the twinkle of the fairy lights, drinking their hot beverages for the next half hour before Grace gave Juniper a magazine and sent her off to her room with it. It was a mindless gossip mag, *Seventeen* magazine, and Juniper was sure she’d never read it, but all the same, she held it to her chest as though it were a hardcover Jane Austen book.

CHAPTER TWENTY

For all her taunts about Juniper's "boyfriend", Grace now had the audacity to invite her own boyfriend over for dinner. Juniper didn't know when Grace had started seeing this guy or how they'd met but she expected nothing but the worst. She was not disappointed. He arrived a whole ten minutes late – fashionably late, Grace insisted – and was dressed in a baggy tracksuit and scuffed skateboard shoes.

"He's kind of gross," Juniper whispered to her mother.

"Juniper, hush."

But he was! There was Grace with her hair perfectly straightened and shining, her long legs stretching out below her silver belt buckle and there was this guy with his baggy clothes and messy mousy brown hair.

"Pearl, Juniper, this is Clinton," Grace said, her eyelids sparkling blue and outlined with way too much dark eyeliner.

"You can call me Clint," the boyfriend said, smiling as if he were the biggest charmer.

"Nice to meet you," Pearl said.

Juniper merely nodded. She spent all of dinner that night watching him, the way he slurped his soup and messed on the tablecloth, the way he wiped his mouth with his serviette, dragging it carelessly. But she also noticed the way he told stories, great and funny stories, and the way he made Grace laugh so that she threw her head back. He even made Pearl laugh and that was a feat in itself.

"I think you like him," Ms W said.

"What?"

"I think you know exactly what your sister sees in him."

"Please."

"He's funny, he's interesting, and isn't there something attractive about his ruggedness? Something Avril Lavigne would go for? Skater boy and all that..."

"Don't bring Avril into this."

"You're jealous of her aren't you?" Ms W tilted her head curiously, her 1920s-style peak cap only just managing to stay in place.

"Gross, no." Juniper turned to look at Clint and Grace across the table. They were whispering to each other about something or other, heads bowed close together, laughing quietly every now and then.

“You’re stuck on the outside, as per usual,” Ms W noted.

“I don’t want a boyfriend.” But even as she said that, she saw Clint reach for Grace’s hand, their fingers interlacing as though this were the most natural thing. She got up abruptly and went to help her mother with the dessert in the kitchen.

The kitchen was curiously empty, with only the sounds of the wall clock and the smell of warm malva pudding to keep Juniper company – that and her confused reflection staring back at her from the oven door.

“Mom?”

No one answered.

“Mom?” Juniper left the kitchen and began walking down the passage towards her mom’s room. All she could think was that Pearl must’ve gone to her bathroom en suite and was perched on the toilet while the pudding was getting cold.

“Mom?” she called again as she pushed through the master bedroom and into the bathroom. Again, she was met with her own reflection, now in the oval bathroom mirror over her mother’s basin. She had to admit that, for once, her hair didn’t look half-bad. It had finally reached shoulder length and this was a definite improvement.

There was another mirror over the second basin, which had been her father’s. His was a square mirror. She walked to it slowly, remembering the number of times she’d walked in to see his face covered in fluffy white shaving cream in front of that mirror and his joke that he got the square mirror to match his square jaw, while her mother got the round one to match her round face. Juniper reached for the handle of the drawer on her dad’s side of the bathroom and pulled it open. Once, this had been filled with a crazy array of things which Pearl had loosely referred to as “your dad’s junk”, but now it had a sectioned tray in it with neatly ordered bottles of nail polish, acetone, nail files, backup tubes of toothpaste, bars of soap, a comb, and a few other items, none of which could really be called junk. When had that changed? Juniper closed the drawer and then moved to the cupboard below it. She wasn’t quite sure why, but now she had to see what was inside. This used to be where TJ kept his electric shaver, his toolbox, and his toiletry bag for when they went on holiday. Now, it only contained rolls of toilet paper, a bottle of Listerine, and a pile of unopened tissue boxes. It was as though he’d been erased from the bathroom like gum scraped off the bottom of a shoe.

“Juniper?”

Juniper turned to confront her mother.

“What are you doing in here?”

“What have you done with all his stuff?”

“What?”

“Where is all of Dad’s stuff? Why is there nail polish in his drawer?” Juniper felt her voice climbing, but also quavering.

“He doesn’t live here anymore, June. He’s got his stuff.”

“But – but it was here just the other day!” Juniper was sure she’d seen it all here not that long ago. She was sure the bathroom had still smelt of his aftershave too. Now, it just smelt like Pearl’s floral deodorant.

“He collected it after your birthday party,” Pearl said.

“But why? He could’ve kept some of it here.”

Pearl shook her head. “That wouldn’t work.”

“Why not?” Juniper shouted, although she already knew the answer. She just wanted to hear it from Pearl.

Pearl moved towards her but Juniper backed away, tears glistening in her eyes.

“June, I don’t want to have all his stuff here.”

“But what if he has to stay here for a few days and...”

“He won’t.”

“But what if he moves back here?” Even though the dreaded D-word still lingered in her mind, part of her was still hoping that Grace had got it wrong.

“He won’t,” Pearl repeated. “Juniper, he hasn’t lived here for more than a year now. I don’t want his junk taking up space -”

“It’s not junk!” Even though she knew it was.

Pearl sighed. “Come, let’s go have some malva pudding and forget about this.” Pearl turned to walk back to the kitchen.

“Where were you?”

She turned back to face Juniper. “What?”

“You weren’t getting the pudding ready. I checked.”

“I had some stuff to do – work stuff.”

“Urgent designs for a building?” Juniper asked sarcastically.

Pearl sighed. “Just come and eat some dessert.” She left.

Juniper went straight to her room.

After about 20 minutes had passed, Pearl knocked on Juniper’s door with a bowl of malva pudding and warm custard as a peace offering. Juniper reluctantly let her in and devoured the pudding.

“You know you embarrassed, Grace, Juniper.”

“Oh, whatever. Her boyfriend is lame anyway.”

“Juniper. I actually think he seems quite nice.”

“With a dress sense worse than...” Juniper tried to think who had bad taste. “Lady Gaga.”

“Lady who now?”

“Gaga. The singer who went to that thing like totally naked except for bubbles.”

Pearl shrugged, clearly having no idea what her daughter was talking about.

“It’s gross, Mom. Why’s she got to be naked?”

“Uhh... Well, anyways, Clint isn’t just wearing bubbles, is he?”

“No, but I don’t care if he thinks I’m rude or whatever.”

“Grace does.”

“Pah-lease.”

“And I do.”

Juniper rolled her eyes. “Grace only invited him so they could go to her room to kiss. And then he’ll see all the boys she’s got stuck up on her wall and he’ll be scared away anyways.”

Pearl sighed. She opened her mouth as though to say something and then, just as quickly, closed it. She looked like a fish who’d just found out it was on land, trying to suck the air. And then, she was gone.

Juniper waited until she could hear the front door closing behind Clint and until she could hear Grace’s door close behind her and the sound of the taps opening over the bath in Pearl’s bathroom. Then, she snuck into the study. If anyone asked, she’d decided she’d tell them she was going to play Club Penguin. If they asked her why she was going to do that at 10 o’clock at night, she’d insist on the fact that it wasn’t a school night and that Grace had had a boy over. Nobody asked.

There were a lot of papers on the desk, most of them sketches of buildings. She handled them carefully before moving on to the bunch of A4 papers behind the filing cabinet. These looked more promising. They were printed, for one thing. They looked official – a big thick pile of printed documents in dark black ink. If she hadn’t been poking her nose around like a proper Sherlock Holmes, she’d surely have missed them in their shadowed hiding place. But there they were. They thing her mom must’ve been working on when she was meant to be getting dessert. Juniper picked them up gingerly and looked at the first page. It was enough for

her to see the word “Divorce” to figure out exactly why TJ had had to move all his stuff out of the bathroom, and to know that Grace had not been wrong. Juniper gripped the papers in her hand for a while, frozen to the spot. Then, she put them all back just when she’d found them and ran to her room.

Ms W was there waiting for her, sitting on the edge of her bed. “What were you thinking looking through your mom’s stuff?” No preamble from Ms W. There never was.

“I wanted to know for sure.”

“And does knowing make you happy?”

“No.”

“Pretty stupid then, isn’t it?”

“I have a right to know.” Juniper felt, briefly, like a hero in *Law and Order*, ready to ensure justice was served.

“And now what will happen?” Ms W pressed. “Do you think you can stop the divorce from happening?”

“Why not?”

“What if you’re the reason the divorce is happening.”

“That’s rubbish. How could that be?”

“You’re a bit of a handful, you know. Hasn’t anyone ever told you that?”

Juniper felt her hands tingle, somewhere close to an itch, but not quite. In fights she’d had with both her parents, they’d called her a number of variations of “handful”. She began to list all of the most memorable adjectives her parents had given her over the years: difficult, impossible, unreasonable, a handful, ungrateful, spoilt, entitled, hysterical. They’d been spread out over months and years of heated arguments like the seasoning in a repeated and oft-amended family omelette recipe. Entitled when she complained about not getting the newest books she wanted in hardcover, impossible when she started screaming and shouting about how TJ had promised to take her to the bird park and then hadn’t, hysterical when she slammed the door after one of many arguments with Pearl about her tone of voice. Facetious was another one. She’d had to look that one up in the dictionary the first time she heard it. Joking or jesting inappropriately – similar to sarcastic. Of course, Pearl hated it when she was sarcastic too.

“She hates it when you’re sarcastic, she can’t handle your tone, she thinks you’re too much drama...”

“Then why isn’t she divorcing *me*?”

“That would be too obvious. She’s clearly divorcing your dad to punish you.”

Juniper shook her head, but she wasn’t certain Ms W was wrong.

“Think about it. When you were little and your mom wanted to visit her friend, Wendy, in Durban, you had two options: go with or stay with your dad. What did you do?”

“Stay with my dad.” This had only happened twice. Once when Juniper was nine and again when she was ten. Grace had gone with her mom to Durban, and she’d stayed with her dad and eaten takeaways for a week while watching PG13 movies with him. They’d even watched *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, which Pearl had called inappropriate and which Juniper adored.

“She’s punishing you,” Ms W repeated.

“No, no, no.” Juniper began changing into her pyjamas, trying to put the thought out of her mind, but Ms W just sat there watching her, echoing the same thought over and over again. If she’d been an easier child, perhaps her parents would still be together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Divorce. The legal ending of a marriage by a court or other authoritative body. Juniper had looked for it on the internet and in the library's encyclopaedia. She'd read about King Henry VIII's divorce and how that led to Anglicanism. She'd read about how important divorce was to women's rights. She'd even read about the Divorce Act of 1979. If her parents were going to legally separate, she wanted to be prepared. Goodbye life cycle of leaves and hello divorce facts.

"Did you know that a divorce can only be granted if you can prove that either there's been an irretrievable break-down of the marriage or that mental illness or serious unconsciousness has been part of the marriage?"

"Serious unconsciousness? What, like the bride was sleeping through the wedding or something?" Marcia laughed at the thought.

"No, surely not. I mean, how would she sign the papers?" Lydia rested her hand on her chin pensively.

"I don't know. I'm not entirely sure of that one, but anyways, that would be irrelevant to my parents. They were both totally conscious of what they were doing."

"What went wrong then?"

No one had ever asked Juniper this question before, at least not so directly. Even her paternal grandmother, Granny Sally, who'd been very distressed by the break-up of the marriage hadn't quite managed to ask that question.

"Well..."

"Maybe they just don't love each other anymore?" Marcia suggested.

"No." Both TJ and Pearl had told Juniper emphatically that they still loved each other.

"Maybe one of them met someone else?"

"No." Although there was that holiday that TJ had had with a "friend" of his... But no, Juniper refused to entertain the opportunity.

"Do they know you're going to be their lawyer?" Marcia joked.

"I can't be both of their lawyers. In a divorce hearing, they'd be up against each other."

"Right."

The tone had turned solemn. Juniper sighed. "My mom tried to hide the papers from me."

"No!" the others chimed in unison.

“She did. She’s had them for weeks and she didn’t want me to know. She hid the papers in the filing cabinet so I wouldn’t see them when I just went in randomly.”

“But why? You’d find out sooner or later.”

“Guess she was hoping for later. But Grace already knew. Can you believe she told Grace but not me?”

“Ridiculous,” Marcia said.

“So unfair,” Lydia agreed. Then, after a pause, she moved into practical mode. “So, what are you going to do?”

“What is there to do?”

“You could fight it. Make them see sense,” Marcia suggested in typical, dramatic Marcia style, hands gesticulating to emphasise the injustice of the situation.

“This isn’t *The Parent Trap*, Marcia. I’m not twin Lindsay Lohans.” She couldn’t believe she was regurgitating Grace’s reference but there it was.

“I preferred the other version of *The Parent Trap*...”

“Me too,” Lydia added.

“But... I mean, if they still love each other, it doesn’t make sense.” Marcia’s face scrunched up thoughtfully.

It didn’t make sense; no. Juniper was aware of that. It hadn’t made sense when TJ had packed his bags nearly 18 months ago and it didn’t make sense now that the law was involved either. But then she was beginning to realise that a lot of things people said and did didn’t make any sense. Like her mom calling her vicious when, according to Grace, she was just upset about her own life falling apart and her client, Willem, being an asshole.

“Sometimes, people do things that don’t make sense. That don’t follow...”

“Logic?” Marcia suggested.

“Yes, exactly.”

If life were a game, it would certainly not be chess. If life were like chess, Juniper would’ve won it by now – at least the junior league. But, no, life was some other kind of game, somewhere between blind man’s bluff, Monopoly, and one of the inane drinking games the people played in movies or *One Tree Hill*.

“I’m sorry, June.”

“Me too.”

Both Lydia and Marcia put their arms around Juniper for a few seconds and held her in a group hug. They rarely hugged, excepting big goodbyes before the holidays. This was a breach of the norm. It felt right though.

At least there was a new episode out for Juniper to watch when she got home from school. She'd taken to watching *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* in the afternoons when it was on, or else she'd sneak in for bits and pieces of the shows that Grace liked to watch – *Pretty Little Liars*, *One Tree Hill*, and *Desperate Housewives*. It felt less like sneaking now though. Grace hardly batted an eye these days when Juniper sat on the far end of the couch to watch with her. Occasionally, they even exchanged comments on the characters. This was all since Juniper had confronted Pearl about the divorce and Grace had actually backed her up. It was perhaps the only time it had been the two of them against Pearl and it felt powerful. Not that Pearl appreciated being ganged up on by her daughters about the paperwork she'd been trying to hide... But what did she expect really?

Grace was at choir practice, so Juniper was watching alone, munching on slightly burnt microwave popcorn as she did. This was no Ian McEwan, but she loved the thrill of it. The main character had a babyish face but was meant to be the same age as Grace. Of course, the big catch was that she was pregnant. Some people were calling this a dragged-out, worse version of *Juno* – a film that she had loved – but Juniper still enjoyed it.

"What are you watching?" Pearl was even grumpier than usual, still dressed in business casual with the kind of shoes that made an ugly clack-clack sound on the kitchen tiles as she made her way to the lounge.

"*The Secret Life of the American Teenager*." It was an awkward scene for her mom to walk in on: two characters were flirting with each other and talking about making out.

"Mmm... And is their secret that they're always having sex?"

"Mom, they're just talking about making out."

"Isn't making out code for sex?"

"No! It's kissing."

Pearl stood considering. "Well, I still think it's inappropriate."

Juniper knew not to point out that the show was about a pregnant 15-year-old or that she'd seen a whole string of condoms on it once. Or that she'd wondered how many people happened to walk around with condoms like that. "It's fine, Mom."

Pearl pursed her lips but didn't seem to have any kind of comeback in mind. She spun on her heels and left Juniper to continue her vicarious enjoyment of the highly sexed lives of fictional American teens.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

When in doubt, turn to the internet. For Juniper's parents, they'd have had to turn to encyclopaedias at her age, but for Juniper, there was a whole world of information out there after just a few clicks. If divorce was the next major thing to befall her family, she wanted to know exactly what that meant. She'd done some research before, but that didn't seem like enough now, so she opened Internet Explorer on one of the school's computers in the IT room during break to find more.

"What exactly do you think you'll find here?" Ms W asked sceptically, peering at the screen through a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles.

"I don't know. Something."

They scanned pages of text for a while in silence until – "There!" There was, in fact, something useful after all. "A divorce summons must state that there is no *reasonable prospect* of restoring the relationship," Juniper read.

"No possibility they could get back together..." Ms W looked at her quizzically. "You don't really think you could convince your parents to get back together, do you?"

"Well, I mean..."

"Oh, Juniper. What a pipe dream! If they already couldn't work it out and they're the ones who decided to get married in the first place, do you really think you could get them back together?"

"Maybe not... But maybe I could give them the idea. Just that it's not *unreasonable* that it might happen."

Juniper Googled "How can I get my parents back together?" There were a lot of results that came up but none of them were particularly useful. Most of them felt rather condescending to read with phrases such as "Many teens think that they can get their parents together" or "divorce usually only happens after everything else has been tried".

"Irreconcilable differences," Ms W read. "Doesn't that sound about right?"

"They're not *that* different."

"Really?" Her voice rang with disbelief and a hint of Grace-esque sarcasm.

"Well, they both let Grace go out as often as she wants to, without them. They both don't like me going out without adult – or teenage – supervision."

"So they're both regular grownups?" Ms W smiled with gleeful condescension.

"Shut up."

“I can think of more ways in which they differ from each other really... Your mom is trying out this bohemian hippie thing. Your dad is trying out the sloppy, too-small apartment thing.”

“That’s not that different.”

Ms W shrugged. “Maybe not, but what makes you think that *you*, of all people, could change anything?”

Juniper sighed, but what she really wanted to do was scream or punch something. But she was at school and Juniper would never do such a thing at school.

“Such a goodie-two-shoes,” Ms W cooed.

“Would you rather I trashed the computer lab?”

“No. That would just be embarrassing.”

“There’s no winning with you... Does W stand for winning?”

“Because I’m always the winner? Oh, that’s a good one. I like that.” But she didn’t answer the question. And just then, someone else walked into the computer lab, so Juniper exited the 5 tabs she had open and set the computer back to sleep mode.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Juniper was awoken by the sound of footsteps approaching her bedroom, followed by a gentle knock on the door. The knocking was new. Usually her mom or Grace would just barge right in.

“Yes?” she asked, groggily, sitting up in bed and reaching for her glasses on the side table.

The door opened to reveal her mother, bedecked in a flamboyant, tasselled poncho and cherry-red bell-bottoms, with a tray of food in her hands. This was unexpected, to say the least. Juniper looked curiously at her mother as she set the tray down on her lap.

“Careful, the hot chocolate may still be a bit hot.”

“Thanks.” It was ridiculous to serve hot chocolate for breakfast, naturally, but given that it was accompanied by freshly cooked flapjacks covered in golden syrup, it made sense. “What’s this for?” Juniper had precious few memories of her mother ever making flapjacks, and no memory of flapjacks being a surprise served to her in bed.

“To say sorry.”

“Thanks.” Juniper blew on the hot chocolate before taking a tiny, tentative sip.

“I should’ve told you about the divorce. And I’m sorry if I’ve been a bit hard on you lately. I know none of this is easy for you either.” She perched lightly on the end of Juniper’s bed.

Juniper just nodded, not knowing what else to say.

“Your sister told me I really upset you the other day.”

Grace, the eternal snitch.

“And I wanted to make it up to you.”

Well, maybe Grace had actually had a good impact on the situation this time.

“Thanks, Mom.”

Pearl smiled. “Do you like the hot chocolate?”

“Delicious.”

“Great. Well, I thought maybe we could do something fun today.”

Juniper began cutting one of the flapjacks, spilling syrup all over the plate. “Like what?”

“Is there something you’d like to do or somewhere you’d like to go? As a treat?”

“Definitely not shopping.” She bit into the flapjack. It was warm and sweet and amazing, filling her up with its warm fluffiness.

“Anything you do want to do?”

“Hmmm...” Juniper had to really think about this one.

Pearl watched her intently, her large bauble earrings bobbing up and down with the slight movement of her head.

“Actually, yes. I know what.”

“Will it hurt?”

“Not much. It’ll be done before you know it.”

“Okay.” Juniper inhaled sharply. The smell of disinfecting alcohol filled her nostrils.

“Ready?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to count to three, okay? Don’t move your head.”

Her fingers clasped her wrists in anticipation and she looked determinedly at a magazine cut-out of a slender, buxom brunette on the wall. She tried to make out what the letters said around her. Inevitably, there was something about fashion and something about sex.

“One... Two... Three.”

It did hurt, quite a lot actually, but it was quick as the woman had promised. She’d taken what looked a lot like a stapler – though she called it a gun – to Juniper’s one earlobe. And now, without warning, she moved on to the next earlobe.

Juniper winced involuntarily as her second ear was pierced.

“All done now. How’s that?” She held a mirror up for Juniper to see herself.

“It looks great.” Juniper felt like she looked like a new person now that her ears were pierced. And the process was much better than when Hallie pierced Annie’s ears in *The Parent Trap* with nothing but an ice cube, a match, a slice of apple, and a sharp needle.

“Wonderful,” Pearl said smiling in the reflection behind her.

The stout woman with the plethora of tattoos and large biceps who’d pierced Juniper’s ears grinner. “Good that Mom likes them. They’re just studs, and small ones, I know. But they’re just for now. Leave them in for 6 weeks and make sure to clean them properly like I told you. Then we can think about changing them.”

Juniper gazed at the tiny golden dots in her earlobes and nodded.

“Lovely,” Pearl said. “Where can I pay?”

The woman directed her to the till.

Juniper picked up the mirror and admired her new earrings once more. They were small and plain but promised a world of future possibility. She was thrilled to have them. Not that this really got Pearl back in her good graces... But if her mother wanted to keep trying, why not let her?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Exams are nothing to be afraid of. Just think of them as big tests. They’re just there to test your knowledge of everything we’ve covered so far this year. Yes, they need your time and attention. You want to be prepared for an exam. But you don’t need to be scared of them.”

This was the first time Mrs Monday had spoken to the Grade 6s separately from the rest of the school. Their elderly, bespectacled headmistress usually spoke to them at school-wide assemblies every Friday, but today was a Tuesday and it was just Juniper’s grade and their main teacher, stout and stern Mrs Myberg, that she was addressing.

“Exams are stressful and tiring. You will need to start revising your work soon if you haven’t started already. There are many different ways you can study. You can rewrite your notes, read your notes, highlight notes, you can make diagrams, you can make up a song to remember the details. Different strategies will work for different girls.”

Juniper began picking at her cuticles. She had long hard cuticles that had formed on her thumbs and were strangely pleasant to pull on. Pearl always scolded her for this habit, but that did little to discourage her.

Mrs Monday was still talking about different learning techniques and about discipline and setting up a study timetable. She was pacing up and down the front of the school hall, her spectacles balanced almost on the tip of her nose. It seemed nearly impossible to believe that she’d once been a student herself as she looked ancient – grey hair, wrinkled skin, and a neck so old and droopy that Juniper liked to think of her as Mrs Turkey Neck.

“And remember, girls, a good night’s sleep is just as important as knowing your work. Never skip out on sleep the night before an exam.”

“Like you’d ever do that,” Marcia whispered to Lydia.

Lydia smiled in lieu of a laugh. Lydia needed at least 11 hours of sleep every night, or something equally ridiculous. Not a chance she’d skip out on sleeping.

Juniper liked to think that she was a bit more grownup in that regard. She could get away with just eight or nine hours of sleep and be just fine. And she liked to drink coffee – the quintessentially grownup hot beverage.

Mrs Turkey Neck turned to face the front of the room once more to stress her final point – “Whatever you do, do not leave studying until the night before. That never ends well.”

No shit, Sherlock. Didn’t work well for tests either. Did Mrs Turkey Neck really think they were that dumb? Juniper sighed and began to roll her shoulders, so they clicked

pleasantly. Sitting on the floor through an assembly like this was never fun. She always found herself hunched over like a prawn, with her feet getting pins and needles in her cross-legged position. But at least this wasn't a full school assembly.

