

KATE FORSTER

Stage Left, Heart Right



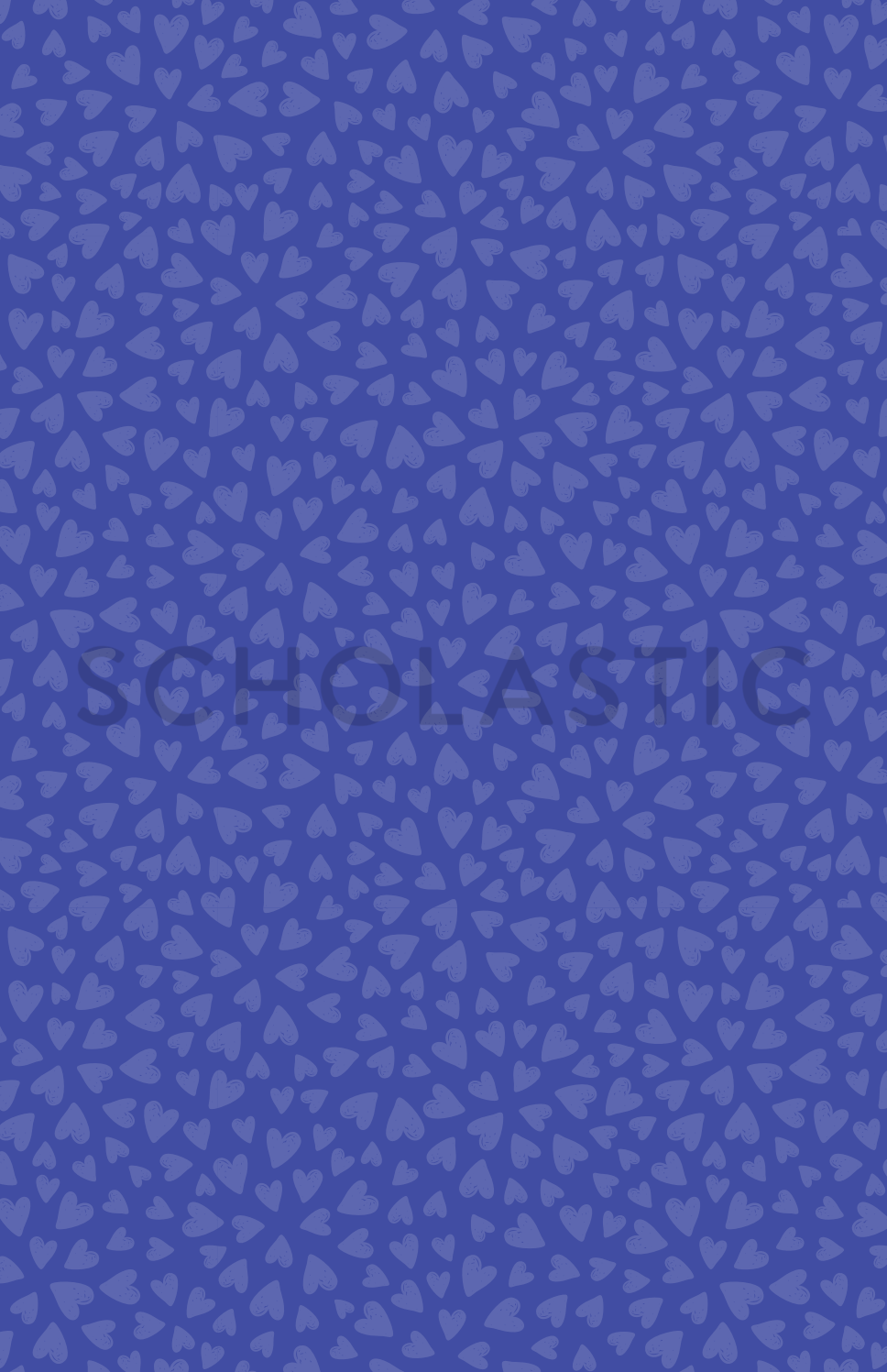
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Stage Left, Heart Right