"Have you created a timetable yet?" Lydia asked.

They were sitting in the library, eating lunch.

"Nah, I don't see the point in a timetable. I'll just study subjects in order of importance, looking at the exam timetable."

"Hmmm... But don't you think we should listen to Mrs Monday?"

"I am listening to Mrs Monday. She said different girls learn differently, remember?" She was cherry-picking of course, but Juniper didn't see any point in making a second timetable just to decide when to study what.

"Right, well, I've made a timetable."

"Me too," said Marcia, "just in case it works."

"Are you guys nervous for the exams?" It was a pointless question. Of course they were nervous.

"Yes, but also, I've done exams for piano," Marcia said, "and they weren't so bad."

"And I've done ballet exams and they weren't so bad either. Just scary having someone watch you, but at least when it's written down, no one is exactly watching you perform."

Of course, Juniper knew that Lydia had done ballet since she was four years old but the thought of her timid friend performing in front of an examiner and coming out somehow unscathed seemed absurd. "How many exams have you done for ballet, Lyd? And how many for piano, Marcia?"

Lydia's eyes flicked upwards as she thought, and Marcia began to count on her fingers. They answered at the same time – Marcia had done three piano exams and Lydia had done five ballet exams.

"So, I'm the only one that's never done an exam then?" A new feeling of anxiety beset her. Thinking about it this way, perhaps she should make a timetable.

Creating a timetable wasn't too bad really. Juniper made one easily enough on Microsoft Word, building a table and colour-coding it according to priority. The soonest exams were coded in red, the next soonest orange, the next soonest yellow, and the furthest away in green. She also coded geography in green, even though it wasn't that far away, because she couldn't

fathom spending very long studying it. The timetable was busy printing when she heard the familiar, clanging sound of the home phone ringing and Pearl dragging her feet heavily down the passageway to answer it.

“Hello? Juniper? Yes, yes... Juniper! Phone for you!”

“Coming!” Juniper snatched her timetable from the printer and dashed down the passage to the phone, where Pearl stood with arched eyebrows.

Juniper raised her eyebrows in response, trying to establish who was on the line.

Pearl mouthed the word “boy”.

Juniper felt a sudden lump form in her throat as she took the phone from her mother and put it to her ear. “Hello?”

“Hi, Juniper. It’s Raymond.”

Of course, Raymond. She hadn’t seen him since her birthday party, but he’d called the house a couple of times and said hi to her on Club Penguin. His penguin’s name was Larry133, which seemed like an odd name for a penguin but anyways... “Hi, Raymond.”

Ms W appeared at the end of the passage, leaning forward inquisitively, trying to catch what Raymond was saying.

“I – I know you’re very busy.”

This he said because every previous time he’d called the house, Juniper, on the urging of Ms W more often than not, had stalled him. She’d turned down just about every plan he’d proposed, usually with the excuse that she was busy, she had homework, she was meeting her friends...

“But there’s a book fair happening this weekend at the school my mom teaches at and I thought maybe you’d like to go?”

“Oh. Thank you for thinking of me.” She felt her voice getting small, sounding a little choked. She felt filled with guilt that his immediate assumption was that she’d say she was busy. It wasn’t that she didn’t like Raymond. She’d enjoyed speaking to him at the chess match and at her party. He seemed clever and nice enough and she enjoyed chatting to him on Club Penguin too. It was just that every time he’d invited her to do something, her hands had gotten all clammy, and she’d imagined him getting uncomfortably close to her and her oily skin and messy hair. And Ms W had always thought it better to avoid him.

Ms W was looking at her expectantly with her big round, fortune teller eyes, but she didn’t say anything.

“Sure. That sounds good.”

“Really?”

Juniper hated that she could hear the surprise and excitement in Raymond's voice. He didn't even try to disguise it. It made her feel more guilty for every time she'd said no and more apprehensive about seeing him. He was a nice boy sure, but what if it got too much?

Ms W appeared to be laughing under her breath – laughing at Juniper.

Juniper rolled her eyes at her and took a deep breath before replying to Raymond. "Yes, sounds good. What day and what time?"

"Saturday? My mom will be there from early but I can ask my dad to take us a bit later."

"Umm... That's okay. I'll ask my mom to bring me a bit later."

"Okay. Like 10ish?"

"Cool."

"Cool."

There was a moment of silence. Juniper really wanted to let go of the phone so she could pick her cuticles.

"Okay then," she said at last, because she couldn't bear the silence any longer. "See you on Saturday."

"Right, Saturday." She could hear he was smiling. Could he hear that she was not?

"Bye."

"Bye."

Juniper replaced the phone on the hook with a sigh and turned to growl at Ms W, who'd been inching closer and closer to her all this time. "What?"

"Nothing, nothing. Just, don't you have to start revising for exams this weekend?"

"Not the whole weekend."

"Mmmhmm... And you're going to let a boy ruin your marks, are you?"

"He won't ruin my marks. It's a book fair, not a wild party."

"That's how it starts, isn't it?"

"I've never seen Grace go to any book fairs."

Ms W smiled trickily, peering at Juniper's face. "You're not Grace."

"Obviously."

"What are you going to wear to the book fair?"

"Does it matter?"

"You really think it doesn't matter?"

"I'm not Grace. I won't spend hours getting dolled up for a boy."

“Even though you normally spend hours getting dressed and washing your face and all that anyways? To little effect I might add.”

“Shut up.” Juniper huffed and puffed her way back down the passage and into the bathroom, where she began to manically pluck her eyebrows in the mirror with Grace’s pink tweezers. She opened the bathroom cabinet and found it full of Grace’s many cosmetics – a powder foundation, some blusher, three different mascaras, a drawstring bag filled with lip glosses and lip smackers, three different kinds of facial cleansers, a big bottle of toner, several bottles of nail polish, an array of face and body creams, and several bottles of Body Shop body spray, along with her trusted Hoity Toity deodorant spray. Juniper’s skin care products took up a modest corner of the cabinet along with the mascara Grace had bought her, her roll-on deodorant and an array of pimple creams – none of which really seemed to work.

It’s so mindless, she thought. Makeup and all of that. It’s what girls with no brains and too much vanity need to resort to. It’s what girls like scheming, frivolous Grace use as their arsenal. She, Juniper, was above all that foolishness. She read real books, not magazines... And yet, she did think her eyebrows looked better now that she’d plucked them.

“What was your phone call about?”

“The Queen’s Convent Book Fair.”

“Oh?”

“Can you drop me there on Saturday? Raymond asked me to join him.”

“By yourself?”

“He’s a 13-year-old boy, not a dragon, Mom.”

“Ah. Yes, well, maybe Grace can go with you.”

“Grace, go with to the book fair. Are you kidding?”

“I don’t like the idea of you going alone, June.”

“I won’t be alone. I’ll be with Raymond.”

“Yes, I know, but you could lose each other and it’s a big school compared to yours. There’ll be a lot of people there.”

“This is insane! You just want me to have a chaperone.”

“You are 12 years old, Juniper. It’s not so crazy to want you to go with your sister.”

“12, yes, not a child. For God’s sake.”

Grace sauntered long-leggedly into the room and patted Juniper on the arm. “Calm down, June. I’ll be a cool chaperone.”

“That’s the biggest oxymoron I ever heard.”

Grace rolled her eyes. “Like I want to spend my Saturday at a book fair. It sucks for me too, kiddo.”

“Don’t call me kiddo.” Juniper shrugged Grace’s hand off her arm with force and stormed out the room. She could hear Grace attempting to reassure her mother that it would all be fine. She hated Grace with a passion right then. She hadn’t even been sure that she wanted to hang out with Raymond but now that she knew that it would be her, Grace, and Raymond, she was positively dreading Saturday. How could she get a single sensible word in with her bimbo of an older sister leering over them? And would Raymond even listen to her with supermodel Grace there? Though he seemed nice, he was only a boy and, as she’d often heard Grace say, boys only liked you if you were “hot”. Juniper knew enough to know that that was not a word anyone was ever likely to describe her with.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The book fair was a lot bigger than Juniper had expected. She'd never visited Queen's Convent before. It was meant to be a good school. An all-girls high school that Grace had considered attending at one point. Its buildings were old stone structures, surrounded by tidy, green gardens with neatly arranged flowerbeds. Several schoolgirls dressed in their uniform of moss green tunics and bark brown stockings walked around the premises, greeting people as "Sir" and "Madam" and looking like poor imitations of trees. A number of classrooms had been taken over by different genres or publishing houses and there were rooms that you had to pay to enter to hear authors speaking on highfalutin topics like the future of the ANC or the question of democracy while PowerPoint presentations were projected onto the walls behind them. To Juniper's dismay, Grace knew several of the poor imitations of trees who were walking around and would shout out their names or – worse – nicknames like Sally G or Apple Bottoms and give them big hugs that went against all their attempts at polite decorousness.

"God, Grace, enough with all the hugging already."

"Calm down. I'm just saying hi to my friends."

"I don't want to cause a scene."

"It's hardly a scene, Juniper."

Juniper spotted Raymond standing at a trestle table in the distance. The banner above the table read "Penguin Randomhouse". She recognised his curly hair and scrawny physique and watched him picking up a book and flipping it over to read the blurb.

"Is that your guy?" Grace blew a bubble with her blue bubble-gum.

Juniper really wished she wasn't chewing bubble gum like a kid. "He's not *my* guy."

"Arrgh, you know what I mean. The guy we're meeting?"

"He's the guy *I'm* meeting. You can go play with your friends now."

Grace scoffed. "Nice try. I would love to, but you're not gonna lose me that easily."

Juniper sighed. "Can I at least say hi to him by myself first?"

"Fine by me. I'll be right here."

This meant that Juniper had to start walking towards Raymond. Her feet suddenly felt like lead. She could see Ms W standing halfway between her and the Penguin Randomhouse table, swinging an old-fashioned pocket watch and mouthing the words "tick tock, tick tock". Juniper inhaled deeply and wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans. She was wearing her trusty bootleg jeans and her long-sleeved t-shirt with the picture of Freddie Mercury on it for luck.

She'd even tried clipping her most unruly tufts of dark hair in place with some butterfly clips she'd stolen from the tin of hair stuff sitting on Grace's dressing table. Just as she was reaching the table, Raymond turned around and saw her. Unwittingly, she stopped dead in her tracks, as though her trusty old takkies were bolted in place.

"Juniper! Hi!"

It didn't seem to matter that she'd stopped walking because, before she knew it, Raymond had made his way to her. He was taller than she remembered and skinnier too. She felt suddenly rotund as a peach standing next to him. "Hi." She couldn't quite get his name out so it was just hi, and that would have to do.

"I'm so glad you could make it!"

"Me too."

He hovered just far enough away that she didn't feel obligated to hug him, but close enough that she wouldn't have been able to stretch out her whole arm. This was just as well because the thought of hugging him made her feel a little queasy.

"Have you looked around much?"

"No, not yet, and you?"

"I have, yeah... I've already been here for nearly two hours, helping my mom get set up and stuff." He glanced backwards in the direction of a small, bird-like woman with auburn hair who smiled and waved.

"Ah." Juniper waved back with an attempted smile. Her hands began to sweat.

"But all that time here means that I can show you all the best stuff – and skip over the lame stuff."

Suddenly Grace appeared. It happened so quickly that for a second, Juniper almost mistook her for Ms W.

"Hi," Grace said without preamble, extending her hand to shake Raymond's as though this were a business interview and not a nosy older sister intruding on Juniper's life. "I'm Grace, Juniper's sister."

"Oh, hi. I'm Raymond." They shook hands and Raymond had the good sense to add that it was nice to meet Grace, though he looked a little stunned. "I didn't realise you'd be joining us," he added with a weak smile.

"Don't worry, you'll hardly notice I'm here."

How Juniper wished that could be true.

After about half an hour of Raymond showing Juniper all his favourite stalls and Juniper leafing through books and scanning blurbs, Grace began to get antsy. She kept blowing ever bigger bubbles and popping them loudly and she barely feigned interest in the books she picked up and just as quickly replaced. Then it became apparent that her gum had lost its flavour and she was on the lookout for a bin and was hurrying them along past interesting looking displays just so she should throw away her chewed up blob of blue.

“Grace please! Just go find a bin and come back. Please.” Juniper tried to say this quietly and not too obviously rudely, but the attempts at politeness were exhausting.

“Fine. But don’t go anywhere.”

“Fine. We won’t.”

Raymond nodded mutely.

Grace swirled around, the tassels of her suede cowboy jacket forming a small brown skirt around the waist of her figure-hugging jeans.

“Your sister isn’t much of a bookworm, is she?”

“No, no she’s not.”

Raymond smiled. “Nice of her to come with you though.”

“You think so?”

“Well...”

Juniper raised an eyebrow.

“No, not really. She... She kind of scares me.”

Juniper laughed. “Don’t worry about it. She’s my arch nemesis but she wouldn’t hurt you.”

“That’s good to hear... apart from the arch nemesis part.” Raymond lifted up a book he’d been holding. “I thought you might like this.”

Juniper took the book from him and looked at it. It was a fantasy adventure book, filled with magical creatures and great journeys. It was absolutely the kind of book Lydia would lap up in a weekend. “Thanks.”

“Do you think you’d like it?”

Juniper wasn’t sure but she found herself saying yes and then suddenly Raymond was buying her the book.

Grace returned just then, looking tired and bored. “That’s enough books for today, isn’t it?”

“I just got a new one,” Juniper said, lifting up her present.

“Nice. Coffee?”

Grace bought herself a cappuccino and bought both Juniper and Raymond soft-serve ice-creams. Juniper and Raymond sat eating their ice-creams in almost total silence while Grace and one of her Queen's Convent friends, Beatrice, shared the latest cross-school gossip, which appeared to include at least three different Megans, two different Jessicas, and the infamous exploits of some guy called James. Now it was Juniper's turn to get tired. Plus, despite the few times they'd spoken to each other and Raymond's generosity in buying her the book, she still felt very uncomfortable being close to him and considering this was potentially meant to be some kind of date.

When Pearl came to fetch them half an hour later, Juniper was beyond relieved. Raymond gave her a very quick hug, as though he were afraid that Grace would stop him if he were too slow. Their ears grazed each other as he pulled away and Juniper felt the prick of goosebumps on her skin.

"That was the most excruciating first date I've ever been on," Grace said when they were in the car driving home.

"Grace," Pearl admonished. It wasn't clear whether she was upset because Grace had said it was excruciating or because she'd called it a date. Juniper imagined herself turning to liquid and getting sucked into the gap between the car seat cushions as though by a vacuum cleaner. Gone.

"We could've at least gone to a movie."

"Whatever. You didn't have to come."

"Yeah, I did. Unfortunately."

Pearl sighed. "Enough, girls, please." She turned up the radio as each of her daughters turned to their respective car windows to look outside and sulk.

The rest of Saturday was dull. Juniper was attempting to redo questions from a previous maths test as revision, but it was boring and her mind kept flitting back to the moment she and Raymond had hugged, when his left ear had brushed against her right ear, and she'd felt a tingle of... excitement? Nerves? She wasn't quite sure. But a tingle of something anyhow. She even sensed that feeling second-hand thinking about it now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

On Sunday morning, Juniper found her mother in a position she'd been in increasingly, wrapped up in blankets, rewatching old movies in bed. Today, she was watching *Notting Hill* for the umpteenth time, her room filled with dirty plates and mugs, the curtains still drawn though it was nearly 11 o'clock.

"Mom, it smells awful in here," Juniper said by way of greeting. "You should really open a window."

Pearl looked at her groggily. "Oh, sorry, June. Open the window for me, won't you?"

Juniper obliged, unleashing a freezing but necessary draught into the room. Then, she began collecting the plates decorating the tops of side-tables, cupboards, and Pearl's usual sketching chair. "I'm coming back for the mugs."

"Oh no, sweetheart. Don't worry about that." Pearl paused the DVD and was decocooning herself. "I shouldn't have made such a mess." She wriggled her feet into her sheepskin slippers and began collecting the mugs.

Juniper was relieved. She wondered if these ever groggier old-movie-watching mornings had anything to do with the phone call she'd overheard a few nights back, where Pearl had been very upset that TJ was taking a holiday with some friend of his called Mandy. Pearl seemed to have forgotten about her policy of letting the colour seep into her via clothing and had retreated into pyjamas, sheets, and a dark room.

Juniper began rinsing plates and then loading them into the dishwasher. She heard the tell-tale sounds of her mother switching on the shower in her bathroom en suite. The extractor fan whirled comfortingly in the background.

Grace sauntered in dressed in her usual attire of tight-fitting, skin-baring clothes and heavy makeup. "You finally got her to stop brooding, thank God."

"Are you actually telling me I did something good?"

"Yeah... Don't get used to it." She opened the fridge to grab a mini yoghurt, the only thing she seemed to eat for breakfast aside from the gross-looking black coffee she'd started drinking.

"Mmmm... Is she okay?"

"What do you think? Would you be okay if your little boyfriend was going away with some other nerd?" So Grace had heard the phone call too.

"He's not my little boyfriend." She'd almost thought Grace was being nice, but Grace could never just be nice. Her words were always laced with the sting of a jellyfish.

“Whatever. Mom needs to find herself a new boyfriend.”

“What?”

“Well, Dad’s moving on. She should too. Otherwise she’s always going to be moping about.”

“We don’t know that Dad’s got a girlfriend. He said that Mandy was just his friend – his work friend.” She remembered how emphatically he’d said it because she’d picked up the other line of the telephone.

“Oh, Juniper. You’re so naïve.”

“Am not!”

“Are too! Let me tell you something.” Grace pointed her teaspoon at Juniper decisively.

“What?”

“The only way to get over somebody is to get under somebody else.”

Juniper thought about this for a second, trying to figure out what Grace meant. Then it clicked. “Gross, Grace! That’s terrible.”

“What? You don’t think that’s what Dad’s doing?”

“Eeuw. No!” This was exactly the kind of thing that Grace would have read in one of her trashy magazines. Juniper had stolen a bunch of them once for a school collage project and had had a page confiscated by the art teacher after it did the rounds of the classroom – a page dedicated to “How to please a man”.

Grace laughed at her and scooped the rest of the yoghurt into her mouth. “You’re so cute sometimes, June. You don’t know the first thing about adult relationships.”

“And you do?”

“I do. So, kudos for getting Mom out of bed, but what you should really do is find her a boyfriend to – ”

“No, nope, no.” Juniper did not want to hear the end of that sentence. It was bad enough to think that her dad might have a new girlfriend but to think that all adults cared about was sex, a thing that she knew was perfectly natural, and yet which repulsed and scared her all the same... And to think her parents engaged in that... It was too much. She was feeling a bit queasy just imagining it.

“You’re so green, Junie,” Grace said, pinching her cheek.

Juniper pinched her back, hard, on the arm.

Grace cried out in pain. “You little bitch. I didn’t pinch you like that!”

Then began a battle of pinching, slapping, scratching, and name calling until Pearl appeared in a fluffy bath towel in the doorway, fuming.

“Stop it! What in God’s name is going on?!”

The sisters both froze and moved apart, neither one wanted to admit to what they’d been discussing before. For once, Grace had no sarcastic remark. They both apologised meekly and went to their rooms.

A couple of weeks later, TJ took his daughters out for lunch and Juniper, watching the ease with which he comported himself compared to doom and gloom Pearl, asked him the question she’d been building up to for a few weeks now - how his girlfriend was doing.

“My girlfriend? What are you talking about?”

“The one you went on holiday with.”

“Mandy? She’s not my girlfriend. She’s just a friend.”

“Sure... Then why go on holiday with her?”

“Juniper, I swear. Just a friend. I would ne-”

“Oh, please, Dad. Cut the crap.” This, of course, was Grace. For once, Juniper was grateful to have her there. “We know you guys are getting divorced. We know divorced people get girlfriends. We know Mandy’s your girlfriend.”

“Grace, no! You’ve got it all wrong.”

“We aren’t babies any more, Dad.”

“Yeah, not babies,” Juniper echoed, pushing her plate away from her.

TJ sighed. “If your mother has been telling you things... You need to know that she’s hurting but that none of this is true.”

“Our mother has told us nothing, but she doesn’t have to.”

TJ looked suddenly very sad. He took a long sip from his Coke Lite before waving at a waiter for the bill.

“You can’t just make us go away,” Grace hissed at him.

“I’m not trying to do that, Grace. You’re not listening to me. I don’t know what shows you’ve been watching but I do not have a girlfriend.”

How were they supposed to believe him when originally, he’d said the separation was just going to be temporary? And then when he’d said he still loved their mother, only for them to discover the divorce papers? How could they listen to a word he said? Juniper felt suddenly very protective of her mother, her mother who usually annoyed her to no end. Even

Grace seemed more sympathetic now as she began to swear at TJ and make the entire restaurant turn to watch them.

“Girls,” TJ hissed. “Please. Let’s discuss this at home.”

“This is like when you sent me to get hot chocolate. It’s never a convenient time for you to listen to the truth is it?”

“Juniper.” He was stern, but still not shouting, which was more irritating than actual shouting.

The bill arrived and TJ tried to act like everything was normal as he calculated the tip and inserted his credit card into the machine. He even offered the girls the peppermints that came with the receipt, but neither of them took any. They walked to the car with heavy feet and heavy faces.

Once in the car, TJ turned to look at Grace in the passenger seat beside him. “Why this obsession with Mandy?”

“You tell me, Dad.”

He sighed. “This isn’t a movie.”

“Yes, you’ve said that already.”

“I’m not seeing anyone.”

“Then why not Mom?” Juniper asked softly.

“We’ve been over this, Juniper... Grace...” He sighed and his eyes turned watery.

“I’m not the bad guy you seem to think I am.” His voice cracked and Juniper felt a lump form in her throat.

Grace reached over to hug their dad. “Sorry, Dad.”

“Sorry,” Juniper added, leaning forward to hug him as best she could from the backseat.

“I’m moving into a new place,” he said. “You guys will like it. You’ll each have your own room and Grace, you’ll have a walk-in wardrobe. And Junie, I found you the coolest bookcase. You can both come then, every weekend, or even maybe during the week.”

None of them added, if the court permits.

“That sounds great,” Grace said instead.

“Yeah, very great.”

He wasn’t bad, her dad. He wasn’t seeing Mandy and he did really care about Grace and Juniper. He just couldn’t be with them anymore; couldn’t be with Pearl anymore.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Raymond invited Juniper to visit the Joburg Zoo with him the next weekend. Pearl wanted Grace to go with her but Grace complained that she had her own boyfriend, dumb skater-boy Clint, who she'd much rather spend time with.

"What about a double date then?" Pearl suggested.

"With my 12-year-old sister? You've got to be joking!" Her eyebrows rose dramatically up her forehead, even more dramatic than usual because Grace had now started colouring them in with the kohl she usually reserved for her eyes.

Pearl sighed.

"I'd really be fine visiting the Zoo with Raymond, you know. I'm responsible." More so than Grace, probably. Besides, Grace would just be making out with her imbecile boyfriend on the benches the whole time, which would be gross and embarrassing to see.

"And then you'd feel the pressure to kiss Raymond, wouldn't you?" Ms W murmured conspiratorially, straightening her flapper-style hat as she spoke. New hat, same Ms W.

"No. I wouldn't."

"Really? You don't think that's what happens on dates?"

"I've been on a date."

"A first date. At some point, don't you think he'll want to kiss you?"

Juniper scrunched her nose and rubbed her palms together compulsively.

"Going with Grace would give him too many ideas."

Juniper nodded. "I guess so." She turned back to her mom. "Please, Mom, I don't want Grace and her boyfriend there."

"Thank you! For once, a bit of sanity." Grace threw her arms in the air like a praise singer.

"Fine, but I don't want you going to the Zoo by yourselves. I'll come with you."

"Seriously, Mom. I don't need a chaperone. I'm not an idiot."

"I know you're not an idiot. I just want you guys to be safe. I won't bug you on your date. I'll just be in the distance, okay?"

Juniper sighed.