KATE
FORSTER

A Scholastic Australia book

For Tansy, who loved a concept (concert)

Chapter 1

Scholastic Australia
An imprint of Scholastic Australia Pty Limited
PO Box 579 Gosford NSW 2250
ABN 11 000 614 577

www.scholastic.com.au
Part of the Scholastic Group
Sydney • Auckland • New York • Toronto • London • Mexico City
New Delhi • Hong Kong • Buenos Aires • Puerto Rico

Published by Scholastic Australia in 2025.
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Cover illustration by Anna Kuptsova.
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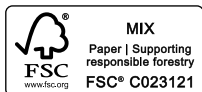
A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN: 978-1-76164-685-0

Typeset in Baskerville

Printed in China by Hang Tai Printing Company Limited.

This product is made of material from well-managed FSC®-certified forests, recycled material, and other controlled sources.



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Ava Riccardo had three rules to get through Year 9 without looking like a complete dork:

- 1) Be invisible.
- 2) Be silent.
- 3) Do not draw attention to herself at any point.

She'd had the same rules for Year 7 and Year 8 and they'd worked fine, so who was she to try to change a formula that meant she hadn't been the target of any of the school bullies or mean girls?

Until today, when she made a huge mistake and broke all three of those rules.

It wasn't intended. She was just trying to be a good friend to Izzy Lawrence, her bestie since, well, forever. Their mums met in mothers' group, and they had been

through kindergarten and primary school together and now high school.

Nothing could separate her and Izzy, people said. They were practically twins, except one was tall and blonde, and one was short and dark-haired, but they went everywhere together, spoke every night on Facetime or on text, and had more than a hundred inside jokes. They were the blueprint for besties.

It was Izzy who had wanted to audition. They hadn't been allowed to be in the theatre shows until Year 9, and that was just fine with Ava. She didn't even like going to the theatre, let alone be in a show on stage where she would be looked at. Yet here she was, holding her printed audition script so tightly that it was beginning to crumple at the corners as she sat on the edge of the plastic theatre seat. Already, she could get a sense of the sweat that was accumulating under her arms. *Gross*, she thought. This felt like a bad idea, and these feelings had never been wrong for her, like when Milly Alcock said they should all sneak out at a sleepover in Year 6, and Ava said she would go to the bathroom and meet them in a moment, but instead

rang her mum and asked her to pick her up.

She never told her mum that the rest of the girls were at the local school at midnight, and that they all got caught by the police and were taken home in disgrace. She just knew when something was a bad idea, and this felt like a bad idea.

Izzy, who was sitting next to her, raised her voice and whispered, 'This is going to be amazing.' She practically bounced in her seat. With a grin on her face, she threw her long blonde ponytail over her shoulder. 'Ava, we are going to become famous actors.'

Her ponytail swished dramatically as she turned. She was wearing one of her new headbands, probably from her older sister. Today's was coral with tiny strawberries. Her nails were perfectly painted pink with orange stripes, while Ava's were short and sensible and without colour as it was against the rules.

Ava stared at the empty stage. 'No, you're going to become a famous actor. I'm happy to cheer from out here. I'm only doing this to support you.'

Miss Elliot, the head of Year 9, came into the room and spoke briefly to Mr Galloway, who was the drama

teacher, and then looked at everyone, her eyes settling on Izzy.

‘Isabel Lawrence, is that a regulation headband?’

Izzy shook her head slowly and pulled it off.

‘Also, lose the nail polish. Come and see me before class tomorrow. I want to see clean nails.’

Miss Elliot left the room and Izzy put the headband back on.

‘She’s such a loser,’ Izzy said. ‘She wouldn’t know style if she stepped in it.’

As Miss Elliot left, Mr Galloway strolled out into the rehearsal room carrying a script, and he looked out to the students in the audience.

The rehearsal room wasn’t really a rehearsal room at all. It was a catch-all kind of a room, the kind of space the school used for overflow lessons and awkward timetable gaps. Half the room had carpet and the other half had floorboards. There were concertina doors that were never closed, and exposed brickwork, some with decades of initials from students past.

One wall was covered in mismatched pinboards, some with scraps of old science diagrams, others with

drama posters curling at the edges, notices and sheet music, and even a school scarf was pinned on there, missing its owner. At the back of the room, there was a stack of plastic chairs leaning dangerously against a filing cabinet that buzzed whenever someone turned on the heater, and some beanbags that had some questionable stains on the cover.

A scratched up whiteboard hung crookedly, and the only mirror in the room had a crack through the top corner like a spider web. The room carried a scent that was a combination of floor cleaner, damp school jumpers and the distant ghost of someone’s forgotten banana.

It wasn’t glamorous. It wasn’t even particularly clean. But this was where the play would live now.

Mr Galloway stepped forward. He always wore oversized cardigans in muted colours, always with elbow patches, and his glasses were constantly slipping down his nose no matter how often he pushed them back up with one ink-smudged finger. His beard was scruffy in a way that suggested he trimmed it himself with kitchen scissors, and he had a gentle, almost

awkward energy when he wasn't directing. But the moment he stepped into rehearsal mode, his voice filled the room, booming and commanding like it belonged to someone twice his size and half as cardiganed. He could quote Shakespeare by heart, knew how to block a scene using nothing but bits of masking tape and hand gestures, and believed, truly, earnestly, that school theatre mattered. And somehow, around him, it did.

'Hello, young thespians, welcome to the auditions for the Year 9 play, which is a contemporary adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, which will use modern language. Our opening night is only five weeks away, so there is no time to waste.' A grin spread across his face as he smiled at them all.

'You never know, there might be a true actor amongst you who can say one day at the Oscars that their career started in Mr Galloway's Year 9 theatre show.'

There were a few polite laughs from the audience, and Izzy laughed far too loudly for such a dad joke, but Ava was silent. She wasn't here to get a role in the play, let alone win any Oscars.

'Many of you are familiar with the play because of

the film,' Mr Galloway continued, 'and as you know, *Romeo and Juliet*, the lead roles, require strong chemistry, an ability to show emotion, and of course, a strong stage presence.'

Ava slid down in her seat. This sounded even worse than she had imagined. Being perceived in any way was her worst nightmare, that and going to school in her pyjamas, but this was pretty bad.

Izzy, on the other hand, seemed to see this as a call to action. 'I really hope I get Juliet,' she whispered. 'And if Cameron gets Romeo, then I will be the happiest person on and off the stage.'

Ava glanced over at Izzy's crush. Not that she would call him that to Izzy. It was more than a crush to Izzy; it was love.

Cameron Reed was the cutest, nicest and funniest guy in Year 9. He skateboarded and surfed and played guitar. *He was a walking Netflix romance series hero*, she thought as she stared at him. The sort of guy that girls wrote in their diaries about with his messy blond waves that always looked like they'd been ruffled by the wind, bright-blue eyes and a smattering of freckles across his

nose that made him look permanently sun-kissed. He was taller than most of the guys in their year and carried himself with a kind of relaxed confidence, like the world was mostly a joke and he was always one step ahead of the punchline. And he was a natural actor, always entertaining his friends with voices and silly impressions, and he even made the teachers laugh, which was sometimes hard to do with the teachers at their school.

Ava didn't think Cameron knew who she was—not when tall, glamorous Izzy was around. But she had noticed that he always seemed extra loud when she and Izzy were nearby, probably because he was trying to impress Izzy.

Ava often ducked her head and ignored him, mostly because she was trying not to be seen for the rest of her high school years, so she avoided him and all guys. Guys were a mystery to her, like quicksand or the Bermuda Triangle, and she figured they'd reveal their purpose over time. But not today.