The day they visited the Joburg Zoo wasn't terrible. In the end, both Raymond and Juniper's moms came along and it worked out pretty well because they got along with each other and were soon talking so much that Raymond and Juniper managed to slip away from them. They

were never very far away but far enough that their moms couldn't hear what they were saying and vice versa.

"It's lame, isn't it?" Juniper said. They were in the reptile enclosure, watching a large snake twist its way slowly past the glass.

"Don't like snakes?"

"No, not that," Juniper said, turning to face him and realising, suddenly, just how close to her he was standing. As usual, she made sure to avoid looking directly into his eyes. "I meant having our moms follow us around. That's what's lame."

"Oh, yeah." He looked a bit startled that she'd turned to face him, like he'd also only just realised that he was standing less than an arm's length away from her.

Inadvertently, she look into his eyes, which widened as if on cue. Quickly, she looked away again. "Although, they haven't come in here yet," she noted, looking around the room. Their moms must've been caught up in more interesting chatter outside.

"So, if you have any secrets to tell me, now's the time," Raymond said with a small smile, his eyes going back to their normal level of openness - drowningness.

"Hmm. Well, my parents are getting divorced and my sister is smoking cigarettes and hanging out with this douchebaggy guy."

"Ah, that... That sucks."

Juniper nodded. "Don't tell anyone about the cigarettes though. That's a real secret. I fell in a thornbush for that one."

"Scout's honour." He laughed. "How exactly did you end up in a thornbush?"

She quickly explained her escapades in Ballito Bay.

"Wow, quite the sleuth," he said.

"How about you?"

"Nothing like that, I'm afraid. I'm not very nimble in rosebushes."

"Apparently neither am I."

Raymond laughed again. "True... My parents are okay. My brother's a bit of a pain in the neck... But that's not a secret."

"Is he like Grace?"

"Like a male version of Grace."

"So, obsessed with girls, super macho, and very into like... sport or something?"

"Pretty much. Especially rugby."

"So, is he like massive with cauliflower ears?"

"Worse." Raymond lifted an eyebrow conspiratorially.

“Worse?” Juniper pictured Raymond’s brother as a kind of ogre, his damaged cauliflower ears the least of his problems.

“He’s massive but in a muscular kind of way – no cauliflower ears. Lots of protein shakes. And he’s really good looking and everyone loves him.”

Now it was Juniper’s turn to laugh. “I hate him already.”

Raymond smiled, his whole face seeming to light up with the force of his upturned lips.

“So you have a boring, conventional brother then?”

“Yep. Can’t help who your siblings are unfortunately.”

“Or your parents.”

“No. I’m sorry your parents are getting divorced.”

“Thanks.” What else could she say?

Raymond looked as though he were about to say something, but then their moms appeared and he closed his mouth and turned back to look at the snake again.

After a few hours at the Zoo, Juniper was tired. She wished she could kick the moms away like you’d kick the blankets off your bed. She hated the sense of being watched, the feeling of eyes on her back, even if it wasn’t always the case.

“This feels like one of those period dramas where the young maiden needs an escort everywhere before she elopes with Mr Wickham or whatever,” she whispered.

“Who’s Mr Wickham?”

“Bad guy in *Pride and Prejudice*.”

“Ah.”

“But he actually does end up eloping with someone.”

“And eloping is, again?”

“Getting married in secret.”

Raymond nodded. “Might be a bit fast for me.” He winked and Juniper felt the blood rush to her face.

“Obviously,” she said quickly.

Raymond laughed.

They kept walking in silence until they reached the parking lot. Juniper realised they’d been walking briskly when she saw how far behind their moms were.

“Well, thanks for coming to the Zoo with me, Juniper.”

Juniper nodded. “Glad Grace didn’t come with this time.”

“Yeah... She’s kind of scary.”

“Glad your brother didn’t come with too. What’s his name?”

“Aaron.”

“Aaron. Well, glad he wasn’t here, with or without the cauliflower ears.”

“Yes. He would definitely have made me look ridiculous by comparison.”

“Eh, you’re not so bad.”

Raymond smiled.

She wondered if she should hug him again. It seemed like the right thing to do, yet the small space between them seemed suddenly vast. And then their moms were approaching and the space felt uncrossable, so they both just smiled and said bye and waved feebly and then said bye to each other’s moms.

“So, did you kiss him then?”

“Eeuw, Grace. No.”

Grace laughed as she put the kettle on for tea. “Rooibos or Five Roses?”

“Five Roses.” For this reason alone would Juniper remain in the kitchen with leering, Cleopatra-eyed Grace.

“I guess Mom was a bit of a cock-blocker, huh?”

“Again, eeuw.”

“Ag, don’t take it so literally. I just mean, I’m sure you didn’t feel very...”

“Can you just leave it, Grace?”

Grace’s leering smile drooped. “Fine.”

The kettle clicked and Grace began to pour hot water into three mugs. Pearl was, thankfully, out of earshot, but Grace always made her a cup by default.

“What about you? How was your date?” Because, naturally, Grace had been with Cliff or whatever his name was that afternoon.

“Much more enjoyable than yours by the sound of things.”

“I suppose he kissed you?” Juniper was curious in spite of herself.

Grace laughed as she began squeezing the three tea bags to colour the water. “I would say it was mutual.”

“And nice?”

“And nice.” She nodded, removing the tea bags one at a time and then proceeding to add milk and sugar. No sugar for herself, though.

“Do you like him?”

“Of course I like him. What kind of question is that?” She handed Juniper her mug.

“Thanks.” Juniper took a sip and nodded approvingly. “I just mean he seemed kind of...”

“What?”

“Lame.”

“Ugh, honestly. I don’t know why I bother talking to you about these things.” Grace grabbed both the remaining mugs and swept out of the kitchen, her long braid swishing in her wake.

“You’re too immature for her now,” Ms W said, leaning against the countertop and peering at Juniper over her own cup of tea, which was sitting in a pretty porcelain teacup, in contrast to the chunky mug Juniper was holding.

“You’ve got a sense of humour now.”

Ms W huffed and slurped her tea.

“I’m not immature,” Juniper said. “Especially not compared to Grace.”

“You’re still 12 though. There are things you just don’t understand.”

“Like what?”

“Well, like kissing.”

“Gross.”

“That’s why you’re immature.”

“What?”

“Because you think you’ll get cooties if you kiss Raymond.”

“I don’t think that. Cooties aren’t real. I know that.”

“Then why no kiss?”

“Because... my mom was there and his mom was there and...”

“Nice try but that’s not why.”

“I don’t know him that well and... It would be weird.”

Ms W nodded. “In other words, you’re still a child.”

“Oh, go away.”

And she did.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

It was Cove time, for the umpteenth time. JuneBeGreat118 was doing really well, cresting waves, enjoying her time in the tubes. She was one cool penguin – until she wasn't. Damn. She always got so close and then a ginormous wave would knock her down. Close but no cigar, as her dad would say. She shuffled out of the surf hut and saw a MarciMay365 standing nearby.

“Hey, hey!” she typed.

“YO YO!” MarciMay365 started dancing, so JuneBeGreat118 started dancing too.

“Surfing again?”

“Yep. U 2?”

“Yep. 2 hard 4 me”

“Ja. Better wit da pizzas”

“Me 2”

“At least dun wit geog project”

“What geog project?”

“The natural disasters 1...”

“AAAHHH... gtg. Byeee!”

“Byeee! Gud luck!”

Juniper exited Club Penguin with an alacrity she normally did not possess and raced to her school bag praying to God that her geography folder was there. It was. Thank you, God! She remained unsure about monotheism... But now was not the time for digressions – or making pizza as a penguin, unfortunately.

The project didn't look too difficult at least. She just needed to pick an historic natural disaster, write a few things about it, and include some photographs and diagrams. Thank God for the internet and her mom's printer! Now was the time to put her brain into overdrive. She pulled on her fluffy slippers and marched into Pearl's study in search of coloured cardboard. After a bit of rummaging around, she found two sheets of red A3 cardboard, one sheet of blue A3 cardboard, and three sheets of pink A4 paper. Now, she just needed to figure out a topic and write the damn thing.

“How did you manage to forget a whole project?”

“I don't have time for you, Ms W.”

Ms W laughed caustically. “Please. You couldn't even find the time for schoolwork and that's meant to be your thing, isn't it?”

“Shut up.”

She was back in her bedroom frantically scrolling through Google to find interesting looking natural disasters. May as well make it cool – as cool as geography could be anyways.

“Interesting? Cool? Pah. Anything started after nine o’clock the night before it’s due can only be interesting in the worst way... It’s going to look like a six-year-old made it.”

“It will be fine.”

“Fine? I thought you strove for excellence. Have you no pride, Junie?”

“I’m trying to concentrate!”

For a moment, Ms W was quiet, restrained, though Juniper’s hands were shaky and sweaty, and her face felt flushed. She opened a window, even though it was put-on-your-biggest-coat cold outside.

She skimmed articles touching on various tragic disasters. The Sichuan earthquake which happened just last year, the Great Galveston Storm of 1900, Cyclone Sidr of 2007, and the Gujarat Earthquake of 2001. She settled on the 2004 Indian Ocean Earthquake and Tsunami because she remembered that family friends of hers had been in Thailand when it happened and had actually seen the tsunami from where they were staying. The memory of her friend, Anna, telling her about a man who surfed the actual tsunami way past all the destruction, with detritus floating all around him, was ingrained in her mind.

Her fingers moved slowly across the keyboard, her mouse clicking back to the web article she’d found every so often to confirm facts. The tsunami had started off the coast of Sumatra in Indonesia, an undersea earthquake resulting in one of the biggest tsunami waves in living memory. Waves 100 feet – 30.48 meters, she discovered after a quick Google – washed over sections of Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Most of the deaths resulting from the tsunami occurred in Aceh, Indonesia.

Juniper sat in an overactive style of trance, fidgeting and humming as she typed and read and typed and read, for almost an hour and a half. Then she began printing her project and went on a hunt for a ruler and pencil to draw lines around the different paragraphs so she could cut them out and stick them nicely onto the coloured cardboard. But she was tired and not particularly interested in drawing boxes around her paragraphs and cutting them out... So, she wandered into Pearl’s room in search of sympathy and a sous-chef for her latest concoction.

“Mom, can you please help me with my project?”

Pearl was in her fluffy white dressing gown with her hair all poofed out from lying against her headboard, watching TV. She looked like a bedraggled bride who’d overslept on

the morning of her wedding. “What project? Why are you working on a project at this time? You should be in bed.”

“Please, Mom. It’s due tomorrow and I forgot about it.”

“Oh, Juniper. That’s unlike you.”

Juniper’s eyes welled with tears, but she tried to keep it together.

“Okay, okay. Don’t worry. I’ll help you. What do you need?”

An hour of drawing lines and cutting out paragraphs and gluing them down passed, interrupted now and then by Pearl’s frustratingly good ideas. For one, she suggested sticking the paragraphs onto the pink paper first, so they’d have a nice border before sticking them onto the blue background cardboard. It wasn’t the most fantastic choice of colours for a natural disaster project, but the extra effort did give it a finished look. Plus, she insisted on printing the different headings out separately and giving them their own blocks and making them in bold instead of underlined. Juniper was loathe to admit that they did look better that way – and that her mom was right that she didn’t have a very steady hand with the ruler. Juniper’s fingers were sticky with dried Pritt and her eyelids felt heavy, but there it was, a complete project with photographs she’d printed off the internet and a couple of diagrams that Pearl had painstakingly traced for her in pencil and then in fine liner.

“You look finished, June. Time for bed.” Pearl removed her reading glasses with slow, tired hands.

Juniper nodded. “Thanks, Mom. I’m sorry I left it so late.”

“That’s okay, June.” Pearl pulled her into a long hug, like she hadn’t for a while. Juniper held her mother snugly and breathed in the smell of her – her Pantene shampoo and conditioner, the anti-frizz oil she rubbed through her curly hair every evening, the thick anti-ageing cream Juniper told her she’d spent too much money on... She smelled so momly, so soothingly Pearl.

“Just please don’t do this to me again,” she said with a laugh. The laugh reached her eyes even. It seemed so unusual that Juniper noticed it. She’d forgotten what it was like for her mom to chide her in a way that wasn’t all so serious.

“I won’t, I promise.”

“Good. Now go to bed.”

“Good night, Mom.”

“Good night, June.” Pearl kissed her and made her way to her own bed.

Juniper dreamt of vast and overpowering waves. She was her penguin character incarnate, surfing the biggest wave, and she was praying to any force or being that would listen, that she'd make it to the next round.

Though her heart was beating very fast, right in her gullet, and she could see Ms W sitting haughtily in the back row, Juniper made it through her geography presentation, up in front of the whole class. The class clapped unenthusiastically, the teacher asked a few questions, and then it was over. Juniper retreated to her usual seat in the second row, where Marcia leaned over and patted her shoulder, mouthing 'Well done'. Lydia, who was already at the front of the class, gearing up for her presentation, shot Juniper a reassuring smile and gave her a thumbs up. The three musketeers didn't care much for geography, but they did care about their grades.

Lydia's project was much more carefully thought out than Juniper's and she'd chosen a more striking font for it too, with perfectly assembled blocks of text that were colour-coded according to subject. She'd chosen the Great Galveston Storm of 1900. Of course she had. Lydia loved anything historical. If it hadn't been this, it would've been Pompeii. Lydia's path into liking the project had been through the history, not the geography. She presented her project as though it were a story, the story of the people whose lives were impacted by the great storm.

"Somewhere between 6,000 and 12,000 people lost their lives to this hurricane, most of them near Galveston in Texas. The storm also tore apart roughly 7,000 buildings, including 3,636 homes. No building was left untouched. Imagine living through that."

Lydia spoke softly, almost inaudibly, as was her way when speaking to most people, but Juniper knew that there was a hidden passion underneath this timid voice. It was that unexpected force that came out in the stories Lydia told and wrote.

"Out of a population of fewer than 38,000 people, nearly 10,000 were left homeless after the hurricane. This also ended what we now think of as the Golden Era of Galveston, the time when it was at the centre of trade in Texas and was home to the first Texan post office, naval base, cotton compress, Parochial school, insurance company, gas lights, Roman Catholic hospital, and Jewish Reform congregation." She looked down at her cue cards for a moment to switch to the next card, her fingers trembling slightly.

Lydia definitely spent too much time on the history and the society surrounding the Galveston Hurricane for a geography project on natural disasters, but she still answered all

the questions asked, had all the pictures and diagrams, and was the best prepared out of anyone. No doubt about it.

“If only she would speak a little louder and not like she was confessing to crimes before the principal,” Ms W hmphed in Juniper’s ear. “It’s a bit embarrassing the way she struggles to get her words out there. Certainly not using her diaphragm.”

Juniper couldn’t say anything to Ms W then, so she pretended she hadn’t heard. She did, however, become more aware of Lydia’s nervousness the way she shifted her feet every now and then, the way her lips barely parted when she spoke. She was frustrated on Lydia’s behalf and wished she could shake her and tell her to *just speak up*.

“Aren’t you embarrassed to have such a shy girl as your friend? God, remember her at the chess match? Not a word spoken the whole time,” Ms W tutted.

Juniper twirled her pen around in her fingers agitatedly. It was frustrating that Lydia was so timid, sure, but not quite embarrassing – not normally anyways.

Marcia had trumpet practice at lunch time, so it was just Juniper and Lydia sitting together that day. Lydia had a ton to say about a story she was writing. She was always writing something, usually fantastical and filled with hare-brained schemes and total impracticalities, so off-the-wall that Juniper had to admit – sometimes begrudgingly – that it was pretty good. The teachers had thought Lydia’s writing was good too. Mrs Miller, their English teacher, had submitted a short story of hers about the secret life of hair lice into the SACCEE short story competition. It hadn’t won any awards, but still, Juniper had been impressed and jealous. Even though she’d always been in the advanced reading group at school and people often called her clever, no one had ever taken one of her story assignments and thought to enter it into a competition. But then Lydia did live and breathe her stories and little else – except other people’s stories.

“Are you listening, June?”

Admittedly, she was not. Though Lydia was painfully quiet in all other situations, when she was with her friends, it was hard to get a word in edgewise. And Juniper resented this weird two-faced-ness and the way Lydia’s stories took up so much space in lunchtime discussions. “Sorry, I zoned out for a bit.”

“Mmm... Oh, okay.” Lydia began picking at her sandwich paper, unwrapping the cheese and tomato confection her mother had made. She took small nibbles, looking intently at the sandwich – almost through the sandwich. Something about her movements made Juniper think of a tortoise. Yes, a tortoise was surely Lydia’s spirit animal. Demure, hidden

away in its shell, poking its head out every now and then. Somehow winning the race even though it was so slow and quiet.

“Sorry, Lyd. I’m just a bit tired. It’s very interesting, your version of Rapunzel.”

Lydia smiled. She liked making up new versions of fairy-tales, ones that turned everything backwards and inside out. Her latest concoction included the character of Rapunzel who appeared to be locked up in a tower when, in reality, she was only pretending to be a prisoner so as to prank her evil stepmother and the dragon for some horrible reality TV show. Kind of like *The Truman Show*, Juniper thought. Lydia had been working on it for weeks, writing it all by hand in an old maths notebook she’d barely used the year before.

“I’m glad you like it, but sorry you’re tired. You’ve seemed to be tired a lot lately.”

“Ummm, thanks...”

Lydia squinted at Juniper, a squint that made her think of her mother and the way she’d say *tone*.

“I mean, it’s not very flattering, is it – to say I look tired all the time?”

“That’s not what I meant.” Now Lydia sounded tired.

This was even more annoying than when Pearl would sigh at her daughter in an argument precisely because Lydia wasn’t her mother, but another twelve-year-old girl. Yet, she behaved as though she were so much older... In some ways anyways. Certainly not in how she spoke to the general public.

“I know it’s stressful... The stuff with your parents.”

“Yes. It is.”

“It’s not your fault though.”

“I know. Why would you even bring that up, Lydia?” Her face felt suddenly hot.

Lydia’s face, on the other hand, had gone white as Baby Powder. They’d never really had anything that could be called a fight or even an argument before. And if Lydia was bad at talking in general, she was surely not a creature built for conflict.

“I – I don’t know. My, my mom said that maybe you’d feel like...”

“Your mom said? Why were you talking to your mom about me and my parents?”

How could she have invaded Juniper’s privacy like that – and betrayed her trust? And who spoke to their parents about other people’s parents anyways?

“I tell my mom everything.”

Of bloody course she did. Not so grown-up after all. A real baby if ever there was one. “Well, I’d like you to stop talking to her about me.”

“I’m – I’m only trying to help you.” Lydia’s voice sounded strangled, and she had tears in her eyes.

Juniper wasn’t sure if she wanted to shout at Lydia for being such a baby or start crying because she’d upset her friend. She felt tears form in her eyes too. “You’re not helping me. You’re being... nosy!”

Lydia began to cry properly then, great gushing tears turning her face all blotchy. There was snot pouring out her nose too, in no time at all. “I’m just – I’m just being your friend...” It was hard to make out what she said after that. Her words were garbled and somewhere between sad and angry.

“Well, try less!” Juniper found herself shouting, but she wasn’t sure exactly why.

Lydia got up and raced towards the locker room, leaving her lunchbox behind.

Juniper sighed and followed her. When she got there, Lydia was at one of the bathroom sinks, splashing her splotchy face with water. A few girls were watching her from their lockers, whispering to each other. Juniper heard Genevieve ask if Lydia was alright and Lydia insist that she was fine.

“Sorry. I’m sorry.” She put her hand cautiously on the space next to Lydia’s on the sink.

Lydia nodded and wiped her face. “It’s fine.”

They hugged and Juniper began to cry properly as they did, which set off Lydia’s waterworks once more. Lydia offered Juniper some toilet paper from one of the bathroom stalls before she blew her own nose loudly.

“Tell me more about this Rapunzel then.”

Lydia smiled through her snotty nose and red eyes and continued with her long, meandering tale.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

It was Grace's best friend, Ashley's birthday and she was throwing a surprise party for her to which neither Juniper nor her parents were invited. Of course, Pearl would still be there in the background for a lot of the party, but she was going out for dinner with some of her girlfriends first. Juniper was relieved at this prospect as Pearl hadn't really been going out or seeing much of anyone lately.

Pearl spent the greater part of the day lecturing her long-legged daughter on how no one was to enter any of their bedrooms, how she'd murder her if there was any alcohol being drunk, and how she'd better not touch any of the fancy crystal glasses.

"You got it, Stalin," Grace said, saluting her mom mockingly.

"I mean it, Grace."

"I know, I know. God. It'll be fine."

"You should lock the liquor cabinet," Juniper whispered to her mother.

"You don't trust your sister?"

"I mean... Not really. But more than that, I wouldn't trust her clodpoll friends."

"Where did you get that word from?"

"Merlin." She'd been watching a lot of *Merlin*. The Blockbusters TJ took her to had DVDs of every episode that had been released so far and she was looking forward to more. Merlin was exactly the kind of character she'd like to be in a fantastical world – smart, funny, powerful, and not all cocky like Prince Arthur. Plus, his gangly looks reminded her a bit of Raymond.

Juniper hadn't seen Raymond in a while. School was busy for both of them and Pearl had been strict about studying. Plus, she was trying to prove to Grace that it was possible to go some time without seeing a boy, seeing as Grace insisted on seeing that dimwit Clint every single weekend – and sometimes even during the week.

The night of Grace's party, Pearl dropped her off at TJ's flat on the way to dinner with some old book club friends of hers.

"Ready for a big night?" TJ asked her in the doorway, trying very hard to form a smile.

"Oh, nothing big. Just a couple of the old girls." Pearl was also trying to smile but she was a bit better at making her smile convincing than TJ was.

“Old girls?” Juniper asked. It was weird that her mother, who was very much not a girl any more, still referred to her friends as girlfriends. When were you supposed to use the word “woman” if not then?

Pearl just nodded.

“Glass of wine?” TJ asked.

Juniper stood awkwardly between them in the doorway. Pearl didn’t normally drop her off and she hadn’t heard her parents speak for so long in ages.

“Sure, why not?” Juniper scurried to her room while her parents headed to the kitchen for wine. She was surprised when, not long afterwards, Pearl called her back.

“It’s for you,” she said, handing Juniper her cell phone.

Juniper took the phone in confusion and noted that the caller ID was Abigail. She wasn’t sure she knew any Abigails.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Juniper.” This was definitely not Abigail.

“Sorry, when I called your home phone, Grace said you were out. And then I realised that your mom gave my mom her number...” It was Raymond.

“Oh, no problem. How are you?”

“Good, good, good. Thanks... How are you?”

“Also good, thanks.” She felt four eyes on her and decided now was a good time to make the most of the mobile functionality of the phone and leave the room. She made her way back to the living room and closed the door behind her.

“What’s up?”

“Oh, uhh... My Leavers’ Party is coming up at school.”

Of course, Raymond was in Grade 7, a year older than her, and his school was throwing a party to say goodbye to the Grade 7s before they wrote their final exams before high school.

“I wanted to know if you’d be my date?”

“Oh, thank you. Yes, of course.” She wondered if being his date was the same as being his girlfriend but then reminded herself that they’d hung out a handful of times.

“Cool! Great!”

She heard him breathing out loudly.

“The invitation said to dress smartly.”

“Right. So I should wear a dress?”

“I think so.”

“Okay.”

Juniper didn't often wear dresses. She suddenly realised she had nothing suitable to wear and felt panic rise in her. After the call, she raced back to the kitchen to find her parents looking very serious as they drank their red wine.

“So, what did he want?” Pearl asked, pasting a smile over her serious face.

“He invited me to his Leavers' Party.”

“Wow, Junie. Didn't realise you guys were serious,” TJ said, winking at her.

“It's not serious. Everyone takes a date. Anyways, I need to go shopping,” she said.

“Oh, how come?” her mother asked.

“I need to wear a smart dress.”

“Oh, wow. That's exciting.” Her voice sounded hollow, croaky, even as she tried to smile. The smile didn't reach her eyes. Juniper wondered if her parents had been arguing or discussing something sad. She knew that Pearl was only trying to sound excited for her daughter's sake. Juniper wished she didn't know what it sounded like for her mother to lie. When she was little, she'd thought her parents told the truth about everything all the time. Since her parents had separated though, she'd realised that was not the case.

“Well, why don't we go to Sandton tomorrow? I'll come pick you up first thing.”

“Okay.”

“And leave me out of it?” TJ asked, with mock disappointment. He was trying to smile too but, just like Pearl, he couldn't quite make it look authentic.

“No offence, Dad, but I don't know how I feel about your fashion sense.”

TJ pretended to gasp.

Juniper felt squeamish watching her parents' attempts at happiness and normalcy.

“Great, well, I should go.” Pearl took a final gulp of red wine and placed the glass down on the counter. “No scary movies tonight please.”

“Only Merlin,” TJ promised, palms raised as though to show he had no weapons.

“Good.” Pearl gave TJ an awkward wave and then kissed Juniper quickly on the forehead before she had time to protest.

Instead of complaining as she usually did though, Juniper gave her mom a hug.

“What's that for?”

“Thought you needed it,” Juniper whispered.

Pearl squeezed her tightly. “We'll find you something super in the morning.”

Juniper nodded though she wasn't so sure they would.

Juniper was trying on a dress in the Woolworths changing room while Pearl waited outside the cubicle. Until recently, Juniper had always let her mom in the cubicle with her, but not anymore. Not since she had hair poking out of unseemly places and thighs that seemed to be expanding every day. If she was honest, which she always tried to be, she looked awful in the changing room mirror. The dress was a faded denim which had looked lovely on the hanger but which fitted her like a potato sack, not to mention how the lights illuminated every drop of grease in her hair and every pimple on her chin.

“Can I see it yet?” Pearl asked.

“Not worth it. It’s hideous.”

“Oh, no, really?”

“Or I’m hideous in it.”

“No, no, I’m sure it’s not that bad.”

Juniper pulled back the curtain halfway and turned to face her mother.

Pearl narrowed her eyes and looked her up and down before nodding. “Okay, not a good fit.”

“I told you.”

There was a mountain of clothes behind Juniper. She’d tried on dress after dress, skirt after skirt. Even the button-down shirt with the Moroccan designs didn’t fit her properly. Her limbs were too short and her breasts too large for the rest of her body. She closed the curtain and changed back into her jeans and t-shirt.

“You’re an improper fraction.”

“A what?” She wasn’t even surprised to see Ms W there, watching her knot her shoelaces.

“Come on, don’t you pay attention in maths?”

Juniper thought about it. “An improper fraction... That’s when the numerator is bigger than the denominator.”

“Yes, like you. And like Pamela Anderson.”

She’d seen a picture of Pamela Anderson in a magazine once. Blonde and sexy and wearing a red swimming costume. She looked nothing like Juniper. Except... “Her top’s bigger than her bottom.”

“Yes, exactly, like you. Buxom.”

“But her boobs are fake, aren’t they?”

“So what?”

“Nothing. I can’t think why she’d want fake boobs.” She eyed herself in the mirror. Her shoulders seemed disproportionately broad and masculine, incongruous with her matronly breasts. She imagined a knife slicing neatly through her flesh, first performing a perfect mastectomy, and then getting rid of half of her thighs. Painlessly, of course.

“Perhaps you might consider exercise or a diet. Maybe that yoghurt and coffee diet Grace has been on,” Ms W suggested wryly.

“As if I’d ever do anything that Grace does!” Juniper began hanging up all the discarded clothes once more so she could bring her failure of a bundle back to the girl who handed out the number cards.

“You say that, but I see how you look at her.”

“I look at her with disgust.”

“And dreamy eyes.”

“Gross.”

“You only hate her because you want to be her.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Bad word for a little girl.”

Juniper eyed her womanly body in the mirror once more. “I’m clearly not a little girl.”

As she exited the cubicle, Pearl offered her a hand, which only made her more aware of a what a colossal failure the trip to Woolworths had been. The pile of clothes was a symbol of sheer disaster and disappointment. She’d never find anything to wear to the leavers’ party.

“There’s always Truworths,” her mother suggested.

“I’m tired. Can we just get something to eat?”

“Sure. We can look again after lunch.”

“Urgh. Can’t I just wear something of Grace’s?”

“I don’t think that’ll work.” What she meant was that Grace’s figure was long and streamlined to match her name, while her sister was more of a pork dumpling.

Juniper sighed. “Fine, we can carry on after food.”

She tried not to think too much about the food she was eating, how much fat there might be in it, whether the chicken contained chemicals that made her boobs bigger, whether she was going to continue expanding horizontally but never vertically, whether Grace’s ludicrous magazine diets made any difference.

“We’ll find you something nice to wear, don’t you worry.”

“Mmm...”

“Maybe the things we’ve tried so far have been too conventional. You need something a little different.”

“Yep, that’s me. Something different.” She stabbed a chip with her fork as she said that pesky word, different.

“I thought you liked being different?”

Ms W smiled at her knowingly from across the restaurant. Juniper was sure she could hear what she was saying, even from all that distance. *You liked being different when you didn’t care what anybody else thought, but now that you care, you wish you could be just like everyone else.*

CHAPTER THIRTY

“This is stupid. I don’t want to stay here during the week.”

“Juniper, come on, be reasonable.”

“No, you be reasonable. I don’t even have a proper bed here.” Juniper kicked the mattress on the living room floor. She was no longer taken with the black duvet cover her dad had bought. She was tired and wanted to go home and this small flat in which she didn’t even have her own bedroom was not home.

“It’s just for two weeks.”

“Two weeks too long.” Juniper sank down into the mattress despondently.

“Don’t you want to spend some time with your own dad?” TJ sat down next to her, trying out a gentle voice and slight smile.

“Not if it means I live far away from school and my friends and I have to sleep on a mattress on the floor.” Juniper didn’t even turn to look at her dad as she spoke.

“Juniper, come on. Think of how nice it will be to catch up and spend some time together.”

This time she had to turn to look at him. “If you wanted to spend time together, maybe you shouldn’t have moved out in the first place. That was your decision, not mine. And that way, we wouldn’t have to catch up on anything in the first place.”

“You’re not being fair.”

“*You’re* not being fair!” She so desperately wished she had a door to slam. All she could do now was start crying and tell TJ to leave her the F alone. She really did just say F and not the full word. It wasn’t time for that, quite.

TJ did leave her the F alone but not without a warning that they’d have to talk about this later.

Juniper wanted to scream into her pillow, but the place wasn’t private enough. She just started pulling at her cuticles instead. Then, after a while, she turned on the TV to see if there was anything worth watching. There wasn’t anything she’d normally watch, so she settled for some reality TV, some show about fat people trying to lose weight. After about five minutes, she got bored and switched to a cooking show instead. She only half-watched this. It was so annoying that Pearl had gone on holiday. Grace kept saying that Pearl needed the break, but Juniper didn’t buy it. Come on, she already spent all her evenings watching TV – even rewatching the same TV – what more of a break did she need? Plus, the break meant that the girls had to stay with their dad, who was still in the same tiny apartment, which was

an okay place for weekend stays but not much more. He also never had great snacks in the house and packed the worst school lunches ever. He may have been her dad, but this wasn't her home.

Grace was doing her usual Grace thing – trying to be at home (or un-home in this case) as little as possible. On Mondays and Thursdays, she had choir practice, on Tuesdays and Fridays, she had hockey practice, and on Wednesdays she insisted on staying at school late to “study” with her friends. Juniper didn't buy it for a second. If Grace spent so much time studying, then how come she wasn't a straight A student? Juniper had tried copying the tactic of staying at school, but it was more difficult when school ended at 12:45 and her dad still treated her like a baby. She did have chess practice on Mondays from 14:00 to 15:00 and she joined Lydia and Marcia at D team netball on Wednesdays from 14:00 to 14:45 but otherwise, she didn't really have much to do. And for some reason, when she suggested studying at school, her dad told her to take it easy or to invite her friends over instead. Lydia and Marcia had been over once, but it had felt weird. At home, she could normally offer them cookies or at least crackers and cheese, whereas here, all they could find was tinned tuna and cereal – which totally don't go together. And then the phone had rung and Juniper had answered it to find her dad's “friend”, Mandy, on the line, and she'd wanted to hang up immediately, but hadn't. Instead, she'd just gone, “Oh, hi, Mandy. This is his daughter, Juniper.” And then she'd taken a message and been in a bad mood for the rest of the afternoon.

Pearl had gone to some health spa or something with her sister, Aunty Larissa. She'd seen the dark green brochure, with its idyllic pictures of mountains and valleys that made it look like a Ceres juice box, sitting on the kitchen table for a few weeks before Pearl finally got up the nerve to tell her about it. The typography across the brochure was a swirling kind of cursive imitation with tendrils pulling away from the ends of Fs and Js and Gs like the wispy smoke of the caterpillar's pipe in *Alice in Wonderland*. The brochure promised such vague benefits as “freedom” and “relaxation” and, most ridiculously, “a break from the world”, as though some mountainside spa resort wasn't part of the world... Was that why Pearl had taken so long to pluck up the courage to tell Juniper about her vacation? Because she knew how farcical the brochure sounded?

It now really did feel like Pearl needed courage to talk to Juniper, like every time Juniper opened her mouth, her mother quivered in anticipation, as though she were a sniper taking her aim – at Pearl. This was annoying and hurtful and made Juniper even less inclined to speak gently to her mother. What was the point, after all, if Pearl already expected the

worst? And why was she, a woman in her forties, so afraid of a 12-year-old girl? Juniper was pretty sure she wasn't a monster, so... None of it made sense.

TJ and Juniper waited for Grace to return from choir practice before eating supper. Once she returned, they ate in hostile silence, broken periodically by the sound of TJ's cell phone or one of the neighbours getting home from work and clattering keys and bags everywhere. Juniper had pulled her cuticles until they bled, and TJ had made her stick plasters over both her thumbs. She twiddled with her plastered thumbs under the table between tiny bites of cottage pie. Grace aggressively stabbed her food and glugged down her apple juice as though she hadn't had a drink all day. When asked about their days, both girls said they'd been fine, and neither one asked their dad about his. After dinner, TJ said he had work to do and retreated into his study.

"Do you think they've just gone crazy?" Juniper asked Grace, while the kettle boiled.

"No."

"No? How could Mom just go on holiday now? In the middle of the term?"

"She's tired."

"We're all tired."

"I know. But tired isn't insane."

"Well, you're cross with Dad too."

"Yes. But not for the same reasons."

"Because of Mandy?"

Grace thought about it. "I'm not sure. Yes, but also no. I still don't even know if Mandy is his girlfriend or not... I'm just angry." Somehow saying this led Grace to deflate like an old balloon. Her face softened and she sighed. "Maybe I'm also just tired." She began making them tea and, after a pause, added a third cup for TJ. "Will you give this to him?"

"Me? I don't want to talk to him."

"Please?" Grace looked strangely like their mother then: the big dark eyes, the thick black eyebrows. All she was missing was a great poof of frizzy hair and a bit more caramel in her complexion. The straight, sleek hair came from their father, as did her long legs.

"Fine." She picked up the chipped blue mug Grace had set down for her.

The door to the study wasn't properly closed, so Juniper nudged it with her foot. Her dad was hunched over his desk with a bunch of papers in front of him. When he turned to look at her,

his face looked almost grey. Perhaps it was the lack of good lighting in the room. There were several lightbulbs that needed replacing. Juniper put the mug of tea down on the desk in front of him and, reflexively, switched on the standing lamp so the light was better. “Grace made it,” she almost whispered as he took a sip.

“Thanks, June.” He sounded as grey as he looked.

“What are you working on?” she asked, lingering just in front of the door.

“Just some admin stuff.”

“For the divorce.”

“No, not for the divorce. Work stuff.”

“Ah.” Juniper wasn’t always entirely sure what work stuff entailed. Finance stuff, she knew, but beyond that, who could say? No one usually had questions after she told them her dad was in finance. It made them think of suits and banks and serious stuff – or at least, that’s what Juniper thought of.

“It’s not all so terrible, you know, June? It’s going to be okay.”

“Are you telling me or yourself?”

TJ smiled with his lips, but not his eyes. “Both of us.”

Juniper edged closer to him.

“It won’t be very different, you know. But I am looking for a bigger place to stay in.

A proper house where you can have your own room.”

“Good.”

“Can you hang in there till then?”

Juniper shrugged. “I guess so. Whatever that even means.”

“You sound like your sister.”

“Hey!”

TJ laughed. “You sound like a teenager.”

“Well how old do you think I am?”

TJ smiled. “Far too old not to have your own bedroom. I’m sorry.”

Juniper nodded. “I have to go study.”

“Okay. Good luck.”

“Thanks.” She pulled the door mostly shut behind her and padded back to the living room/her bedroom to find Grace sitting on her bed, watching *Desperate Housewives*.

“What? This is the lounge.”

“I need to study, Grace.”

“Seriously?” Grace showed no indication of moving.

Juniper's fists clenched automatically. "Turn the bloody TV off, Grace."

"I don't think the TV looks so bloody, to be honest, June. This isn't one of your vampire shows." She smiled smugly at what she must've thought was terribly clever. Imbecile.

Juniper felt the blood rush to her face. "Grace!" Her voice was abnormally shrill. "Get up and get *out*!"

Grace turned to look at her properly now, eyes wide. "Jesus. Okay." Grace turned off the TV and stood up abruptly.

Juniper was trembling all over like a leaf in the wind.

"Holy guacamole. Good night then." Grace bounded out the room and down the passage to her own room.

Juniper released a long sigh. She pulled her study timetable out of her school bag and assessed what she had in store for herself that evening. Maths, science, and biology, she saw. Half an hour of each. She opened her maths notebook and began to leaf through it. After a while, the numbers began to blur together into one giant number, and she supposed that meant it was time to move on to science. Concentrating was tough though – even when there were words to focus on. She missed having a desk to sit at with a little lamp to shine on her notes. She was all hunched over sitting on her mattress. She moved to the kitchen table, but it was to no avail. Her eyelids were heavy.

"You're going to fail if you keep it up like this," Ms W remarked from her seat across the table.

"I'll be fine."

"You telling that to me or to yourself?"

"Don't quote me."

"Just saying... You're not off to a good start, and if you don't do well in your exams, that will impact your overall grade."

"You don't think I know that?"

"Well you wouldn't think so from this unserious approach to studying you have going on."

"F off."

Ms W smiled menacingly and left.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Thankfully, the second term of Grade 6 was finally coming to an end, which meant most of the classes were winding down and all anyone was talking about was the August holidays. Marcia was especially excited because her family were going to Mozambique, her first ever trip outside of South Africa.

“I hear it’s amazing there. Clear blue sea, delicious prawns, and coconut everything!”

“Yep. My cousin went there,” Lydia said. “She said she ate the most delicious coconut bread every day until it made her constipated.”

“Eeuw, Lydia. That’s disgusting. Please, some of us are trying to eat here.”

“Ah, June.” Lydia laughed.

“What are you doing again, June?” Marcia asked.

“For the holidays?”

Marcia nodded.

“Not much. Grace is going on a choir tour in the Drakensburg for the first two weeks and my dad said he’d go down for a couple of days to watch her. He asked me to come with but I’m not super keen to be honest.”

“The Drakensburg is beautiful though!” Lydia insisted.

“Yeah, but then I’d be going specifically to watch my sister sing in the choir, whereas, if I stay home with Pearl, I have two Grace-free weeks.” She didn’t add that it also meant two weeks of checking her mom wasn’t living in a dark stale room. She never spoke about that at school.

“Well, think about it maybe.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

When she got home from chess practice, Grace was blowing her nose aggressively in front of the TV.

“Jeez, you got a cold?”

Grace turned to look at her. Her nose was red and her eyes puffy. It was the worst she’d probably ever looked.

“You look terrible.”

“Gee, thanks, Juniper.” Clearly not so sick as to have lost her edge.

“Are you still going to the Drakensburg?”

“Yes, of course.” Grace flung her tissue into the wastepaper basket she’d moved right up next to her. It was already brimming with tissues. She blew her nose again.

Juniper perched herself on the opposite end of the couch, not wanting to catch whatever her sister had.

Grace turned back to the show she’d been watching. It was some American reality TV show that made Juniper bristle with secondhand embarrassment.

“You going to be okay if I skip this one? It’s not really my thing.”

“God, Juniper. Yes, I’ll be okay without you,” she snapped without looking at her sister.

“Wow, okay. I’ll make a note never to be nice to you again then.” Juniper felt her eyes welling with tears. It looked to her like Grace’s might’ve been too, but she quickly assured herself that couldn’t have been right. Or if it was, Grace was just responding to the flu or whatever she had. Juniper left the room before the tears properly fell down her cheeks, just managing to talk herself out of slamming her bedroom door.

She sat on the floor for a while, hugging her legs to her chest and listening to the sounds of the house. Grace was still watching her mindless TV show and blowing her nose nonstop, while Pearl was working in the study with treacherous pop music playing.

“She must think you’re a real clodpoll,” Ms W said, sliding down onto the floor opposite Juniper.

“Who?”

“Grace, obviously.”

“Why?”

“Well, she didn’t even care that you were leaving.”

Juniper sighed. “I don’t care about what she thinks.” But it wasn’t true and Juniper knew it wasn’t true.

“You’re all alone in this noisy house.”

“I would be, if you weren’t here.”

Ms W laughed. “You’ll miss me when I’m gone.”

“You say that like you’re about to leave.”

“And what if I did leave?”

“Please, you’d never let me off the hook like that. It’s always the same.”

Ms W raised her eyebrows curiously beneath her lopsided horse-races hat.

“Just me and you, Ms W.”

Juniper began rearranging the ornaments on her shelf, switching around the little dodo figurine Granny Sally had given her with her Dumbledore bobblehead. After a few minutes, she started all over again, arranging the figurines in height order like she used to do when she was little.

“You’re not little any more though,” Ms W told her.

“I thought you were going to leave me?”

Ms W smiled. “Not today.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

It felt a little strange to be Raymond's date to the Leavers' Party without having seen him for nearly a month. Juniper wasn't sure what to take from this. Partly, it was her own fault for trying to prove to herself and everyone else just how important school was to her, and partly it had to do with juggling weekends between parents. TJ had made an offer on the house he really wanted to buy but someone else had made a better offer, so that was the end of that thought for a while. Pearl was somewhere between mid-life hippie crisis and the walking dead, watching far too many reruns in bed and forgetting things she shouldn't be forgetting – like that 6:30 was dinner time and Juniper's stomach was punctually hungry.

"It's bloody annoying," she heard Grace saying, shoulder hunched up to her ear to support her cell phone while she stirred her attempt at napolitana sauce on the stove. Trusting Grace with the pasta sauce was surely a bad idea but Pearl had gotten all crotchety when Juniper complained of hunger and then told them it would be good for them to learn to do things for themselves.

"They're all royal eggheads. Yes, you heard me."

At least Juniper wasn't the only one to be called an egghead then. She was busy chopping up basil leaves to sprinkle on top of the pasta when it was ready. Her hands weren't used to chopping things and she was a bit afraid of the big knife, but Pearl wouldn't take no for an answer.

"It's bullshit. All of it."

Juniper wondered what it was.

Grace was stirring the sauce quite aggressively now. She even sloshed some over the side of the pot by mistake. "Juniper, get me a wet cloth, won't you?"

"What's the magic word?"

Grace rolled her eyes. "Please."

Juniper sighed. A win was a win. She went to fetch a cloth from the scullery. As she walked past Grace she overheard the girl on the other end of the line call her "Leggy".

Grace snapped her phone shut without even saying goodbye.

"Who was that?" Juniper asked, handing her the wet cloth.

Grace began wiping the stove top, tears in her eyes. "No one. Just some bitch who I thought was my friend."

"Are you okay?"

Grace nodded slowly. “Just pissed off.” She handed Juniper the tomato-covered cloth. “Sorry,” Juniper said, taking the cloth back to the scullery to rinse. “Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.” She turned down the heat on the stove and put the lid back on the pot.

“Where’s the pasta pot?”

Juniper pointed to the top of the cupboard. “It’s too high for me to reach it.”

Grace obligingly retrieved the pot, not even needing to go on her tippytoes to do so. Her body stretched elegantly upwards, her movements smooth and swan-like.

“Is she your nemesis now? The girl on the phone.”

Grace laughed, hovering over the sink as she filled the pasta pot with water. “No. She’s just one of many... minions.”

“Minions? Of who?”

“Of the grapevine.”

“Huh?”

“You know, stories people tell each other. Look at this.” She pulled a picture up on her phone.

Juniper adjusted her glasses, squinting at the image of a piece of exam pad paper. She could see it was a list of names. And there, sure enough, was her sister’s, next to the tag “Leggy”. “Best legs, Grace Leggy Lennox,” she read aloud.

“Yep.”

“Isn’t that a compliment?”

“On a list shared by boys from Maslow High with a bunch of girls’ names next to body parts? Mmmm... No.”

“That is a bit weird.” She kept reading. Best lips, best butt, best boobs, best hair. “I mean, aren’t you flattered?”

“No.” She placed the pasta pot heavily onto the stove and turned the plate on. “It’s not just, oh, Grace has nice legs. It’s oh, and every guy has...”

“Seen them?”

“Never mind. It’s... Not nice.” Grace sprinkled some salt into the water.

Juniper nodded. “Well, that’s rubbish. Can’t your boyfriend tell these guys they’re wrong? Doesn’t he go there?”

Grace laughed, but it wasn’t a happy laugh. “Who do you think started all this?”

“No!”

Grace nodded. “It’s whatever, I guess.”

“He’s a clodpoll,” Juniper said.

Grace laughed again, but this time it was a happier laugh. “Yes. I’ll make sure to tell him that if I ever speak to him again. Thanks.”

Juniper gave Grace a quick hug, then, feeling that this was weird, quickly announced she had stuff to do but would call Mom for dinner shortly.

They didn’t talk about the “Leggy” incident at dinner or any other time. Juniper instinctively guessed that this was a bit like the cigarette incident, best for Pearl not to hear about it. She bit into the pasta, which was a little bit overcooked and soggy, and looked towards her mother.

“Not bad,” Pearl said.

“A little mushy,” Juniper said.

“Needed to cook for less time then. Now you guys know. I like the sauce though. Well done, girls.”

Grace nodded, seeming to push her pasta around the plate more than she was eating it.

“So, what should we do tomorrow?” Pearl asked.

All Juniper could think was that she wanted to get out of the house. “What about ice skating?”

“Ice skating? Aren’t you terrible at that?” Grace asked, the mocking tone back in her voice, but only just.

“No... I mean, I’m not the best, but I haven’t gone in ages.” Memories of falling on the cold ice resurfaced unwittingly.

“Okay,” Pearl said. “Ice skating. At Northgate?”

“What other rink is there?”

“Grace, I’ve had enough of your attitude tonight.”

Grace scoffed. “Right, well, that’s me out.” She took her plate, which was still full of pasta and dumped it in the scullery before heading for her bedroom.

Pearl watched her with wide eyes. “Grace!”

Grace was already gone though.

Juniper shovelled the rest of her food into her mouth. It was mushy but she was hungry.

“What was that all about?”

“I’d leave her alone if I were you.”

Pearl sighed. “Okay, ice skating. Do you want to invite your friends?”

“They’re away.”

“Both of them?”

She wondered briefly if it was sad to have the word friends encapsulate only two people. “Yep.”

“Uhhh, what about Raymond?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I haven’t spoken to him in a while.”

“No fight though?”

“No.”

“Why don’t you call him up? I’m sure he’d appreciate the invite.”

Juniper had never invited Raymond anywhere before. It felt dangerous. She looked at her mother with saucers for eyes. “Like now?”

“Sure. Why not? You can use my phone. It has his number saved.” She handed Juniper her phone.

Juniper felt trapped. On the one hand, she had been thinking it would be strange to be his date when she hadn’t seen him in so long, but on the other hand, the idea of speaking to him on the phone gave her instant churning worms in her stomach. Her palms were already sweating.

She waited till they’d both finished eating and putting the dishes in the dishwasher before taking Pearl’s cell phone into her room and pressing the number to call.