Ava noticed that Cameron's hands were fidgeting as Mr Galloway spoke, his fingers twitching at the sleeves of his hoodie. He had a stain of some sort on his shirt.

Maybe tomato sauce? Or maybe chocolate milk? Hard to tell. In that moment, Cameron looked over and caught her staring. He gave her his slow, gentle smile, easy and unbothered. Ava's eyes widened in horror, and she quickly looked back at Mr Galloway.

Rookie mistake, Ava, she told herself. Draw no attention to yourself, least of all from the most popular guy in Year 9.

Mr Galloway began calling people up to read out a scene together.

Izzy was called first to read with a boy called Jordan, and they both seemed to be invested in the scene, giving it everything they had. Maybe too much. It all seemed very over the top when they spoke the words of love, Ava felt, but what did she know about love or acting.

Ava sat watching with interest, able to see who understood the play and who didn't, who fumbled over words and struggled with Mr Galloway's direction.

'Ava Riccardo.'

She jumped in her seat, as though she had been given a huge fright.

Then to add to her terror, Izzy poked her. 'Hey, he's calling you, it's your turn.'

Ava stood up, regretting her decision to support her bestie, and made her way to the stage.

‘And Cameron Reed,’ Mr Galloway said.

Oh. My. Gosh. Kill me with fire, she thought, looking out at Izzy, who was nodding like the dashboard toy of Elvis that was in her dad’s car.

‘Okay, both of you, start as soon as you’re ready,’ Mr Galloway instructed.

Ava looked at Cameron, who was now standing opposite her. He was taller than her, but not in a weird way. *A sort of nice way, like I’d fit in under his arm if we were walking*, she thought and then pushed the idea from her head.

‘You ready?’ he asked her.

‘For what?’ she asked, slightly mesmerised by the smattering of freckles on his nose.

‘To declare your love for me,’ he said, his eyes searching hers.

She blinked a few times and then nodded.

Cameron started the scene, and Ava listened to the lines and spoke her part, and though she held the script in her hands, the words came easily without her having

to once look down to remember a line.

Neither did Cameron. He held her gaze, speaking sincerely and gently, and she felt her stomach flip as he declared his love for her.

So, this was it? This was what people spoke of? She felt as though she was spinning, and felt the words release from her with a passion she didn’t know she had inside her. Cameron met her where she was and returned the emotions, and then . . .

Then it was finished.

There was a pause in the theatre and then a burst of applause, and Ava stopped spinning and came back to the stage. Cameron was still looking at her, and she realised this was heartbreak, this was love—this was acting.

‘Thank you, everyone,’ Mr Galloway said. ‘The cast list might be up outside the drama department by tomorrow lunchtime. Might. Hopefully, I can get through it in time.’

Izzy looked over at her and gave her a thumbs up, and behind her, Cameron stood staring at her in a way that was making her feel as though she was falling into that quicksand that people always warned her about.

Chapter 2

Ava hadn't planned to look at the cast list, but Izzy had dragged her there at recess while she was in the middle of opening a tricky tub of yoghurt.

'Come on,' Izzy said, tugging her sleeve and talking a mile a minute. 'Imagine if I'm Juliet and you're her nurse or nanny or whatever that role is. Why does she have a nurse? Is she sick? I guess we'll find out, but that would be amazing. We could have scenes together. And with Cameron. It's just so exciting.'

Ava let herself be pulled along the breezblock path towards the drama department, yoghurt tub still clutched in her hand. A small group of students stood around the noticeboard, buzzing with quiet energy. Most were from Year 9, but a few older drama students

hovered nearby with the confidence of people who knew exactly whose names would be listed. *Theatre nerds loved a cast list*, Ava thought.

'I had a feeling the list would go up today,' Izzy called over her shoulder. 'I just knew it. Mr Galloway is so predictable. As if he could've waited to get it sorted! Honestly, I was born for Juliet, or maybe Juliet was born for me.'