“Hello?”

Juniper considered not saying anything and then realised that his phone probably had caller ID. “Hi, Raymond.”

“Juniper! Hi. Long time!” He didn’t sound angry though. Juniper wasn’t sure anger was an emotion he possessed. She struggled to picture him angry.

“Yes, uh, sorry. Things have been... Hectic.” The ultimate cop-out, although it wasn’t really a lie.

“Yeah, I’m sure. For me too.”

She wasn’t sure what to say now. She was losing her nerve and the problem with speaking on a cell phone was that there was no cord to anxiously twirl around her fingers like worry beads.

“I’m glad you called though.”

Juniper smiled with relief, wiping the palm of her free hand on her duvet cover. “Thanks. Um. I wondered if you maybe wanted to come ice skating with me tomorrow?”

“Sure, yeah! That would be great. Maybe our moms can go shopping together or something.”

Juniper wasn’t sure what shopping there was to do around the ice rink but surely, the moms could find something to do. “Or something, yeah.”

“Okay, cool. Let me just check with my mom.”

“Okay.” She waited, squinting her eyes as though it would help her to discern his footfalls on the other end any better. His mom must’ve been in another room. She could only hear the vaguest murmur of voices.

“Juniper?”

“Ah, yes?”

“My mom says that’s cool. How’s 10ish?”

“That should be good. Meet you there?”

“Yeah, cool.”

“Cool.”

“Bye then.”

“Bye.” She pressed the End Call button and tossed the phone onto the bed, annoyed that it couldn’t snap shut like Grace’s phone.

“What a terrible idea,” Ms W said.

“Maybe,” Juniper agreed, sinking onto the floor and thinking of every bad skating experience she’d ever had. But she did feel excited suddenly, buoyed by the prospect of seeing Raymond again.

The morning sun only appeared very late and Juniper wrapped herself up in layers and layers of clothes in preparation for the ice rink. Pearl ensured she had thick socks on and reminded her to keep her hands in a fist if she fell so that no one would accidentally chop her fingers off with their ice skates. As if she didn’t already have enough to worry about.

They met with Abigail and Raymond at the ticket centre, where they parted ways, the moms deciding they’d go get a coffee while their children skated.

“Are you any good?” Raymond asked, while they waited in the queue for ice skates.

“Oh, no, not really... I’m kind of horrible actually, but I live in hope.”

Raymond laughed. “You can only get better, right?”

“Right.”

They secured themselves some shoes and then set up strapping them on and waddling awkwardly towards the rink. There were a ton of kids there, most of them holding onto the railing for dear life, but a few were braver and had ventured into the middle. Raymond, she soon realised, was one of the brave ones. Juniper was not. In fact, she was pretty sure she’d never get up the nerve to leave the railing and was beginning to regret ever coming in the first place.

“Oh, come on, Juniper. You can do it,” Raymond called to her.

A small boy, surely not more than five years old came zooming past her, slamming to a halt at the side before spinning around and zooming back across the rink in the opposite direction. Juniper felt the mortification of being upstaged by a five year old spread across her whole body, as though the ice beneath her were spreading and turning her into a stalagmite, forever stuck in shameful space.

“Hey, it’s okay. Let me help you.” Raymond was next to her suddenly, standing against the railing where she had frozen.

Juniper felt like she was about to cry. “I don’t think I can do it.”

“Don’t be scared. Here, take my hand.” He offered her his hand and she looked at it questioningly. “Trust me. I won’t let you fall.”

Juniper inhaled deeply before placing her ice cold hand in his. She felt a strange tingle of excitement in her fingers, which was soon once again replaced with terror. “What if I fall?”

“You won’t. Come.” He began to skate slowly away from the side, bringing her with him.

She wanted to scream, but she didn’t. She just kept her eyes on Raymond as he somehow managed to sway his feet across the ice and take them all the way to the middle. She held his hand so tightly it hurt and just tried to keep breathing. When they reached the middle, he stopped moving and when she tried to, she nearly fell, but Raymond grabbed hold of her middle, stabilising her.

“You’re alright,” he said.

“That was terrifying.”

“But look, you did it.” He smiled and she couldn’t help but smile back.

“Don’t you dare let go of my hand though. There’s no way I can make it back on my own.”

“No problem. Ready to go to the other side?”

Juniper nodded. This time it was better. She’d calmed down a bit and wasn’t holding Raymond’s hand quite so tightly. She tried to mimic the movement of his feet and at times, she almost felt she had it right. There was no denying the relief she felt when they reached the side though.

“Not so bad, was it?”

“Uhhh... Not my best.” But she smiled. It hadn’t all been terrible; she’d held his hand.

They joined their moms for hot chocolate afterwards and Juniper began to defrost. Raymond sat quite close to her at the table, not so that they were touching, but almost. They walked towards the cars together and she wondered if they'd hold hands again, but it felt weird with their moms next to them. Raymond was going to the Kruger Park the next week, but he promised to bring her back a souvenir. It was so silly, but Juniper couldn't stop smiling.

Their hug goodbye felt earned by her bravery on the ice.

"You did well out there," Raymond said as their hug ended.

"Thanks. I'm not sure I'll ever do that again." But she smiled.

Raymond dashed to catch up with his mom and then they all waved goodbye to each other.

"Sweet boy, with a lovely mother," Pearl said as they got in the car.

"Mom!"

"What? I didn't say anything bad."

Juniper sighed. It was true, but she didn't want to talk about Raymond with her mom.

"You like him, don't you?"

Juniper shrugged and then, begrudgingly nodded.

"That's okay. That's nice."

"Yes, Mom. Can we just talk about something else?"

Pearl laughed. "You're blushing."

"Mom!"

It was excruciating and yet, when she thought about it, not a bad day.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

It had finally happened, the leaves of the past year had withered away to brown crunch and dust and now, it was all beginning all over again, from the smallest leaves on the smallest trees to the grass on the school field. Hay fever season back again. From dawn till dusk, that was all Juniper was doing – sneezing, being afflicted by the pests of the air and trees. Pearl was back in her attempts at light-hearted colour and cheer and had invited gushy Eunice over to drink wine and smell the jasmine blossoms while they sat on the front patio. And Grace was filling her days with extracurricular activities, so many of them that they hardly seemed to see her any more. Which Juniper didn't mind too much. It meant the computer was free more often for her to take deep dives into her rabbit hole of the week or play Club Penguin or The Sims 2, which Marcia had lent her during the holiday. She could spend hours creating simulations of human families, complete with strange, half-painted houses, and asymmetrical gardens. Whenever Pearl popped into the office while Juniper was playing, she'd exclaim at her interest in architecture, but she was only seeing what she wanted to see. The houses were there for necessity's sake. They took too long to build and Juniper didn't really care about them so long as she had her families in place. It was the people she really cared about.

She spent hours watching these fake families interact, supervising the mother while she learned to make macaroni and cheese, ensuring the house didn't burn down, forcing the grumpy children to do their homework, making the dad swim in the pool until he was positively bursting to go to the toilet. Suffering with him as his bladder exploded in the passageway on the way to the toilet and he cried in mortification. But the best was playing with the teenagers. Juniper enjoyed creating multiple families in one go and having them all live in the same house so that the boy from the one family and the girl from the other family could start dating. That was the best. Clicking and clicking and clicking until they'd passed from chatting to dancing to flirting to kissing. It was all so simple in the Sims.

In between homework and chess club and playing the Sims, she'd SMS Raymond from her mom's phone. They'd been to the movies with TJ, which somehow felt more chilled than excursions with Pearl and TJ had even fist bumped Raymond goodbye in an attempt at coolness which had made Juniper laugh like a lunatic.

The term was ticking by with the horrors of swimming returning, but there was something hopeful in the air. Juniper's hair was past her shoulders now, which meant she had to sweep it up in a ponytail for school. It never stayed securely in place for long though and she was constantly adjusting it and dirtying her hair in the process. But at least it no longer

stuck up as it had before. The last term was here, the flowers were blooming, and the hairs on Juniper's legs were sprouting up like the grass. She started visiting Pearl's beautician, Rachel, every three weeks to wax them. She liked to call these visits her trips to the torture chamber, and when she started waxing her bikini line for swimming, she had to admit the name was truly apt. But they weren't all bad. She was beginning to feel more grown up now, more like a lady. Still not a woman, but a lady. And even her breasts didn't embarrass her quite so much anymore. In the right shirt, she had to admit, they didn't look half bad.

Sitting in English one day, she caught sight of Jam out of the corner of her eye. Jam was drawing something in her notebook. It looked like a peacock, a very skilfully sketched peacock.

"Wow, Miranda, that's so cool!"

Jam looked up shyly. "Thanks, Juniper." Her hair was still greasy as ever but her smile seemed genuine.

"That is cool," Lydia said, taking a look for herself. "I didn't know you could draw like that."

"I've always wanted to be an artist," Jam said.

"Wow!" Marcia gushed. "Flippen' cool."

"Girls, please focus on your work," their teacher warned. They got back to it.

After English, Jam walked with the three musketeers to their next class, Zulu. She was talking about the art classes she'd been taking for years now and how they should come try a class. It didn't sound like a terrible idea. Juniper looked around instinctively for Ms W, assuming she'd have something to say, but she couldn't see her anywhere.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The first day of exams was ushered in by the heady smell of jasmine on the breeze and the squelch of sticky Jacaranda flowers underfoot. Juniper bent down to pick the sappy, flattened flowers off the bottom of her school shoe. Up close to the shoe, she saw the thick, dark strands of hair on her calves, silhouetted by the sun like dark blades of grass. She had been meaning to book a wax for a while now, but exams had totally distracted her.

“It really does look like a haunted forest down there.” Ms W eyed her legs disapprovingly.

“Well, you should see my armpits.” Juniper wasn’t in the mood for Ms W’s taunts. Today was meant to be a good day. She straightened up and fixed the skirt of her dress. A thread had come loose from where her mom had let the hem out once again just the other day.

“It’s not just my hair that’s growing.” Juniper had grown at least an inch since her birthday – or so said Pearl anyway.

“No, you’re growing wider too! And more...” Ms W paused to take a crude look at Juniper’s body. “More matronly.”

Juniper laughed. “Good one.”

Ms W, for once, had nothing more to say. Not even anything snide about what Juniper’s performance would be like in the exam. But what could she say? Today was the Maths exam and Juniper had been preparing for this for weeks – for years really, if you considered how diligent she’d always been. Walking towards the assembly hall where they’d all be writing, she felt about as ready as she could be, although her palms did get clammy, and her stomach turned to a bubbling soup as she got closer to the wide-open double doors. Flocks of girls were outside the hall chatting nervously, asking last minute questions, and packing notebooks away into their bags. Juniper began putting her bag down and taking out her pencil case, trying not to eavesdrop on any Maths-related conversations.

“Oh, Juniper will know this one, won’t you?” It was Genevieve, wearing her silly tacky lip-gloss and mascara even on an exam day, her ponytail perfectly positioned so that long wavy locks tumbled down behind her.

“I don’t discuss exam stuff before exams,” Juniper said.

“Oh, don’t be silly, Juniper!”

“I’m dead serious. Don’t ask me anything. I don’t want to think about it until I’m in there.”

Genevieve's pristine smile faltered, her eyebrows furrowing. It looked as though her face were a loading screen on a computer, desperately trying to recalibrate but not quite finding the right page to land on.

"Good luck, Genevieve. I'm going to find Lydia and Marcia."

Lydia and Marcia were, luckily, not too difficult to find. They were, as Juniper had guessed, in the bathroom, where Lydia was emptying her bladder for the third time since she'd gotten to school.

"I can't help it," Lydia moaned from inside the bathroom stall. "I have a bladder the size of a freakin' teaspoon."

"You're telling me! I've only been here half the morning waiting for you." Marcia turned to Juniper conspiratorially. "I think she might need to drink a bit less tea."

Juniper laughed.

The toilet flushed and a red-faced Lydia emerged.

"Don't think I didn't hear that, you guys." But she wasn't really angry.

"It's just nerves," Juniper said.

"Oh, I know. I've taken a Rescue Remedy already." Lydia splashed her face with water. "Do you want one?" She pulled the small pill bottle out of her pocket.

"No, thanks."

"I'll have one," Marcia said, grabbing the bottle out of Lydia's hand.

Juniper had heard that Rescue Remedy was homeopathic, which, in TJ's opinion was just another way of saying "crap", but she didn't feel now was a good time to mention this to her friends. They walked back to the hall discussing everything other than the upcoming exam – how weird it was that Pearl and the lawyer lady were spending so much time together, how TJ had finally found another place to move into that actually had three bedrooms, how Lydia's brother had started doing CrossFit and Lydia thought he was beyond mad, and how Marcia thought they should all go camping at the end of the year.

"Marcia, no. That's gross."

"Oh, come on, Juniper! It's nature. How can it be gross?"

"You walk around barefoot in your garden and are okay with that, Marcia. We are not the same."

"No, we aren't, but that's why camping would be good for you."

"I'm kind of with June on this one," Lydia admitted. "The whole no toilet thing is an issue."

“Of course that’s what you think of,” Juniper laughed.

“But you don’t even like public toilets, June. Can you imagine no toilets?”

“Guys, guys. Calm down. There are toilets. Every campsite has an ablutions block.”

“That you share with other people?” Juniper mimed puking.

“You’re both such bloody princesses.”

“Why can’t we go glamping? I’ve seen it on TV. It looks much more...”

“Civilised?” Juniper suggested.

“Oh, shut up, both of you.” But there was no malice in Marcia’s voice. They all laughed.

The hall looked imposing now that the time of the exam was approaching. For the first time, Juniper noticed how high the ceiling was and how the windows seemed to glare down at her from what she guessed was at least three metres up. Almost like a church, but without the stained glass. They were entering a sacred ceremony, lining up in alphabetical order with their requisite transparent pencil cases in hand. Juniper’s pencil case was actually just a Ziplock sandwich bag, but it did the trick. She stood quietly in line behind a very fidgety girl called Benazir. If anyone needed that Rescue Remedy – or something stronger – it was Benazir. She was constantly swivelling around, zipping and unzipping her plastic pencil case, tagging at the sleeves of her blazer and adjusting her glasses. Juniper suddenly began to feel conscious of her own glasses and lifted them off her nose to inspect the lenses for smudges. As always, there were a few. While she was trying to remove them with the skirt of her dress, the line began to move. It was go-time. Thank God.

The girls filed into their assigned seats after having their pencil cases and the pockets of their blazers inspected for crib notes. Lydia, Juniper, and Marcia searched wildly for each other across the room to produce enthusiastic thumbs ups, and then Mrs Monday asked for hands to be raised if any of the desks were wobbly. Miss Greely, the young, energetic teacher-in-training, dashed across the room with little bits of paper to fit under the cold metal legs of the offending desks. Then Mrs Monday instructed the girls to bow their heads in prayer. Juniper closed her eyes, partially listening to the prayer but mostly listening to the suddenly aggressive sound of a leaf blower just outside.

“Right,” Mrs Monday said, waking them from their brief reverie. “As you can see, we’ve positioned this big clock at the front of the hall so you can all see it.”

Juniper squinted at the clock, wondering if she perhaps needed to update her prescription. Just as well she’d borrowed Grace’s Swatch for the day.

“Good luck, girls. You may begin.”

Juniper turned over the page to see the exam paper. The sound of papers turning was loud and abrasive. It was as though she’d suddenly acquired super-hearing, like she’d become Superman. She could hear someone clicking their ballpoint pen, someone rocking on their chair. She could even hear Benazir’s breathing. Ms W appeared, standing in front of the stage, close to Mrs Monday, but she was quiet for once, merely watching. Juniper nodded at her wearily and turned back to her paper. She took a deep breath, picked up her pencil and began to read the questions.

“So, how was it?”

Juniper was just reaching the circle in the middle of the parking lot, having fist bumped Lydia and Marcia and said her goodbyes when this unexpected figure emerged from the crowd of mothers in their linen trousers and trendy shoes.

“What are you doing here?”

“That bad, huh?”

“No, it was fine. Good actually.” It had been good, as good as any test she’d ever written before.

“I knew it. The only person who could leave an exam feeling good. I’m sure you aced it.”

“Yeah, well... I hope so. But really, what are you doing here?”

Grace sighed loudly. “Thrilled to see you too, sister dearest.” She pulled her head to one side and then to the other in an attempt to stretch out her neck. Lately, she’d been getting terrible headaches and she’d gone to a physio who told her to do these special neck stretches. “Mom called me about half an hour ago and asked me to come over and tell you she can’t fetch you now. Something came up.”

“What? On the first day of exams?”

“Apparently.”

“How did you even get here?” Juniper peered out at the sea of shining SUVs around her as if she’d see some wild motorbike there that Grace had stolen from an unsuspecting victim.

“Again, I can feel you swelling with gratitude right now.”

Surely Grace was meant to be at school now too. And she was too young to know how to drive. It didn’t make any sense.

“I got a lift with a friend of mine and her older brother. They were driving this way anyway and have kindly offered to take us both home.”

“Are you bunking school?”

“For crying out loud, Juniper. Why do you always assume the worst? I have exams too, remember? My Grade 9 exams – the last ones I write before starting the subjects that I will do until Matric. God.”

Juniper felt her face get warm. “Right. Sorry.”

“God’s sake. Let’s go.” Grace grabbed Juniper’s schoolbag with some aggression and led her through the parking lot to where her friend and her friend’s brother were waiting in their second-hand punch-buggy.

Juniper had to punch Grace for that of course. “Punch buggy.”

“Ow. Jeez, Juniper. Grow up, won’t you?”

Grace’s friends were okay, very nice really. They asked all about her exam and how she was feeling while Grace looked out the opposite window and rubbed her left shoulder.

“I’ve heard so much about you, of course,” Grace’s friend Julia said.

“Really?”

“Yeah, really,” Grace muttered.

“Of course! Your sister is very proud of you and how smart you are. And I heard you’re on the chess team. How cool! I don’t even know how to play.”

“Oh, it’s really not that hard.”

“I can teach you if you want, Jules,” Grace said. “If even I can play it, how hard can it be?” Somehow this comment felt like it had a sharp edge to it, like it was flaking off pieces of Juniper’s skin.

“Did you have an exam today?” she managed to ask, now conscious that perhaps she should’ve learnt a bit more about her sister’s life.

“Oh, yeah. We had geography,” Julia answered.

“Can’t wait to drop that. It’s the worst,” Grace added.

“I also hate geography.”

“Really? I thought the only subject you hated was PE.”

“Well, that too. But geography is so lame, and my teacher has a skirt that looks like it’s made out of office blinds.”

They all began to laugh.

“Honestly, don’t teachers know their fashion choices are on display?” Grace said playfully. “We are all deprived of the ability to choose our own outfits at school so they should do better.”

“And she should really dye her hair,” Juniper added. “It’s gone all grey and I don’t even think she’s that old.”

“It probably makes her look 20 years older.”

“Yeah. Maybe that’s why she’s a Miss, not a Mrs.”

“Maybe.” Juniper started laughing too, until suddenly something caught in her throat. Not like a cough, more of a cry, or the tears behind a cry. Because soon Pearl would move from a Mrs to a Miss or maybe a Ms. Maybe she’d even go back to using her maiden name.

When they got home, Grace put popcorn in the microwave and turned on the TV. Juniper tried to have a nap but couldn’t fall asleep thanks to the sound of the neighbours’ lawnmower. It seemed that no matter where she went, lawnmowers and leaf blowers followed her. Giving up on sleep, she went to watch TV with Grace, who was so slouched in the couch it was as though she’d become one with it.

“Thanks for fetching me.”

“No problem.”

“What are you watching?” It wasn’t *Desperate Housewives* or *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, but something Juniper hadn’t seen before.

“Oh, it’s some high school musical kind of thing... But more grown up. It’s called *Glee*.”

It was also American. Easy enough to tell from the garish accents and even more garish cheerleaders. Everything they watched was American. Except for *Harry Potter* but even that was only not American because J.K. Rowling had made that a condition of them making the films.

“It’s pretty good so far,” Grace said.

About 10 minutes and half a bowl of popcorn in, Juniper decided that Pearl would have a heart attack if she found Juniper watching this. Already, a cheerleader was pregnant, and they were talking about sex things. She was riveted.

Pearl got back late in the afternoon, after Juniper and Grace had finished watching TV and had both gone to their rooms to study and procrastinate studying. Juniper heard a knock on

her bedroom door. She'd stuck a piece of cardboard on the door with the words "STUDYING. DON'T COME IN" written on it.

"Yes?"

"Hi, June. It's me."

Juniper yawned. "Come in."

Pearl appeared in the doorway looking tired. She still had her laptop bag slung over her shoulder and there were bags under her big brown eyes. "I'm sorry I couldn't fetch you today."

Juniper shrugged. She didn't get up from her bed.

"How was your first exam?"

"It was good. No, I don't want to jinx it. It was decent. Fine."

"Good, good. That's good." Pearl hovered in the doorway, as though at the threshold to the Underworld and debating if it were worth venturing down there for her daughter's spirit or not.

"Where were you?"

"I had some admin to take care of."

"Seriously? Admin? If you're going to lie about it, at least pick something believable."

"Juniper!"

Juniper rolled her eyes. "Tone, I suppose?"

"I did have admin to do, Juniper."

"Admin can be done at any time. That means you deliberately chose then."

"No."

"It's divorce stuff, isn't it?"

"That is part of it."

"Mmmm... You've been spending a lot of time with that lawyer lady."

"I have to."

Juniper sighed and rolled onto her back, looking up at the pressed ceiling. "Whatever."

"Are you on your period?"

She rolled over quickly and sat up straight. "What the hell, Mom?!"

"Well, you're kind of being -"

"What?"

"Bitchy."

Juniper stood up and started towards the door. Her mother backed away slowly. This backing away only made her angrier. Tears welled in her eyes.

“Can’t you ever be nice to me, Juniper? Just, normal, nice?”

“Can’t you ever let me have feelings without blaming it on hormones?!” At least that’s what Juniper meant to say, but her words came out garbled by tears.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there after your exam,” her mom conceded, enveloping her in a hug. “I’m sure you did brilliantly.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Bloody hell to bloody F-ing hell. These words were now entrenched in Juniper's vocabulary, as they were Lydia and Marcia's, as they were Ronald Weasley's. By all accounts, they could be worse. Juniper had been reprimanded by a prefect and told she was "blaspheming". She wanted to go all Rhett Butler and say that quite frankly, my (not so) dear, I don't give a damn. But of course, she didn't do that. She wasn't a total clot. But all ponderings aside, she really did feel like whipping out the colourful language right now because Grace had been hogging the bathroom and she really needed to pee.

"Grace! This is code yellow. Urgent yellow. Need to pee now!"

Surprisingly, there was no snappy response, only the sound of the toilet flushing and Grace shuffling things around and blowing her nose sharply. Then, Grace appeared in the doorway, her eyes red and swollen, gaze to the ground.

"Are you okay?" It was weird seeing Grace this way. Of course, she'd seen her cry before. She just couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her so... Sad? Was it sad? It seemed stronger than sad. She was cradling one elbow in her hand, holding it tightly, as though it were injured, but there was no injury that Juniper could see. What was even weirder was that she wouldn't look up from the floor.

"No, I don't think so," she said slowly, so softly Juniper almost missed it.

"Are you sick?"

Grace shook her head very slightly and sniffled.

"Did... Did someone die?" Juniper found herself whispering.

"No."

"Don't tell me you have allergies. I'm not a dummy and they always say that in sitcoms."

Not a laugh, not even a slight smile. "Go pee, June."

"I will, but only because I'm bursting."

When Juniper got out of the bathroom, she went straight to Grace's room. The door was closed, so she knocked. Grace didn't tell her to go away but she didn't tell her to come in either. She just croaked a "Yes?" which Juniper took as her signal to get in there.

“Are you and Mom fighting?” Juniper asked, sitting on the edge of her sister’s bed. She began to plait the tassels at the end of Grace’s stripey bed throw so her hands would have something to do.

Grace was lying on her side, facing away from the door, legs pulled into her stomach with her arms wrapped around them like the pastry keeping a sausage roll together.