Ava stayed back as Izzy darted ahead and through the crowd with a laser-like purpose.

Ava sat down on the nearby bench and focused on the yoghurt. She peeled at the foil, which immediately resisted her efforts. She tried from another corner. Still nothing. The lid was stubborn, glued tight to the edge. Who even designed this thing!

Ava pressed harder, gripping the tub and giving the foil one last determined pull . . . It exploded at the exact moment she heard Izzy yell from her spot by the noticeboard, 'No Way!'

Yoghurt splattered Ava's shirt, her blazer and even her chin. A pale-pink splodge even hit her shoe. She blinked at herself, unsure what to clean first.

‘Oh no,’ she whispered.

‘You alright?’

Ava looked up to find Cameron Reed standing there, his expression somewhere between amused and concerned, and he held out a tissue without hesitation.

‘Thanks,’ she muttered, cheeks burning as she took it from him.

He crouched to grab a few more from his bag and offered them to her.

‘My mum’s obsessed with emergency supplies,’ he said. ‘Don’t judge me, but she makes me carry tissues, bandaids and hand sanitiser. I’m like a walking first-aid kit. You will never need to worry because she will worry for you.’

‘That’s . . . actually really useful. Thank your mum for me,’ Ava said dryly, dabbing at her yoghurt-covered clothes.

‘I will. She thinks me having a first-aid kit will make up for her never being home.’ He gave a somewhat hollow laugh.

‘Oh?’ she asked, surprised at such an intimate piece of information from him. ‘Well, it’s good to be

prepared, I suppose, like a boy scout or whatever.’

Cameron smiled. ‘That yoghurt clearly had a plan and it wasn’t in your favour.’

‘Did you say favour or flavour?’ she quipped, and he laughed, this time more genuinely.

Ava tried not to laugh back, but she failed. It was impossible not to. His presence was warm and relaxed, like he had all the time in the world to help a girl clean dairy off her shirt.

Izzy returned from the front of the crowd, her phone in hand, her expression unreadable as she reached them. She looked at the yoghurt on Ava and screwed her nose up a little.

‘I’m sorry, but this isn’t okay,’ she said.

Ava shook her head in agreement. ‘I know. I’m going to email the company and tell them they need to rethink their design of the foil lids. This could have been much worse. Imagine if I was getting married today and yoghurt exploded all over my wedding dress.’

‘Would you eat yoghurt in your wedding dress?’ Cameron asked, frowning. ‘I mean, it doesn’t seem like a snack you would have at your wedding, does it?’

I don't know, I've never been to a wedding,' he added with a shrug.

'I suppose not,' Ava said. 'You could eat chicken drumsticks, I guess, or fries. I would have pasta at my wedding, for sure.'

'True,' he said. 'That's a good choice. I'd have burgers.'

'Shut up, you weirdo!' Izzy cried. 'Why are you talking about wedding snacks? I'm talking about the part. I can't believe it!'

Ava looked at her friend, who she knew was close to tears. She could always tell by the way Izzy's eyes became a bit smaller and the skin around her nose went really red.

'What's happened?' she asked, taking another tissue from Cameron.

Izzy looked at her. 'You got it.' She seemed almost accusing as she spoke.

'Got what?' Ava was confused.

'You're Juliet,' Cameron said, then paused before adding, 'and I'm Romeo.'

Ava stared at him, then at Izzy, who nodded slowly.

'Yeah. You got the lead.' She said it as though it left a bad taste in her mouth.

Izzy wasn't used to losing, especially not to Ava. She was the kind of person who turned everything into a game; even the walk to class could become a race if she was in the mood. And when she didn't win, she didn't hide her disappointment well. In fact, she didn't hide it at all, like now. Ava saw it in the way Izzy's jaw tensed. The way her arms folded a little too tightly across her chest.

'You must've nailed it,' Izzy added, smiling, but it didn't reach her eyes.

Ava was still holding the yoghurt tub, which was half empty and forgotten.

Cameron gave her a little smile. 'Congrats.' Then he walked off towards his group of friends.

Ava turned to Izzy. 'I didn't think—' she began, but Izzy jumped in.

'It's fine,' she said quickly, the skin around her nose bright red. 'Really. You were great. You deserve it.'

There was a flicker in her voice, a tightness that she couldn't hide.

Ava wasn't sure what to say. Her heart was pounding. Her shirt was stained. Her best friend had just watched her land the one role she probably wanted more than anything. And the boy Izzy liked had helped Ava wipe yoghurt off her shoes.

This wasn't how recess was supposed to go.

She smiled weakly. 'I can just tell Mr Galloway I only auditioned to support you and I don't really want to do it.'

But as she spoke, she knew this was a lie. To Ava's surprise, she'd liked being up on stage. Or was it that she'd liked being up there with Cameron? She wasn't sure; she would need more experience to find out.

'And I'm the nurse. I mean, I'm too pretty to be the nurse,' Izzy huffed.

Ava let the comment slide because Izzy had just had a massive disappointment, but she felt the sting of her words.

She walked over to the noticeboard, still holding her half-empty tub of yoghurt, and read the list.

Juliet.

Her.

Ava's stomach twisted. She hadn't asked for this; she hadn't wanted to win anything. She'd only auditioned to keep Izzy company, not to end up on top of the cast list. But now, looking at her best friend's barely hidden disappointment, Ava felt the glow of her achievement shrink. She felt guilty, as though she had stolen something instead of earning it. How could something feel so exciting and so awful at the same time?

Chapter 3

After school, Ava went to the library to avoid sitting on the bus with Izzy, and texted her dad for a pickup after he finished work at his car-detailing business. She read the script, checked her phone and sighed on repeat. Everything felt so hard.

Now, she was sitting next to her dad in his old American car as he drove her home, humming along to 'Burning Love' as the Elvis toy nodded along in time to the music.

Tony Riccardo had three great loves in his life:

- 1) American cars.
- 2) Elvis Presley.
- 3) And his family, which consisted of Ava, her mum, Sonia, and her ten-year-old brother, Aaron, whose

name was Elvis's middle name.

It was hard to know in which order, but it didn't matter to Ava. He was reliable and kind, and compared to Izzy's dad, who was unreliable at best in Izzy's life and cheated on Izzy's mum, Ava's dad was a saint.

He still looked a little like Elvis, if Elvis had swapped the jumpsuit for a faded footy hoodie and cargo shorts. He had thick black hair slicked back with the help of a very loyal brand of gel, and sideburns he refused to trim despite Ava's mum's many attempts. His knee gave him trouble now, but Ava had seen videos of him in full impersonator mode when he was younger, hip-thrusting through 'Jailhouse Rock' with wild confidence and sequins. These days, he stuck to crooning in the kitchen or behind the wheel of his beloved Impala, but he still walked like there might be music following him somewhere, just out of ear-shot, and she loved him for it, because her dad fully embraced the spotlight in life, something Ava hadn't quite managed to feel comfortable with yet.

'You're quiet. Big day at school?' he asked, glancing at her.

She hesitated. 'I, um . . . got a part in the . . . um, school play.'

'What?' he exclaimed, slamming the brakes just a little too hard at the red light. 'Ava Riccardo, my very own superstar?!' He twisted in his seat, eyes wide behind his sunglasses, even though the sky was cloudy.

'It's just the school play,' she said quickly. 'No big deal really.'

'Just the school play?! Do you know who else started out in school plays? Elvis!'

'I'm pretty sure Elvis didn't do Shakespeare,' Ava muttered.

'Shakespeare? What's the play?' Her dad was practically shouting with excitement.

'*Romeo and Juliet*,' she said, laughing at his over-the-top enthusiasm.

'Oh wow, a classic.' He nodded. 'And your role is . . .?'

She paused, because she knew he was about to get even more excited.

'Juliet,' she said slowly.