“No.”

“Dad?”

“No.”

“School friends?” She paused thoughtfully and then whispered, “Enemies?”

“I fucked up, June.”

Juniper nodded. This was something to go on at least. “At school?”

“No.”

“It’s totally normal to do, you know. The teachers always tell us that.” She had to add the second part because Juniper had no personal experience of F-ing up at school and she didn’t really apply this “normal” business to herself with that kind of thing... But she did apply it to Grace.

“Not at school.” Her voice wavered a bit.

Juniper walked around the side of the bed so she could see Grace’s face. She sat on the floor and looked up at her. Tears were trickling down in rivulets, smudging Grace’s lovely black mascara. Juniper reached her hand up tentatively to pat her sister’s shoulder like someone in a movie where they go “There there”, only she didn’t say the trite line. She suddenly realised she had no idea how to comfort her sister. She had never really thought of her sister as someone in need of comfort before.

Grace shut her eyes tightly and pulled a face, a grimace really, before her crying transformed laboured sobs, like she’d suddenly realised how badly she’d messed up.

“Hey, hey. Don’t worry. It can’t be that bad.” Juniper tried stroking her shoulder.

“It – it...”

But she was crying too much and there was too much snot running down her face and her throat seemed too choked up to get anything else out. So, Juniper ran to fetch the tissue box from the dressing table and pulled out a handful of tissues. Grace began to blow her nose and wipe her face. The crying calmed a bit, but Juniper didn’t know what to say.

“I did something stupid and now... and now...”

Juniper nodded and watched her sister expectantly.

“And I’m scared.”

“What did you do, Grace? I won’t tell anyone, I promise.”

“Not even your friends?”

That was a tough one, but she could do it, this time. “Not even my friends. I’ll pinky swear it.” Juniper held out her pinky solemnly.

Grace laughed a choked laugh and lifted her pinky. They clasped pinkies.

“Okay, now tell me.”

“You won’t judge me?”

“No.”

“You know how I was hanging out with Clint?”

“Right...” This not judging thing might become hard. Juniper had never thought much of Clint.

“And... And he seemed like a nice guy...”

“But he wasn’t really?” Surprise surprise.

“No... And so I stopped seeing him. But... Remember the leggy thing?”

“Yeah...”

“Well, it wasn’t just that. Clint told everyone I hooked up with like the whole rugby team.”

“And they believed him?”

“Yeah... Or, I mean, they seem to...”

“Morons.”

“Yes... But... that was bad enough and now...”

It got worse?

“Now, my period is late and I’m freaking out.”

“Hang on... You had sex with this Cliff guy?” She tried not to sound judgey or repulsed when she said “sex”. She’d said it a million times before in class speeches and when trying to show Marcia and Lydia how mature she was, but it felt different to treat it seriously.

“Clint. Yes. Like a month ago, before he turned into an ass...”

“Okay. And...” All Juniper’s knowledge of sex came from *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Glee*, *Atonement*, and the bunch of adult books she’d pilfered from the bookcase. “Did you uhh... Did you use a condom?”

“Yes. God, Juniper, obviously.”

“Okay, okay. But so then... It’s probably fine, right?”

“Like 90% of the time I think, yes. 10% is kind of a big margin with people having sex... Kind of a big margin when it comes to maybe having a baby. I looked it up. There are so many stories of people using condoms and then having babies anyways.”

“Can’t you take a pregnancy test?”

“How am I going to get to Dischem? This isn’t America. I can’t drive.”

“What about that friend of yours who drives?”

“I can’t ask someone else. Then I really will always be known as *the slut*.”

Juniper pushed her fingers up through her hair, grossed out to realise how greasy it was and how her new, supposedly oil-free moisturizer, had caught in the fibres of her fringe.

“Okay. We’ll have to ask Mom then,” she said finally.

“Are you nuts?”

Juniper shrugged. “We are out of options. It’s her or Dad and I think Dad would be worse.”

The front door swung open loudly. Pearl was back from her yoga class. Eunice had insisted yoga would be good for her. It made her even more insufferably bohemian in Juniper’s eyes, but there it was. Pearl called out to her girls. Only Juniper responded.

“Grace? Is Grace here?”

Grace curled up once more.

“She’s not feeling well!” Juniper called back.

“She’s gonna come check on me now, idiot.”

“I’ll keep her in line,” Juniper said sternly.

Grace closed her eyes.

Pearl’s appearance in the doorway was ghostly in the dim evening light. Grace had left all the lights off in her room and all that remained of the sun was fast disappearing behind the trees outside.

“It’s so dark in here! What’s going on?” Their mother reached instantly for the light switch, illuminating the chaos of her eldest daughter’s room. Pillows were scattered across the floor and a big pile of tissues sat at the base of the wastepaper basket next to Grace’s dressing table with more sitting in a discreet corner of her bed. Pearl edged tentatively towards the cocoon of her firstborn child. She looked briefly at Juniper with wide question-mark eyes.

Juniper tried to keep her expression neutral and stern as she’d promised. She shrugged her shoulders as casually as she could.

"Grace, honey, are you okay?" Pearl reached a hand towards Grace's forehead instinctively. "No fever at least."

"I'm okay." Grace looked at the ground. "I'm just... I did something stupid." Then she began repeating it. Something stupid. Something stupid. I've been so stupid. I'm so stupid. So fucking stupid.

"It's okay. It's okay," Pearl began saying gently. "I know you, Grace. You're not stupid."

"No, no, but I am."

Pearl managed to get Grace to sit up and sat herself down beside her. "Whatever happened, it's going to be okay. Tell me what you need."

"What I need?"

"Or what happened? What happened? Why are you so upset?"

"It – it would just prove them all right."

"Who? Who would it prove right?"

"Everyone at school and at Marlow High." Marlow High was the nearest boys' high school to Grace's school, the school Clinton attended.

"And what is *it*?"

"The rumours about me... about me being a slut."

Pearl drew a deep breath in. When she let it out, she leaned closer towards Grace and whispered, "Would you like me to ask Juniper to leave?"

"No," Grace said. "I already told her everything."

Juniper felt cool just then, like Grace saw her as a full grown-up, worthy of listening to difficult grown-up conversations, and worthy of hearing the story before her own mother.

"Okay," Pearl said. "Why don't I make us all some tea and we can sit down together properly to discuss this?"

But now didn't seem like a good time to discuss anything because Grace had begun to cry again.

"Grace," Juniper whispered in the hopes that Pearl wouldn't hear, "can't you take a test?"

Of course, Pearl did hear. "A test, Juniper?"

Juniper winced. "This is between me and Grace, Mom. Give us a second."

Pearl nodded slowly and began to back away towards the door.

"At least then you'd know, Grace. And then you could figure out..."

Grace nodded, wiping her face with her sleeves. "Okay."

“Can I tell her?” Juniper whispered.

Grace nodded.

“Mom, can we get Grace a pregnancy test?”

For a second, Pearl’s whole face appeared to unravel. She couldn’t find the right place to put her surprise, her shock, her dismay. Could she not hide it in the corner of her mouth, the heaviness of her tongue, the crinkles next to her eyes? She couldn’t quite hide it anywhere, until suddenly she could. Juniper marvelled at her mother as, in no more than a few seconds, her face registered every emotion and then, just as quickly, became a neutral mask of itself. It was a skill Juniper was sure she’d spend a lifetime trying to master.

“Okay. We’ll get you a blood test. It’s more accurate than the tests from the shop. Let’s go.”

When Grace showed no indication of moving, her mother insisted, “Now. I’m not sure the labs will still be open.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The inside of the car felt like the heat of a Cape Town beach without the wind. Stifling. Juniper rolled down her window as soon as she could, until Pearl told her not to open it so far as it was dangerous.

“I don’t have a phone for anyone to steal,” Juniper argued.

“I’ve put the aircon on. Just wait for it to circulate.”

Juniper sighed loudly.

“Are we going to talk about this, Grace?”

Grace was sitting in the backseat with Juniper, even though she normally sat up front and even though Pearl hated having them both in the backseat because it made her feel like a taxi driver.

“I’m not ready to be lectured. I already know I fucked up.”

“Language, Grace.”

“Oh, give it a break, Mom. The worst has already happened. What’s left now?”

“That’s not true, Grace. God, do you hear yourself?”

“Leave her alone, Mom. Please?”

Pearl sighed. “You see the kind of example you’re setting your sister here, Grace?”

“For God’s sake. I haven’t committed a crime. Besides, Juniper’s not like me. She’d never get into this situation in the first place.”

“I should hope not. She’s only 12. And you, might I add, are only 15.”

“That’s not what I meant. Juniper’s smart. She’d never sleep with a stupid boy.”

Pearl sighed. “Oh, Grace. It’s not stupid to have sex. Everyone does that at some point or other.”

“Unless they’re asexual,” Juniper interrupted.

“Right, well, most people. And you know, it’s a totally natural, normal thing. I just wish you would’ve waited a little before...”

“What, like until the *sanctity* of marriage?”

The old bile was back in Grace’s voice but suddenly Juniper realised she wasn’t being nasty for nastiness’s sake. Grace was hurting. This didn’t, however, stop their mother from flinching at the reference to marriage.

“No, not until marriage. I don’t care about that. I care about you being safe and emotionally mature enough to deal with... The repercussions.”

“I thought I was safe!”

“Then why are we on our way to Lancet now?”

“Because my period is a week late. But not because I didn’t use a condom. How thick do you think I am?”

Pearl sighed. “Glad to hear that at least.”

“I know I’m not A+ chess champion Juniper, but I have a few brain cells of my own.” It suddenly occurred to Juniper that Grace, beautiful, long-legged Grace might actually be jealous of her.

“Stop talking about your sister like that. This is not a competition.” Pearl found a parking outside the lab and reversed into it. “Come. Let’s go. Juniper, you can wait in the car.”

“Oh, God no. It’s a furnace in there. Please let me come with.”

“Fine.” Pearl shut the door and began walking towards the lab.

“Don’t forget to lock the car, Mom!” Juniper called.

The high-pitched beep of the alarm switching on sounded.

Grace looked pale and sickly sitting on the narrow bed while a nurse drew blood from her arm. Juniper felt a bit queasy watching the blood draw out of her veins and through a tube. She looked around for Ms W. It would be strangely comforting to talk to her just then, even if all Ms W would say was how Juniper had put her foot in it with her mother or how Grace clearly despised her for being such a nerd. But there was no sign of Ms W anywhere, so Juniper had to content herself with her mother, who’d suddenly become embarrassingly chatty, and her sister, who’d gone totally silent and still.

“All done,” the nurse said. “Are you hoping for a yes or a no?”

Seriously? Asking a 15-year-old if she wanted to have a child just seemed cruel. But then, Grace was quite tall and her body looked pretty womanly. She could pass for 18 perhaps.

“A no,” Grace whispered.

The nurse nodded and had the audacity to smile.

Back to the furnace. Pearl didn’t say anything as Juniper rolled the back window all the way down. For a while, all that could be heard in the car was the ticking of the indicator, the low growl of the engine, and the very low volume pop music peeping out of the forgotten radio.

Juniper was briefly tempted to stick her head out the window like a dog and poke her tongue out into the cool air too. Instead, she just stuck out a hand, until Pearl noticed and told her a passing car could take that hand right off.

“Then I’d be like Thing from the *Addams Family*, and he’s probably the coolest character,” Juniper said. She waited for Grace to butt in and say that Morticia was the best, or maybe Wednesday, but Grace was just gazing out the closed window on her side of the car.

“It’s going to be okay,” Pearl said at last. “I’m sure it’s nothing. You know, often your period will be late simply because you’re stressed. It’s happened to me many times. And I am proud of you for using a condom... and for telling me about this now.”

Grace let out a slow breath. “Thanks, Mom.”

“I wouldn’t even know if my period was late. It just comes whenever it wants to,” Juniper said. “And I hate it every time.”

“Oh, I’d love to have a really nasty, painful period right now,” her sister said.

“It’s a funny thing. You spend half your life praying for your period to come and the other half praying for it not to,” Pearl said.

Juniper had never imagined that her period would be something she’d want to have, something she’d pray for. She didn’t really pray to begin with, but she thought that maybe now would be a good time to start. She’d pray for Grace to get hers.

“What happens now?” Grace asked.

“Now we wait. Dr Allens will get the result soon. Hopefully by tomorrow night.”

“So Dr Allens will know?”

“Please, Dr Allens has known you your whole life. He’s dealt with every ailment and injury. He once had to give you a suppository for your constipation, remember?”

“How could I forget?” Grace sighed.

“Does Clint know about this?”

“No.”

“And why not?”

“Because he’s not my boyfriend anymore.”

“Since when?”

“Since he started being an asshole and spreading rumours about me.”

Pearl sighed. “I’m sorry, Grace. I didn’t know. You could’ve told me, you know?”

“I know... You had your own shit going on with the divorce and everything.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t notice. I should’ve noticed... I’ve been so caught up in my own...” She never finished her sentence, something which drove Juniper mad ordinarily. But right then it seemed okay. Pearl reached for her eldest daughter’s hand and squeezed it.

Grace started crying again but without making a sound. Juniper leaned over to give her a hug. They held each other tightly for the rest of the drive home.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“Juniper! Juniper! Juniper!”

Juniper’s eyes opened and she sat up groggily, disoriented. There was a dim light peeping in from under the curtains but not much. She reached for her glasses and then Grace’s Swatch to check the time. She still hadn’t returned the Swatch and didn’t plan to any time soon. It was only 5:17 am. This was madness. Still, Juniper got out of bed and followed the sound of Grace’s voice to the bathroom, her stripy sleep shorts sticking to her groin in sweaty creases. A mosquito had bitten her in the night, and her arms and legs began to itch with the realisation of several swollen bites.

“Grace?” She pushed open the bathroom door to find her sister sitting on the toilet.

“What the hell, Grace?”

“Look! Look!”

It was the most disgusting and most beautiful thing Juniper had ever seen. Red and brown and wet, sitting neatly in the centre of her sister’s pyjama shorts, which sat curled around her ankles on the tiled floor. Suddenly this thing, that had recently become the bane of Juniper’s existence, this thing that supposedly meant she was a woman now, this thing that made her moody and achy and feel like slothing around and fighting the world at the same time, it was suddenly a thing that stirred hope and relief and the belief that sometimes, it wasn’t all so bad.

“I’m so happy for you!”

Grace began to laugh in disbelief.

“But, Grace. This is seriously gross. I don’t ever want to see *this*,” she waved her hands in the general direction of the floor, “again.”

Grace laughed. “Okay, June. Okay.”

The sun was practically blasting through the cracks in her curtains when Juniper’s eyes opened again. She rolled onto her side and examined the Swatch. 10:34. Much later than she’d slept in ages. Her mouth felt like it was filled with cotton wool, with the fluff stuck on her teeth. It also tasted sour, gross. She made her way to the bathroom and proceeded to brush her teeth vigorously until her gums bled. Bloody awful. Literally. Juniper laughed at her own joke. She half expected to see Ms W watching her sceptically in the mirror but all she could see there was her own groggy reflection. Her hair was greasy, the scraggly fringe slick against her forehead. The rest of her hair reached almost to her shoulders now though, falling

in waves that didn't look entirely unpleasant. She had a fresh array of pimples on her chin and under her chin, across the bridge of her nose, and a really huge, pussy one right in the middle of her neck. She'd been a bit slack with the Roaccutane during exam time and it showed.

Juniper had a long, hot shower, scrubbing her hair as vigorously as her teeth, and then covered herself in body lotion as soon as she stepped on the bathmat. She was going to her dad for lunch today because his mother, Granny Sally, was visiting from Durban. What a great day for company.

TJ picked her and Grace up at 12, by which time Juniper had managed to assemble the longest parts of her hair into an attempted ponytail and blow-dried her fringe so it didn't fall in her eyes. Grace looked effortlessly good in jeans and a t-shirt, her long hair arranged in a perfect fishtail plait, and her eyes made up with dark kohl as usual.

"You feeling okay?" Juniper whispered as they headed for the door.

"Fantastic. Only I feel like an idiot for freaking out and telling Mom and going for the test and everything."

"You're not an idiot. You're just paranoid."

"Thanks... I think?"

Juniper found her arms around her sister's tall slim body, somehow, and soon Grace's arms were around her too. They held each other for a moment before opening the door to see TJ and Granny Sally. TJ was the same strangely hollow, grey man he'd been for the past few months, except that he'd decided to shave his face completely this time, which made him look younger and more like the dad they used to know. Granny Sally was all sunshine and roses next to him with her perfectly coiffed, definitely dyed auburn hair and her pink floral dress.

"Where are my girls?" she asked, as if they weren't standing right in front of her. Grace obediently kissed her and was kissed by her and Juniper followed suit, trying not to flinch too much from the sloppy kisses.

"You're so big now, Junie!" She looked Juniper up and down with eyes enlarged by her thick round spectacles.

Juniper self-consciously adjusted her own spectacles and felt her eyelashes brush against the glass lenses uncomfortably. She'd tried to put mascara on underneath her glasses, but it seemed to make her lashes not fit in place quite as well as they normally did.

"You're all grown up!"

"I'm only 12 years and 6 months old actually."

“Well, you look like a little young lady to me,” her grandmother practically cooed, her gaze resting momentarily on Juniper’s breasts.

Juniper felt her face flush.

“Hi, girls,” TJ interjected feebly. “Where’s your mother?”

“In the shower.”

TJ nodded. “Right, well, I guess we’ll see her when we drop you back later.”

And so, off they went for lunch, which was thankfully at a restaurant and not in their father’s cramped apartment.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Raymond's Leavers' Party had to happen right in the middle of exams and just after the stress of Grace's absolute meltdown. There was obviously no better time for it. It must be at a time of peak stress for Juniper, when her face was breaking out in great red spots, ripe for the popping, and the bags under her eyes were so large that they appeared to have contain layers of bags.

"It's not so bad," Rachel, the beautician was saying. Pearl had been going to Rachel for so long now that she was basically a friend. One who'd seen way too much of Pearl's body – and her daughters' as well.

"It is too." Now was time for a mini facial, as Rachel called it, but nothing felt mini about it for Juniper. The cleansing and exfoliation were fun and all the products she used smelt intoxicating, but now was the time when Rachel started squeezing all Juniper's pimples and that, though necessary for the dance, was nearly unbearable. Juniper squirmed in every direction and gritted her teeth.

"You're doing well," Rachel told her. "Nearly there."

The nose was the worst, especially the pimples that were lodged right on its bridge... But then Rachel reached Juniper's chin and she decided that that was actually the worst. Finally, all her pimples were popped, and Rachel was wiping some kind of disinfecting tea tree balm over her face.

"Just relax. I'm going to put you under the steamer now."

Sure enough, hot air began to engulf Juniper's whole face as she closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. It felt like a sauna just for her face, which felt even better when Rachel placed cool, damp rounds of cottonwool over her closed eyelids. The tranquil music playing in the background lulled Juniper into a kind of trance. She heard the door click as Rachel left the room, leaving her to lie under the gentle pulsating rhythm of the steamer and the distant melody of yogic music coming from the CD player.

The Leavers' Party took place the day after the torture of the mini facial and the leg and underarm wax that soon followed. Juniper had only her mother to blame for her hairy body, though she knew the oily, acne-prone skin came from her dad. TJ had become a kind of peripheral character in her life for the past few weeks. He'd been away several times for work and then again with his "not girlfriend", Mandy, and Juniper had been busy studying. He'd phoned her on the day of her first end-of-year exam, but she knew that was only because

Pearl had told him when her exams were. So, it felt weird to see him standing in the entrance hall with a small gift for her as she emerged from her room wearing the emerald green dress she and Pearl had finally found on their third dress-hunting trip. It was a classical velvet sleeveless dress which sat tightly, but comfortably, across her breasts and then flared outwards till it ended about two inches above her knees. It didn't hug her tightly across her thighs or her bottom, which had been her fear, but actually looked pretty flattering. Even Grace said so.

"Wow," TJ said, as she walked towards him. "You look so grown up."

"Yes. You've missed me growing up a bit."

"Hey, June..." He had the forlorn look of a lost child.

"Not a judgement, just a fact."

"I'm sorry. I have been a bit caught up in my own... stuff."

"As you always are," Pearl said coolly, as she swept into the room in an ornate shawl. Juniper smiled at her, grateful for the backup.

"You look beautiful," her mother said, tucking a loose piece of hair behind Juniper's ear.

"Like her hair, hey?" Grace asked, with a grin. She'd spent what felt like at least an hour curling it with her straightener and spraying it all over with aggressive hairspray.

"Very nice, Grace," Pearl said.

TJ nodded, a lone figure outside the circle of glowing females. He seemed about to say something, then paused, and tried again. "I got you this." He handed Juniper a small cardboard box.

"Thanks, Dad." She opened it to find a delicate silver bracelet with a small pendant of the Queen chess piece on it. "Oh, it's lovely! Thank you!" She rushed to give him a hug and he held her tightly.

Pearl helped her put the bracelet on and then announced it was time for pictures.

"What about Raymond?"

"We'll take more when he gets here."

"Okay."

They took picture after picture. Juniper by herself, Juniper with her mother, her father, Grace, both parents, her mother and Grace, her father and Grace, but never them altogether. Juniper even got a picture with Black Cat, not that he was terribly cooperative.

TJ and Pearl disappeared then, into the kitchen, to talk in private for a bit.

"Divorce stuff?" Juniper asked her sister.

“Probably. I think it’s pretty much finalised now though. Finally.”

“Yeah. Makes sense.”

“No more *Parent Trap* attempts from you?”

Juniper laughed. “Eh, not worth it.”

“Yeah. We’re not gonna give Mandy an easy time of it though, are we?”

“We’ll see.” Juniper sat down on the couch and examined the chess piece on her bracelet.

“It is a really spot-on gift, for once,” Grace admitted, sitting down next to Juniper and admiring the bracelet too.

“I think he’s trying.”

“That’s what you’ve got to look forward to as you get older.”

“Bracelets?”

“Men trying to make you like them by buying you nice things.”

Juniper laughed. “And you’re the expert?”

“No, no. Although, a guy friend did give me a nice cigarette box.” She pulled a beautiful silver box out of her jacket pocket.

“Are you mad? Mom and Dad are just in the other room.”

“Oh, come on. Have a look.”

Juniper took the box in her hands and fingered the delicate carving of a flower on the outside of the box. “It’s very pretty. Sure he’s just a friend?”

“Yes, definitely. I’m done with boyfriends for a while I think.”

“Good idea.”

“And look,” Grace said, opening the box with a gentle click. There were no cigarettes inside, just a slim box of chewing gum.

“You’re not smoking anymore?”

“Nope. Been there, done that, got a nice box for it. Now, I’d like to save my lungs for singing.”

Juniper smiled. “I think that’s the best decision you’ve ever made.”

“Thanks.” She passed Juniper a piece of chewing gum and then put the box back in her jacket pocket. “Good luck tonight.”

“Thanks,” Juniper said, her stomach suddenly a swirl of agitated moths. She popped the chewing gum in her mouth.

“Don’t chew it so obviously.”

“You’re one to talk.”

Grace laughed. "I'm not going to a dance."

Juniper tried to chew more slowly, gracefully. She wasn't sure chewing gum was a graceful thing to do.

"When is the boy getting here?"

"Raymond. You know his name is Raymond."

Grace smiled. "I know. I just like seeing your cheeks go all red."

Juniper shook her head. "He should be here any minute now."

"Fabulous. Throw the gum out just before he comes. You do not have this graceful thing down, but at least your breath will smell fresh."

Juniper nodded. "He's not going to be that close to me to tell though."

"Eh, just in case."

Raymond looked very smart in his suit and his tie matched Juniper's dress perfectly. Pearl and Abigail must have conferred on this point. They hugged hello briefly and were then made to pose for several photographs for both sets of parents. When the parents were finally satisfied and had all had a drink together, Abigail and Raymond's dad, Ron, declared it was time to go.

"Good luck," Grace whispered, as she passed Juniper a shawl to take with her.

"Thanks."

"Not that you need it."