He tooted the horn of the car repeatedly. 'Juliet Capulet? Of Verona? You know my family is traced

back to Verona. That's why you got it—you have the natural DNA of Italian royalty, plus the talent.'

'Sure, Dad,' she teased.

He grinned so wide his sideburns practically lifted. 'You want me to get you a cape like Elvis? I bet Juliet could rock a cape.'

Ava laughed in spite of herself. 'No capes, Dad. They're setting it in the modern day.'

'You know, they should set it in Graceland. Priscilla and Elvis were like Romeo and Juliet.'

Ava decided not to correct her father on this fact, as she wasn't sure it was like that at all, but she would never argue with him about Elvis or the changeover to electric vehicles; some things weren't worth the drama.

When they pulled into the driveway, the porch light flickered on. This was their usual routine. She either got the bus or her dad picked her up.

Inside, her mum was already setting the table for dinner after picking up Aaron from school, and they would eat dinner, and her dad would be over the top and her mother would be stern but loving, and they would do it over and over again with no changes to

the routine unless something strange and unusual happened.

Ava had the feeling that something was about to happen tonight.

She walked inside and dropped her bag by the stairs.

‘You’re late,’ her mum said without looking up. ‘Did something happen?’

Her dad came in behind Ava and kissed her mum on the cheek. ‘Ava has news,’ he said proudly.

Ava’s mum looked expectantly at her, holding a few steak knives in her hand. She was a no-nonsense sort of woman, due to her having to work in the family fruit business at an early age, and now she worked as a bookkeeper for a trucking company. She carried herself like someone who could manage other people’s chaos, and could organise any world crisis with only a mobile phone and an Excel spreadsheet. Her dark hair was clipped back in a practical bun that somehow still managed to frizz by lunchtime, and she had a habit of tapping her pen against her teeth when she was thinking, something Ava had inherited.

She wore sensible blouses and flats with just enough

structure to look professional, even when she was juggling dinner, bills and reminders about school forms. There was a sharpness to her movements, like she ran on to-do lists instead of actual sleep and worried about everything all the time.

Ava had never quite understood how her parents worked as a couple, but somehow they did. Her mum was all about plans and ordered spreadsheets, calendars and sharp corners, while her dad moved through life like it was one long Elvis song, full of impulse and rhythm and heart. Her mum kept the house running. Her dad kept the house fun. And even when they bickered about money, or dishes, or whether Ava needed another maths tutor, there was something solid beneath it all. Like no matter what changed around them, they were still pulling in the same direction. Just at very different speeds.

‘I got the lead in the school play,’ Ava said, holding her breath. ‘We’re doing *Romeo and Juliet*.’ She paused and tried not to wince as she shared the news. ‘I’m playing Juliet.’

Her mum looked up slowly, her eyes darting over

Ava's face as though looking for some hint that this was a joke or Ava was sleepwalking and talking. 'Juliet? A play?'

'Yes,' she said.

There was silence in the kitchen except for the sound of the steaks sizzling in the pan on the stove.

'Well,' she said carefully, 'I suppose that is news indeed.'

Ava waited. One. Two. Three.

'But let's make sure it doesn't affect your school-work,' her mum added, just as Ava knew she would. 'Year 9 marks are important. If you want to get into university to do law, you'll need to start working now.'

Bingo, she thought and looked at her dad for support.

'It's a great opportunity, love,' her dad said gently. 'Let her enjoy it. It's Year 9. It'll be good for her.'

'I'm not saying she can't do it,' her mum replied. 'But it's important she doesn't get distracted. Drama's fun, but it's not a career path.'

Ava took a deep breath. She wasn't expecting balloons and a parade. But something more than *don't let it interfere with your schoolwork* might've been nice.

She grabbed her bag off the floor. 'I'm going to my room.'

Her dad gave her a little salute. 'Break a leg, Juliet.'

'Don't be long, dinner's nearly ready,' her mum called after her.