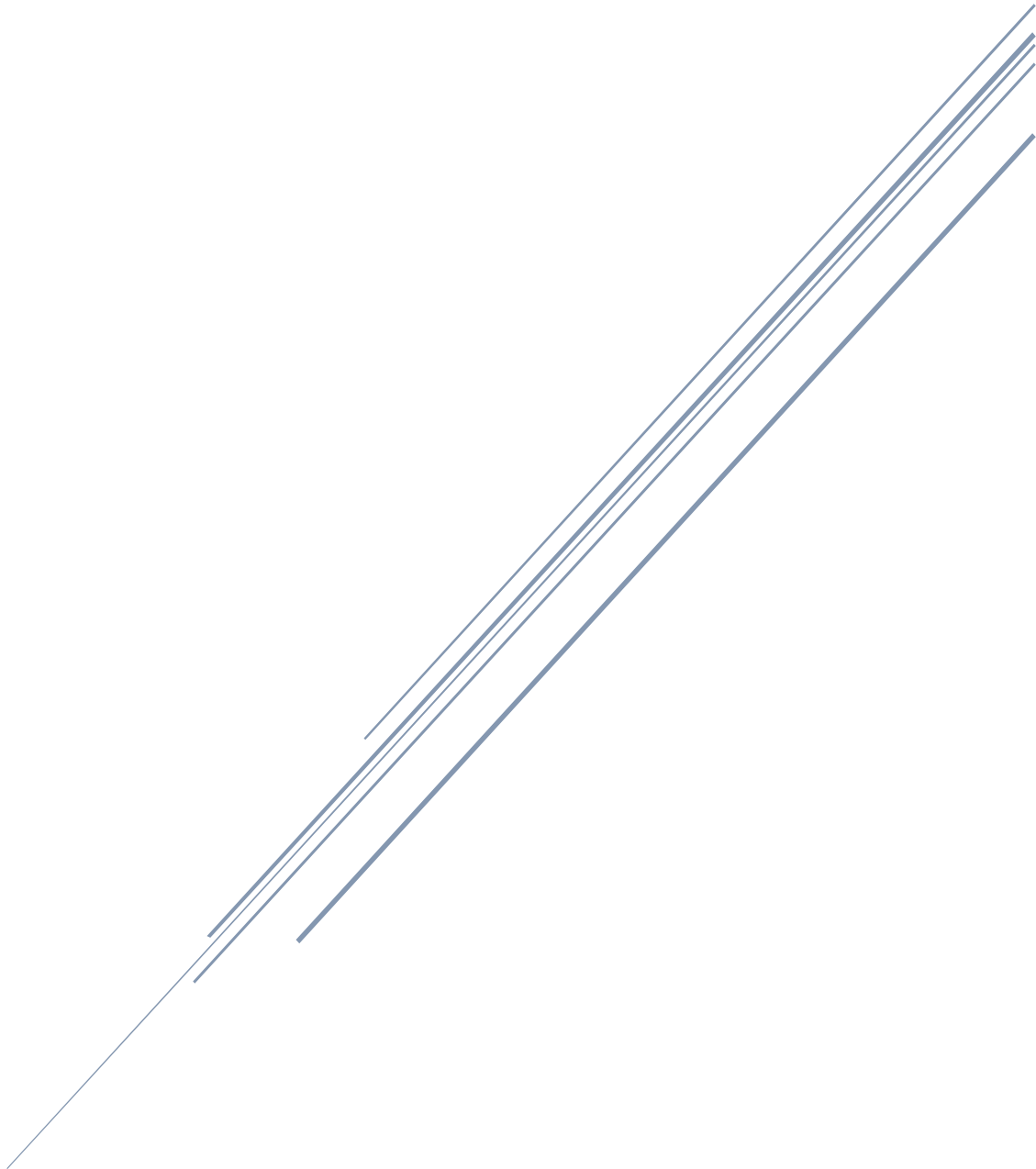
"Wow. Who are you and what have you done with my sister?"

Grace winked. "Don't get used to it."

Pearl and TJ both kissed Juniper goodbye and she didn't flinch with either kiss. Then, it was time to go with Raymond and his parents. As she was heading for the door, Black Cat made his presence known and rubbed his soft black body across her smooth waxed legs.

"Bye, Black Cat," she whispered. She looked around the room in search of an unusual hat adorning the head of a tall, gaunt woman, but there was nothing but the usual ornaments. Her mother's hat stand was the closest thing she could find, located in its position next to the door. It had more shawls draped on its sturdy wooden arms than hats, but there was a large straw hat sitting in the very middle that looked very familiar. Juniper smiled wistfully at the hat. Wherever Ms W was, it couldn't be too far away.

REFLECTIVE ESSAY: COMING OF AGE & THE LOSS OF CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE



When anyone asks me about my master's project, I describe it as a coming of age novel. This makes sense as it is about a 12-year-old girl coming to terms with puberty, a changing body, hormonal shifts, and the idea of growing up. However, there are a few peculiarities to do with this idea of "coming of age" that have struck me along the way. One of these is the idea of childhood and the innocence that children are often assumed to have – and then lose as they come of age. But if innocence is typically also associated with ignorance, what then of a protagonist who is an intellectually precocious child? In this essay, I will consider the changing perceptions of childhood and childhood innocence over time. I will argue that the idea of "letting children be children", as the expression goes, is a uniquely modern concept and that societal understandings of childhood, childhood naïveté and what is considered child-appropriate behaviour have all changed over time. Moreover, these ideas of childhood and childhood innocence have often served certain political or social causes. I will also consider the special position of the girl child and how her coming of age is and has been considered differently to that of the boy child. My main contention is that the idea of losing one's childhood innocence to come of age is not a great calamity for innocence and virtue but rather an opportunity for expanding knowledge and increasing compassion. Furthermore, it may be worthwhile to reconsider the pedestal upon which childhood innocence and ignorance have been placed and consider how "difficult knowledge" might be imparted to children in more fruitful ways.

To begin with, I would like to unpack the idea of childhood innocence and its cultural significance. In her chapter, "Innocence", in the 2020 book, *Trickbox of Memory* (edited by Felicitas Macgilchrist and Rosalie Metro), Lisa Farley describes innocence as "a tricky construction" (65). Innocence is tricky in that it indicates "a state of happiness, moral purity, and "carefree enchantment"" while also being "linked to histories of social injustice" (Farley 65). Farley argues that the idea of innocence has been constructed to support "a largely unquestioned educational idea"; the idea that children should be guarded against "difficult knowledge" of the larger context in which they live so that they can go on to "become custodians of a better future" (65). As such, children are treated as the solution to the troubles of society at large. However, paradoxically, they are expected to fix these problems without having any knowledge of the problems in question. Farley traces this paradox back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "idealised fantasy of childhood as the embodiment of nature" (65-66), noting that most schools continue to strive to protect children from difficult knowledge while expecting them to become the saviours of tomorrow. Farley argues that this idealistic idea of the innocent child who will bring about a better future suggests a culture that would forget the

darker aspects of the past. This leads me to consider whether protecting childhood innocence is not really another way of protecting childhood *ignorance* and, at what point does this attempt to protect children go too far?

The area in which Farley focuses on this idea of protecting childhood virtue is the realm of the school, with special reference to the historical events that children are taught about and to the books that they encounter as part of their syllabus. Although Farley is writing from a Canadian context, there is a lot of overlap in the methodology of teaching and views of childhood between the Canadian and South African contexts particularly as these are both countries were colonised by European countries and, thus, influenced by European educational practices. Farley considers Freud's notions of melancholia and mourning, explaining that the melancholic person internalises the pain of loss "to the point of "devouring" its own center" while the mourner "transforms the anguish of loss into memory" (67). As such, melancholia "defends against the difficult work of acknowledging how loss undoes the ego's protective boundaries" (Farley 68), whereas mourning entails more of the difficult work of letting down those boundaries. Farley contends that a melancholic attitude toward the past has seeped into much of the contemporary Western school curriculum and pedagogy, giving the example of the idealisation of Anne Frank "as a child beacon of hope that tempers questions of cultural genocide and sexuality that Frank also pens in her diary" (68). By focusing on the most hopeful, virtuous aspects of her diary, teachers bypass some of the more uncomfortable questions that may arise from reading about a girl living through the holocaust. With these more uncomfortable areas out of the limelight, children do not need to grapple with questions around the extent of evil that may be possible within ordinary, everyday citizens. Instead, their attention is redirected to the hopeful figure of Anne Frank. While this idea is far from universal, it can also be seen locally in the notion of the "Rainbow Nation", an idealised vision of total acceptance of racial diversity, and the "Born Free" generation, those South Africans born after 1994, with the idea that the new generation would be free of the prejudices and violence of the past.

The redeeming figure of the innocent child is, thus, a melancholic figure which "harbors ambivalence between... the wish to absolve historical violence, and... the anxiety of children's fantasied loss of innocence in encountering representations of such violence" (Farley 69). The child is therefore idealised and kept apart from difficult knowledge. However, while the idea of a brighter future in which children do not possess the terrible ideas of their parents or grandparents may be appealing, by keeping children in the dark about the horrors of the past,

their educators unwittingly lead them to preside over an “unchanged world” (Farley 69). After all, how can children right the wrongs of the world if they do not know about those wrongs?

If protecting children signifies protecting the future, then children are, by implication, dormant adults who are not yet aware of the issues of the adult world. In Suzanne Shanahan’s 2007 paper, “Lost and Found: The Sociological Ambivalence Toward Childhood”, she considers the influence of Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* (1762), in which Rousseau describes childhood as the “sleep of reason” a time in which one does not worry about conventional expectations (413). As Shanahan opines, “this characterization was part description and part prescription—the childhood he observed and the notion of childhood he sought to create” (413). To further complicate matters then, childhood is not only a construction arising from a certain society at a certain time that reflects the attitudes of that society towards children, but it is also often used as a kind of aspirational idea – or on the contrary, as a warning – in literature. In Shanahan’s view, childhood is “both aspiration and cultural artifact” (413) a goal for the society that envisions it and a way to make sense of that society in hindsight.

Recently, Puffin, an imprint of Penguin Random House publishers, was at the centre of a scandal to do with the censorship of a number of Roald Dahl’s children’s books. Before the republication of a number of these books, sensitivity readers were employed to review the books for any words that might cause offense. When word got out that words such as “ugly” and “fat” were included in the list of words deemed too insensitive for children to read, public outrage followed with authors like Salman Rushdie and Philip Pullman weighing in, alongside the British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, as reported by *CNN* (Asmelash n.p.). The backlash against the censoring of children’s books, even by those who agreed that, as Rushdie puts it, Dahl was “no angel” (Asmelash n.p.) suggests that the tide may be turning when it comes to hypersensitivity around children. This comes alongside a growing backlash against a so-called “woke” culture of intense sensitivity and so-called “political correctness”. For instance, the *Daily Mail* slammed the sensitivity edits, quoting enraged parents saying, “If you’re that easily offended stay at home in bubble wrap” (Mailonline n.p.). Following the backlash, Puffin decided not to go ahead with the censored versions of the Dahl books. Francesca Dow, the managing director of children’s books at Penguin Random House, is quoted in an article by the *Financial Times*, as saying that the debate has “reaffirmed the extraordinary power of Roald Dahl’s books and the very real question around how stories from one era can be kept relevant for each new generation” (Alim n.p.). While Dow phrases this as a question around relevance, I find that it is more a question of what society deems appropriate and “safe” enough for children to encounter. By limiting references to demeaning descriptions such as “ugly” or “fat”,

sensitivity readers are not necessarily preparing children to be more sensitive adults. On the contrary, modern psychological studies have found that attempting to shield children from difficult truths may be detrimental to their development. As author and psychologist, Richard E. Cytowic M.D., puts it in an article for *Psychology Today*:

Well-meaning parents sometimes try to shield their kids from unpleasant facts. They assume that the tough details of reality will upset the children and inflict grave harm. But evidence to the contrary shows how mistaken they are. Efforts to sugarcoat reality or shield children from harsh truths unintentionally hamper their ability to learn from misfortune and develop the resilience that makes negotiating adult life easier. (Cytowic n.p.)

Thus, exposure to insensitive or uncomfortable words may lead to an awareness of some of the uglier parts of life, which can help children build resilience and the ability to cope better with future hardships.

When it comes to determining what is appropriate for children to learn about, pedagogical discussions frequently revolve around ideas of preserving the goodness of innocence and safeguarding children from the evils of “difficult knowledge” (Farley 70). At times, teachers argue that children are not yet capable of understanding certain ideas, while, at others, they argue that certain content simply will not appeal to children. However, the idea of what will appeal and what *ought* to appeal, according to teachers, is not necessarily the same (Farley 70). Farley notes that the research of Grumet, Chang-Kredl and Wilkie finds that adults read children’s literature to recover something that they feel they have lost: the innocence, freedom and happiness of childhood (71). However, childhood is not necessarily devoid of difficult or traumatic experiences. The happily-ever-after format of many children’s books is but a myth and, as Farley argues, “This proclivity to procure positive affect and protect childhood innocence... risks silencing children’s embodied experiences of living in a world of social and historical conflict” (71). Therefore, the emphasis on childhood innocence that must be protected may do more harm than good in terms of educating children and preparing them for when they come of age.

In addition, childhood innocence itself is not a trait that is inherent in all children, but rather serves a more symbolic function. In an interview about her 2010 book, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood in Black and White*, author and professor, Robin Bernstein, explains just how new the idea that children are naturally innocent is. As she says, “Three

hundred years ago, there was no assumption that children were innocent” (Keches n.p.). Bernstein explains that the idea only became widespread in the United States in the early 19th century. Then, once this perception of childhood “became laminated to the idea of innocence, children could be used strategically in political arguments” to make these arguments seem “apolitical, or simply evocations of truth” (Keches n.p.). Children were used to gain sympathy for political causes. Bernstein uses the character of Little Eva in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as an example. Bernstein describes Little Eva as “an angelic, white child, in a loving relationship with an adult slave” (Keches n.p.). The relationship between Uncle Tom and Little Eva is intended, according to Bernstein, to make Uncle Tom appear innocent and to imply that abolition will be innocent too (Keches n.p.). In this way, the symbol of childhood innocence was used to make a political point.

Moreover, historically, childhood innocence tended to be associated with white children as a way to “[exclude] non-white children from innocence and from childhood” in some of the most racist periods in American history (Keches n.p.). Similarly, Farley notes that for racial minorities, “the classification of childhood calcified into a discourse of infantilization justifying violent interventions in the name of progress” (72). Thus, the notion of childhood and, specifically, childhood innocence was considered differently for different races in order to serve different political motives. Likewise, class impacts upon one’s experience of childhood, determining the kind of school to which one has access and the hardships to which one may be exposed. The kind of experience of childhood that one has in an underprivileged, working class family will likely be very different from the experience of childhood one has in a wealthy, middle-class family. This is especially true in the South African context where socioeconomic divides are stark. While I will not be focusing on this particular area of study, I think it significant in illustrating that the now-pervasive notion of childhood innocence has historically been used to serve certain political and social causes and is often symbolic rather than inherent to childhood experience.

Furthermore, it is not just the idea of childhood innocence that has a clear history, but the idea of childhood itself. As Hugh Cunningham writes in his review essay, “Histories of Childhood” (1998), childhood has, in different periods, “stood for innocence, hope, naïveté, incapacity, or evil, or has embodied a nostalgia for times past” (1195) depending on the time and place. Cunningham’s essay focuses specifically on what he calls the “cultural construction of childhood” (1195), the ways in which different societies have conceived of what childhood means or signifies over time and across geographical space. In other words, he argues that the idea of childhood is not universal. Just as for many, childhood is emblematic of a time of

sinlessness before a kind of Biblical descent into knowledge or sin, for others, children are not considered to be in need of protection from the corrupting force of adult knowledge.

To fully consider the idea of childhood as a social construction, it is worth referring to one of the most influential books on the subject. Cunningham cites Philippe Ariès' *L'enfant et la familiale sous l'ancien regime* (1960) as "the most famous book in that historiography" (1197). Ariès' book popularised the notion of the history of childhood and the idea that how people conceive of childhood differs in different contexts. In this book, Ariès begins by considering the emphasis that modern Western societies place on age and its importance in governmental bureaucracy, as represented by such things as identity numbers. He then explains how during the Middle Ages, people would often not know their exact age, or it might be considered uncouth for children to provide others with their precise age. Instead, there was a notion of the "ages of life" (Ariès 18). These ages or stages were divided into "childhood, puerility, adolescence, youth, senility, old age" (Ariès 19). In different texts, there are different divisions of age, some even based on the seven planets in the solar system, in a manner somewhat akin to astrology (Ariès 22). To contemporary readers, these ideas of age may seem absurd, but this just proves Ariès' point of the historicity of childhood as an idea.

More recent research has unpacked some of the inconsistency in societal expectations of childhood and children. Shanahan argues that contemporary social scientific research on children is "oddly ambivalent" (407). She finds that these studies tend to either "lament or celebrate" the experience of being a child, at times confusing matters by equating research on children with research on childhood (Shanahan 408). Historic studies around children from the *American Journal of Sociology* (in the period of 1895-1935) were predominantly concerned with child welfare and delinquency as part of a progressive move to "protect children from the labor market, the streets, poverty, and neglect and physical and/or sexual abuse" (409). Outside of that journal, there were a handful of studies focused on deviance and delinquency including the 1923 study of female juvenile delinquency, *The Unadjusted Girl* by William. I. Thomas. In Shanahan's view, this study "documented how individuals who fail to adapt to normative standards are more prone to crime, prostitution, or other forms of maladjustment" (409). This focus on misbehaviour and nonconformity in children dominated sociological studies of children until the 1970s.

In the 1920s, US society became "infatuated with youth and the young" and protecting children became a way to protect the world (Shanahan 409). Coinciding with this idea was the end of unregulated child labour, the consolidation of a justice system specifically for minors, the arrival of mothers' pensions, and the significant expansion of mass education for children,

along with a rise in medicine, psychology, and social services specifically catering to children (Shanahan 409). However, the discipline of Sociology lacked significant studies of children because they were still considered to be “adults in the making rather than children in the state of being” (Shanahan 409). It was not until the mid-1980s that more critical work was done in this area and sociologists began to consider children as a group. Referencing Ariès’ work on the history of childhood, Shanahan says:

The modern rise of childhood as an idea (and cultural ideal) was, for Aries, linked to institutions and organizations that sought to organize, manage, protect, and preserve it. In this sense, childhood is the consummate social construction. Put differently, childhood was constituted by the advent of a caring and concerned ethos toward children. (411)

Before this modern conception of childhood, the experience of being a child was different in the sense that children were far less protected by society – or *from* society. There have been many criticisms of Ariès’ work in terms of his assertions about the Middle Ages, and the Eurocentrism of his claims. However, as Shanahan notes, his contention that the very idea of childhood changes across context stands up to scrutiny (411). Following Ariès’ assertion that childhood as a concept is socially constructed, Shanahan contends that “there are many childhoods” and that “childhood is always constituted in time and space and is a product of specific social, political, and cultural institutions” (412). In other words, though ageing is a natural and unavoidable phenomenon, the way in which society conceives of childhood and children differs in different contexts, and so too, does each society’s treatment of children.

Moreover, there has been a notable change in the idea of the impact of one’s childhood on one’s mental development over time. As Cunningham notes, “In the German High Middle Ages, people did not think that the way in which children were treated would affect how they turned out as adults” (1197), a notion which stands in stark contrast to the assertions of contemporary psychology and science. As Jack P. Shonkoff writes in his 2017 article entitled, “Breakthrough Impacts: What Science Tells Us About Supporting Early Childhood Development”:

Children develop within an environment of relationships that begins in the family but also involves other adults who play important roles in their lives. These relationships

affect virtually all aspects of development—intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and behavioral. (9)

Moreover, Shonkoff notes the importance of raising children in a healthy environment when it comes to their brain development. As he says, “The exceptionally strong influence of early experiences on brain architecture makes the early years a period of both great opportunity and great vulnerability for development” (Shonkoff 9). While children raised in difficult circumstances will not necessarily become delinquents or criminals, the environment in which a child develops can influence the way in which their genes are expressed (Shonkoff 12). In contrast to this modern understanding of early development, in the Middle Ages, the idea of environmental impacts on the development of children into adults was not considered in this way at all. Rather, it was believed that one could discern what kind of adult the child might grow to be from something innate within the child at a young age (Cunningham 1198). Thus, the ways in which society has considered childhood in terms of development, preparation for the future, and even the expected behaviour of children has constantly changed.

If childhood is not a concrete, unchanging experience then this once again calls into question society’s veneration and protection of what it currently considers to be childhood’s greatest possession: its innocence. Interestingly, the idea that children are innocent is also rather recent. For instance, as Bette P. Goldstone notes in “Views of Childhood in Children’s Literature Over Time”, the Puritans of the 16th and 17th centuries considered children to be born into sin and, as such, dedicated a great deal of time and energy to educating them about their sinful ways and how they should work to rid themselves of evil (793). The Puritans were in favour of corporal punishment to teach children about their evil ways and it was only after the work of Locke and others regarding children’s education that a more nurturing approach to teaching was considered appropriate (Goldstone 794). Thus, though the idea of childhood innocence is prevalent now, this was not always the case.

Integral to this idea of childhood innocence is the idea of children’s sexual innocence, their lack of carnal knowledge. One of the most striking differences that Ariès noted between his time of writing, the 1960s, and centuries gone by was society’s approach to sexuality and childhood. As he puts it,

One of the unwritten laws of contemporary morality, the strictest and best respected of all, requires adults to avoid any reference, above all any humorous reference, to sexual matters in the presence of children. This notion was entirely foreign to the society of old. (Ariès 100)

This idea of protecting children from the world of adult sexuality has remained critical in contemporary Western society, coinciding with a widespread disapproval of child marriages and a general campaign for the rights of children. During the 15th – 17th centuries, it was frequently assumed that children were either “unaware or indifferent to sex” (Ariès 106). It was, therefore, only once children reached adolescence, the age at which they were considered to begin coming of age, that they were expected to speak in a more restrained fashion around subjects of a sexual nature.

In addition, during this time, the idea that discussing sex could somehow “soil childish innocence” was not a common belief (Ariès 106). As Ariès says, “nobody thought that this innocence really existed” (106) in the first place. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, adults would joke openly about genitalia and other sexual subjects without fear that this would poison their children’s innocence, suggesting that either sex was not considered so corrupting or that children were not considered so pure, or perhaps that they were not considered so easily corruptible. This stands in sharp contrast to contemporary sensitivity readers who worry about the impact of insulting language in children’s books or to the age restrictions which are placed on films and television shows to protect children from “strong language”, nudity, violence, or sexually explicit material.

Over time, childhood sexuality became policed, as could be seen in the separation of the sexes at children’s boarding schools. Towards the end of the 16th century, certain pedagogues began to forbid the sharing of “indecent” literature with children (Ariès 109). Since then, the focus on protecting children from harm has been coupled with moves to prepare children to be model citizens, with the implication that childhood exposure to inappropriate situations can have detrimental consequences down the line. This is reflected in more recent research around children too. For instance, Shonkoff writes, “When we give children what they need to learn, develop, and thrive, they give back through a lifetime of productive citizenship” (9). So, it would appear that the end goal of nurturing children, protecting them from any ills of adult life, has the end goal of turning children into productive citizens, giving back to the community and paving the way to a bright future. However, as Shonkoff notes, a difficult childhood does not necessarily lead to a maladjusted adult.

Although children who have these [negative] experiences clearly are at greater risk for adverse impacts on brain development and later problems with aggression, they are not doomed to poor outcomes. Indeed, they can be helped substantially if reliable and

nurturing relationships with supportive caregivers are established as soon as possible and appropriate treatments are provided as needed. (Shonkoff 12)

Recent research has found that one of the most important elements in preparing children for resilience in adulthood is stable relationships with the adults in their lives.

Despite the widespread yet erroneous belief that people need only draw upon some heroic strength of character, science now tells us that it is the reliable presence of at least one supportive relationship and multiple opportunities for developing effective coping skills that are the essential building blocks for strengthening the capacity to do well in the face of significant adversity. (Shonkoff 12)

What is most important for healthy development, then, is not that children be shielded from knowledge of the darker elements at play in the world, but that they are supported by the adults in their lives as they face difficulties.

In recent years, society's focus on childhood innocence has been sharpened by an awareness of the prevalence of child abuse. In her article, "Defending Innocence: Ideologies of Childhood", Jenny Kitzinger unpacks some of the problematic issues surrounding the emphasis on childhood innocence in society's bids to protect children and their childhoods from the destruction inflicted by child abuse. As Kitzinger writes, contemporary society is filled with images of childhood abuse, and the abuse of children is sometimes referred to as the robbery or desecration of their childhoods (78). The implication is that the abuse robs children of the safety assumed to go hand in glove with childhood; that blissful ignorance to the darker elements of life.

The coverage of child abuse in the news reinforces the notion of childhood as a time of innocent bliss, with abusers desecrating the sacred innocence of their victims. Newspaper and television reports of child sexual abuse often include pictures of toys, children with pigtails, or even "the tinkling sound of a musical box" to set the scene and to suggest what is ostensibly the true nature of childhood (Kitzinger 78). While these depictions are meant to inspire sympathy for child victims and rage at those who would harm them, they simultaneously fetishize the very idea of juvenile naïveté in a way that may perpetuate the problem of child abuse.

Implicit... in all such documentation is an assertion of what childhood 'really is'. Childhood is presented as a time of play, an asexual and peaceful existence within the protective bosom of the family. (Kitzinger 78)

In these news articles and feature stories, childhood is represented once more as an idyllic island, separate from the sordid world of adults. Kitzinger calls this representation "both ethnocentric and unrealistic" (78), reinforcing a myth about childhood that "[contradicts] the experiences of the majority of young people" (79). She notes that the child protection movement is fighting against a long tradition of victim-blaming, "which presents the child victim as a 'Lolita'" figure, and recasting the child as an innocent, passive victim (Kitzinger 79). However, while this does redress negative stereotypes of child victims, it also fetishizes children by focusing so intensely on the loss of their innocence (Kitzinger 79). Kitzinger warns that innocence itself is "a source of titillation for abusers" (79). If innocence is fetishized and the "deflowering [of] the virgin" (Kitzinger 80) is cause for excitement, then it is counterproductive to focus so strongly on childhood innocence in the fight to protect children. Moreover, the use of naïveté as a defence of child victims is problematic because it stigmatises the "knowing" child (Kitzinger 80). In other words, by putting childhood naïveté on a pedestal, one implies that the impure or knowing child victim is not to be pitied or in need of as much protection as the virtuous or unknowing child.

The romanticism of childhood innocence excludes those who do not conform to the ideal. A precocious child who appears flirtatious and sexually aware may forfeit her claims to protection because, if violation of innocence is the criterion by which the act of sexual abuse is judged, violating a 'knowing' child is a lesser offence than violating an 'innocent' child. (Kitzinger 80)

Therefore, the very notion of innocence and loss of innocence can lead to further abuse of children on the grounds that abusers will argue, as did one abuser Kitzinger cites, that the child was "no angel" or "already damaged goods" (80). Thus, it may be fruitful to deconstruct the idea that a child must be perfectly innocent and naïve to really *be* a child and to consider how one might impart knowledge to children alongside support so that they may be better equipped for the future.

In his 2001 *A History of Childhood*, Colin Heywood highlights various conceptual dichotomies of childhood. The first, and the one that is of most interest to this essay, is

depravity/innocence. Shanahan argues that, since the Enlightenment, the emphasis has been placed on innocence or inexperience and, as such when children behave in ways that challenge this idea of innocence, by, for instance, committing crimes, they must be exiled so that the idyllic idea of childhood innocence can be upheld (413). This idea is of most interest to me as this relates once more to the idea of childhood innocence versus the corruption of knowledge that comes with adulthood.

As I noted previously, the notion that childhood innocence must be protected at all costs can, in some cases, cost the very children it purports to protect. This is true both in the case of building resiliency in children and in protecting them from abuse. As Kitzinger says, “In the name of ‘childhood innocence’ adults repress children’s own expressions of sexuality, deny them control over their own bodies and ‘protect’ them from knowledge” (80). By depriving children of knowledge, especially sexual knowledge, parents potentially endanger their children by making them less likely to speak up if they are abused. Moreover, the curtailing of talks of childhood sexuality does not mean that children will not explore their sexuality, just that they may be more secretive about it.

Beyond the ideas of society’s contemporary fixation on childhood abuse, I would like to focus on the ways in which this idealised notion of childhood works to widen the gap between adults and children, meaning that growing up becomes particularly daunting. By placing such emphasis on childhood purity, the implication is that the world of adults is filled with squalor and corruption. Thus, to transition from one to the other, children must encounter something impure which in some way taints them, moving them from the tinkling bells of childhood into the rock and roll of adulthood.

Typically, when one considers the loss of childhood innocence, one may think of the pressures of growing up, exposure to harsh realities, social expectations around sex or alcohol, and the influence of the media. In the 2009 article, “Growing up Faster, Feeling Older: Hardship in Childhood and Adolescence”, Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson and Stefanie Mollborn examine whether hardship while growing up shapes “subjective age identity” or the experience of feeling older than one’s chronological age (39). They cite previous studies that suggests that children who grow up with divorced parents “grow up a little faster” (39). Moreover, more recent research has shown that young people who come from “married biological-parent families feel younger and are less likely to consider themselves adults than young people with other family structures” (Johnson and Mollborn 39). As such, the idea of growing up or “feeling older” is in many ways subjective and linked to the hardships that one experiences. As children

are expected to face few hardships, when they do experience many hardships, they feel that they have grown up faster.

Family disruption and poverty, along with other conditions of deprivation or stress like feeling unsafe in daily life, represent key hardships implicated in subjective aging during the early life course. (Johnson and Mollborn 40)

Here, the loss of innocence thanks to exposure to harsh realities leads children to feel older than their chronological age. This may partly have to do with the idea that dealing with harsh realities is something beyond the scope of childhood and its assumption of innocence.

However, I would like to argue that coming of age is less about children leaving behind a life of blissful ignorance than leaving behind a life of limited knowledge and highly internally focused experience. As children begin to mature, they trade this ignorance for a broader understanding of the world around them and a greater appreciation for the experiences of other people and their own impact on those people. In my own project, Juniper grows most significantly not when she starts menstruating or wearing bras and not when she starts going on dates with Raymond, but when she learns to consider the feelings of those around her and the impact of her own behaviour on them. When she begins to consider what prompts her mother's sadness or frustration and when she begins to see that Grace is not really her arch nemesis, but someone who has her own life difficulties, that is when Juniper truly starts to mature. While she may be precocious to begin with, reading books that are deemed "adult" or using a vocabulary which is unusual at her age, these attributes only reinforce her youth and desire for knowledge – the knowledge that comes with growing up.

If the gap between childhood and adulthood is knowledge and experience, then it is the gaining of this knowledge and experience that is so integral to the process of coming of age. While I have argued thus far that losing childhood innocence in favour of greater knowledge of the world is not such a calamity, I would now like to turn to the opportunities that this loss of innocence provides and to argue that part of the loss of innocence is also a loss of immature self-centredness. In the essay "Crabbed Age and Youth", classics scholar and linguist, Jane Ellen Harrison considers what it means to be old and to be young, respectively. She considers the ways in which the two phases of life differ and begins to unravel the paradox of young people being both filled with a wonder for the world and yet far more inwardly focused than their older counterparts. Similarly, she argues that maturity concurrently leads to a far more specialised focus alongside a widening of understanding and compassion for others. Thus, she

suggests that as one ages, one's focus is sharpened according to certain responsibilities while one also gains greater empathy for others.

Harrison borrows the phrase "crabbed age" from the poem, *Crabbed age and youth*, which is often attributed (perhaps misattributed) to Shakespeare. This is a poem in which the poet contends that old age and youth cannot coexist, "Crabbed age and youth cannot live together" (1), for they are opposites in every possible way. While "[y]outh is full of pleasance", "age is full of care" (2). While youth is summer, age is winter (3) and so on. If this poem generalises these terms, Harrison's reflection specifies them. Harrison even goes so far as to give the terms specific ages. When she speaks about "Crabbed Age", Harrison explains that she means "anything completely or hopelessly grown up—anything, say well over thirty." (1). By comparison, "Youth" is then not just childhood, but also young adulthood. Thus, Harrison expands the idea of coming of age or maturing to also include adolescents and those in their 20s or even 30s. However, for the purposes of this essay, I will not consider the continued process of maturation past adolescence.

Similarly to the poem, Harrison talks about the friction between youth and "Crabbed Age". In her words:

There is, I believe, a certain amount of inherent and inevitable friction between Youth and Crabbed Age. This friction may, if rightly understood and considerably handled on both sides, take the form of mutual stimulus and attraction. (5)

This tension is aroused both from the opposition of age and youth and from the attraction between the two. When one is young, one often wishes to be all grown up, while the older one gets, the more one looks back with longing at youth. In considerations of what it means to come of age, there is a question of the gap between youth and "Crabbed Age". What happens in the in between and how does one bridge the gap? As Harrison puts it, "Youth and Crabbed Age stand broadly for two opposite poles of human living, poles equally essential to any real vitality, but always contrasted" (5). If "age is relative" (Harrison 1), as she says, it is relative *to age*; one cannot call someone young without having an older subject with whom to compare them.

Moreover, Harrison conceives of youth and age as opposites not just in terms of their physical ages or their proclivities for pleasure or care for others, but in terms of rationality and the ego. In her descriptions, the two categories of human existence take on symbolic meaning beyond their physical forms as youths or the aged.

Youth stands for rationalism, for the intellect and its concomitants, egotism and individualism. Crabbed Age stands for tradition, for the instincts and emotions, with their concomitant altruism. (Harrison 5)

Considering these two critical phases of life, Harrison posits that youth prioritises selfhood and intellectualism, while age prioritises others and instincts or emotions. Harrison clarifies that she is neither blaming youth nor praising age but merely stressing what she feels to be the stronger attributes of each. Furthermore, she insists that “the egotism of youth is compulsory, inevitable, and equally the altruism of age is ineluctable” (6). It is only in time, and with ageing, that one learns to care for others and become less self-centred. I would argue that this is one example of the ways in which the transition from youth to adulthood is beneficial. While one may lose the so-called “innocence” of youth with age, one gains an appreciation of a full spectrum of humanity, of the people beyond oneself.

One of the ways in which childhood and adulthood are often differentiated is that children tend to live far more imaginative lives, while adults tend to focus more on daily realities. Children may spend a lot of time in play and in the realm of fantasy, putting on personas in a way that is markedly different from how adults tend to comport themselves. Harrison argues along these lines, saying that youth is characterised to some extent by “acting” (Harrison 8). The idea of acting is suggestive of a falsity, a performance of identity rather than an inhabiting of identity. However, Harrison later clarifies, “the young do not as a rule act at all; they do what is the very opposite pole of acting—they *masquerade*” (Harrison 9). She defines masquerading as “borrowing another’s personality, putting on the mask of another’s features, dress, experiences, emotions, and thereby enhancing your own” (Harrison 9). Youth, she argues, especially shy youth, is attracted to masquerading because “Youth is inhibited artificially from enhancing personality by the normal means of living” (Harrison 9), by which she perhaps means that young people have not gained enough life experience to have fully fledged personalities of their own, and so they must mimic others. Masquerading may be thought of as insincere or even deceptive, but for the young, it is a means of making sense of the world.

Conversely, Harrison argues that “Crabbed Age” no longer masquerades because “the impulse to *imaginative* self-enhancement dies down as soon as liberty to live is granted” (Harrison 10). In other words, once one can experience the fullness of life as an adult, one no longer feels the need or desire to invent one’s personality. While Youth prepares for life, “Crabbed Age is busy living, not rehearsing, and living, if sometimes less amusing, is infinitely

more absorbing” (Harrison 10). And “real life”, as opposed to fantasy, inspires consideration for other people, the altruism Harrison accords to the aged. Thus, ostensibly age-appropriate people stop masquerading when they grow up because growing up entails becoming fully embedded in life, and when one is fully embedded in life, there is no longer any time to spend in the fantasy of the masquerade.

Normally, in the first place, life itself will lure you, catch you, and marry you, make a father or a mother of you, and your children will stop your masquerading, and teach you that you are not the centre of their universe—nay, compel you to revolve around the circumference of theirs. (Harrison 10-11).

This is the “natural lure of life” (Harrison 11), the events that bring adults out of the self-centeredness of youth. But, even if one were to somehow elude this snare and not marry or have children, society promises an “artificial lure” (Harrison 11), one involving the trappings of work. As Harrison puts it, society is just “waiting to catch you and make an official of you, a functionary, a thing that is only half or quarter perhaps yourself,” (11) while largely serving the community. While this transition to adulthood entails a loss of self, in a sense, there is also something to be gained in adulthood, in no longer being the centre of one’s own universe. It illustrates that, unlike a child, one has learnt something from life and is now able to examine one’s situation from a distance, rather than fret over it from within it (Harrison 12). In Harrison’s words:

At seven years old one cannot analyze, so one must agonize. That is why it is so terrible to be a child, or even a young thing at all. One sees things, feels them, whole. There is no such devastating, desolating experience as to have been at the centre, warm and sheltered, and suddenly to be at the outmost circumference, and be asked to revolve as spectator and sympathizer round a newly-formed centre. (12)

This idea of not being able to critically reflect over a situation and, consequently, feeling emotions very intensely is pertinent to what I tried to illustrate in my project. Juniper, though she is a very bright 12-year-old, is still a child. Her whole world is disrupted by the split in her parents’ marriage and, while she is used to only concerning herself with her own life and the issues she has at school, she discovers that the people around her – her parents and her sister – are having their own troubles and she becomes a spectator of these issues. This feeling of

displacement from the centre is unnerving and accompanied by a lot of anxiety, which often manifests in her discussions with Ms W. This sense of a world outside one's own circumference is considered beyond the scope of childhood innocence and ignorance, but this is just one example of why the loss of innocence associated with coming of age can be positive: it broadens one's perspective and helps one to better reflect on oneself and on the emotions and experiences of others.

While children are consumed by their immediate experiences, they are not as aware of the goings-on surrounding them. While this is often framed as innocence, this quality is ultimately a limitation, a misapprehension of the world. The beauty of losing so-called innocence lies in the expansion of understanding of external life. Harrison explains this well in the following analogy:

I seem to see Youth as standing, a small, intensely-focussed spot, outside of a great globe or circle. So intense is the focus that the tiny spot believes itself the centre of the great circle. Then slowly that little burning, throbbing spot that is oneself is sucked in with thousands of others into the great globe. Humbled by life it learns that it is no centre of life at all; at most it is one of the myriads of spokes in the great wheel. (16)

Knowledge that one is but one of many "spokes in the great wheel" can lead to greater compassion and self-awareness. As Harrison puts it, when one ages, "the speck" of that individual life no longer burns in the same way and if one looks back on the "great wheel", one "can see it a little because, at least partially, [one is] outside of it" (16). So, one is never entirely outside of oneself, but one does, with age, become more self-aware. Therefore, a loss of innocence does not necessarily lead to a life dominated by hardship and corruption, but can also lead to a life of greater reflection and understanding.

Perhaps my favourite quote from Harrison's essay is this: "Anyone who honestly wants to be young again has never lived, only imagined, only masqueraded" (17). To wish to be young is to wish to undo the experience of living and gaining knowledge of the world. This is reminiscent of an essay by the children's author, Phillip Pullman. In his trilogy, *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000), Philip Pullman tells a fantastical coming of age story set in a parallel universe in which every human has an animal "dæmon" which essentially embodies a part of their soul. What is significant in *His Dark Materials*, whose title is taken from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, is that children have dæmons whose forms are always changing, but, when they reach a certain degree of maturity, their dæmon settles into one form which it will assume for

the rest of their lives. This is a very literal depiction of growing up and, to return to *Paradise Lost*, this is a significant reference because the trilogy suggests that what prompts this transition is knowledge, and knowledge is also what prompts the Fall in the Biblical tale of Adam and Eve, which is retold in *Paradise Lost*. After Eve bites the apple from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, she loses her innocence and is cast out of Eden. Pullman uses this as inspiration for his depiction of growing up in *His Dark Materials*, but that he sees the Fall as something positive. In his 1981 essay, “Heinrich von Kleist: On the Marionette Theatre”, Pullman writes,

Where I disagree with a number of writers from the so-called golden age of children’s literature is precisely here, in their view of innocence. Too many of them seem to feel that childhood was a golden age and its loss is tragic, something to be looked back on for ever with nostalgia and regret. (44)

On the contrary, Pullman sees the leaving behind of childhood innocence as positive, as it provides “the hope that we can learn something true” (45). Similarly to Harrison, Pullman argues that one gains a level of knowledge when one grows up and that this knowledge may uncover something truthful which one cannot fully comprehend as a child. Whether this is the self-awareness or humility that Harrison suggests by the widening of the circle and shifting in perspective or whether this is some other kind of knowledge, it is undoubtedly something one cannot gain as an innocent child. As Harrison puts it, “The remedy, the only remedy, for Youth’s excessive rationalism and egotism, is life, more life—that is, being fuller and freer relation with more people and things” (17). While contemporary society praises the purity of childhood and places this purity on a pedestal, the act of living and maturing leads one to uncover knowledge about oneself and others which expands one’s sense of compassion. Rather than tarnish the child, this strengthens them and their interactions with other people.

Reflecting on the idea of the Fall, it is difficult not to consider this in gendered terms as it is Eve who is tempted by the snake to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Milton depicts Eve as vain and selfish, admiring her own reflection:

As I bent down to look, just opposite
A shape within the wat’ry gleam appear’d,
Bending to look on me: I started back;
It started back: but pleas’d I soon return’d;

Pleas'd it return'd as soon; with answering looks
Of sympathy and love: there I had fixt
Mine eyes till now, and pin'd with vain desire (Milton, IV, 460–466)

However, it is Eve who is intrigued to learn more and to find out what she is missing. In a sense, Eve's coming of age is the template for all others. She transitions from self-centred but curious youth to knowing and compassionate adult. It is Eve, the woman, who begins this transition into the hard world of knowledge and adulthood, of both physical labour and the pains of child labour. This is significant to me as my project is about a girl coming of age and coming to terms with what it means to be a woman. Moreover, girl children and boy children are conceived of in different terms, with a great deal of emphasis placed on girl's innocence and, as girls begin to enter adolescence and adulthood, their chastity.

Historically, a girl's entry into womanhood has been considered in relation to her bodily changes, menstruation, and with its culmination in marriage and childbearing. On the other hand, a boy's entry into manhood is more often indicated by signs of bravery and independence. In terms of the coming of age novel as a genre, Alba Quifiones Endicott, in the 1992 article, "Females Also Come of Age", writes the following:

Traditional coming-of-age novels have been exclusively a male designation referring to the test of manhood in which boys participate in contests of physical strength or endurance by killing animals or by fighting each other. (42)

On the other hand, Endicott argues that, traditionally, a girl's coming of age is treated very differently. Rather than be expected to pass tests of physical bravery or prowess, a girl's transition to womanhood is signalled by "menses as their rite of passage" coupled with the discovery of a suitable man "who [has] passed the test of manhood" and can now "take care" of the young woman (Endicott 42). This choice of a husband "will make their lives complete and give them meaning" (Endicott 42). It is only in more recent years that authors of female coming of age narratives have begun to consider that part of growing up as a woman may also include the awareness of an individual self, separate from one's father or husband (Endicott 42). In my own project, Juniper's period plays a big role in her coming of age. She also has a romantic interest in Raymond and is greatly influenced by her father, especially in terms of her taste in music. However, Juniper's sense of self is clearly differentiated from both Raymond

and her father. Moreover, in time, she comes to see that her period can be viewed in different lights, given her sister's pregnancy scare.

Initially, for Juniper, becoming a woman is an uncomfortable and disgusting turn of events. When she has her period for the first time, her mother wants to celebrate, but she sees no reason to celebrate. In her 2004 essay, "Dogs, Cats, and Dancers: Thoughts About Beauty", Ursula K. Le Guin notes this strange disjuncture between the expectation of how girls seemingly ought to respond to puberty and how she herself responded, which is something akin to Juniper's response.

All little girls are supposed (by the media anyhow) to be impatient to reach puberty and to put on "training bras" before there's anything to train, but let me speak for children who dread and are humiliated by the changes adolescence brings to their body. I remember how I tried to feel good about the weird heavy feelings, the cramps, the hair where there hadn't been hair, the fat places that used to be thin places. They were supposed to be good because they all meant that I was Becoming a Woman. And my mother tried to help me. But we were both shy, and maybe both a little scared. Becoming a woman is a big deal and not always a good one. (Le Guin 142)

While the transition to adulthood is significant and offers many benefits in terms of knowledge and growing empathy, it is not easy, nor is it something that all children enjoy – especially girl children. The idea of becoming a woman can be daunting at the level of the body. While society idolises the youthful body, the child's mind lacks the experiences of the adult's that lead to wisdom and self-reflection, and the changes of puberty can be trying. As Le Guin puts it:

A child's body is very easy to live in. An adult body isn't. The change is hard. And it's such a tremendous change that it's no wonder a lot of adolescents don't know who they are. They look in the mirror — that is me? Who's me? (142-143)

This touches both on Harrison's notion of masquerading in one's youth and on the physical elements of ageing and the bodily experiences of coming of age. Le Guin's essay focuses on beauty and the punishing nature of the expectations that societies place on people, particularly women, to be beautiful. While she notes several differences in the criteria for beauty across cultures, Le Guin comments that, "One rule of the game [of beauty], in most times and places, is that it's the young who are beautiful. The beauty ideal is always a youthful one" (141). As

people age, they begin to lose this youthful beauty, but in its place they grow in experience and personality. For Le Guin, beauty in an older person “has to do with the bones” and with “who the person is”, “what shines through” their outward appearances (142). Just as Harrison considers the ways in which adults become self-aware and stop focusing on an outward masquerade as they busy themselves with living, so Le Guin finds beauty in the inner lives of adults.

Ultimately, the transition from childhood to adulthood is much more complex than a move from innocence to knowledge. Oftentimes, children have more knowledge of difficult or mature topics than is usually accepted in the realms of education or even amongst well-intentioned parents. Their innocence is not innate any more than it is enforced through attempts to keep children ignorant and protected from the traumas of everyday life. However, the pedestal of childhood innocence may be budging slightly with calls to end the censorship of children’s books in favour of raising more resilient children.

While contemporary society remains enamoured with youth and the idea of children as future social redeemers, it has become clear that for children to be able to become agents of change, they must be given the space to gain more knowledge of the external environment, to grow their compassion and resilience. While “Youth” and “Crabbed Age” may be considered as polar opposites by many, the threshold between them need not be so treacherous. By considering children’s curiosity and supporting them in their pursuit to understand more about themselves, their bodies, and the history of the world around them, adults can help children to develop into well-adjusted grownups without repressing their more “impure” or seemingly precocious desires. In all my reflections on the notion of coming of age, Pullman’s contention that the move from innocence to awareness in children is positive is what has struck me most.

On a personal note, I began reading Philip Pullman’s books when I was 11 years old and, though the subject matter and language were difficult for me at the time, I appreciated them greatly and am still glad that I encountered his books. His books treat the reader as someone capable of learning, of making sense of complicated plots, dark subject matter, and more adult vocabulary. They do not feel the need to uphold childhood innocence but work to expand the minds of their readers.

In this reflective essay, I have considered and deconstructed the idea of the myth of an idyllic childhood that must be safeguarded so that tomorrow’s leaders will be more virtuous than the leaders of the past. I have considered the ramifications of this idea in education, parenting, and the attempt to fight child abuse. I have also looked more broadly at the history of childhood as a concept and the ways in which coming of age has been linked to notions of

a dark and corrupted adult world. Ultimately, Harrison's notion of the expanding circle of awareness, humility, and compassion is what strikes me as the most fitting analogy of growing up. While the process of relinquishing that centrality of experience in favour of wider understanding may not be easy, it is certainly something to be celebrated.

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