Ava smiled faintly and disappeared upstairs, the echo of her mum's voice still lingering.

She lay on her bed, script open beside her, and stared at the ceiling.

Lead role. On stage. With Cameron Reed.

It should have felt amazing.

Instead, all she could think about was Izzy's smile slipping for just a second and her mum's voice saying it was just a distraction. Why couldn't she feel good without someone trying to make her or her achievement smaller to make themselves feel better?

Chapter 4

Despite Ava's skill at being a master of invisibility, not even she could avoid the thick, awful feeling that came with dodging Izzy at school. She couldn't explain why she felt guilty but she did. Even though it wasn't her decision to try out for the play in the first place, she still wanted to change it all back to how it was yesterday.

She slipped between classes like a ghost, head down, her books clutched to her chest like a shield, not even going to her locker, where she knew Izzy would be waiting for her. Every time she caught a glimpse of Izzy's blonde ponytail, her stomach flipped and she got that weird feeling of dread that only came when she went home with a mark below a B, knowing that her mum would see it.

At lunchtime, Ava pretended to study in the library, tracing the same sentence about Henry VIII's wives for so long the letters blurred into hieroglyphics. Maybe she should quit the play and fix everything before it got worse. That would be easy enough, wouldn't it?

Her phone buzzed and she saw Izzy's name.

Where are you? I've missed you all day. Why are you angry with me?

She typed back quickly, *Sorry, had a meeting at lunch for history. Facetime later.*

Two more classes today and then I'm home free, she thought when a stack of books dropped on the table she was sitting at.

'Hey,' she heard and looked up to see Cameron in front of her. 'Are you working on the history reflection?'

She nodded slowly, trying to find the right words, but they all seemed to escape her.

'You excited about the play?' he asked, sitting down.

If she reached out a foot she could touch his. She tucked her feet safely away under her chair.

'Um, I guess,' she said, relieved at finding what she wanted to say finally.

‘You guess?’ He laughed. ‘I thought you would be stoked. I mean, it’s the main role and everything.’

She kind of shrugged and nodded at the same time, and wondered if she looked as ridiculous as she felt.

‘Yeah, I mean, Izzy really wanted the main role, so you know, I wasn’t expecting to get anything. I only did it to keep her company.’

He looked surprised. ‘Really? You’re so talented, I’m going to have to really work hard to be as good as you.’

Ava knew a blush when she had one, and she was sure her cheeks were bright red.

‘Oh, don’t be silly, everyone knows you’re great. They’re probably wondering who this loser is with you,’ she half joked.

Cameron frowned and leaned forward, his elbows on the table. ‘Don’t call yourself a loser,’ he said.

‘Oh, you know what I mean. It’s not like anyone knows who I am, but you’re super popular. People are going to be wondering when I started at this school when we do the play.’ She laughed a little too hard at her own joke, then looked down again at some words

about Anne Boleyn, wondering if having her head chopped off right now would be more pleasant than this exchange.

‘I know who you are,’ Cameron said, and Ava looked up at him. Their eyes met and she gave him a small smile. ‘You’re Ava Riccardo, you started in Year 7, you’re in green house, you study a lot, are best friends with Izzy and ignore my jokes.’

She felt her jaw drop and she went to speak, but then the sound of the bell rang through the library.

‘Time to go,’ Ava said quickly, packing up her books and laptop.

Before Cameron could say anything, she had left the library and rushed to class. *That was weird*, she thought, wishing she could speak to Izzy about it, but then they would have to talk about the play and Izzy being mad that Ava had the lead role, and Ava wasn’t prepared for that discussion.

She spent the afternoon avoiding Izzy and then left the last class early so she didn’t have to see Izzy at the bus stop.

By the time she got home, the doubt had wrapped

itself around her so tightly she could barely breathe. What was she doing this stupid play for?

‘Hello, love,’ her mum called from the kitchen. The smell of onion and garlic frying welcomed Ava home as she dumped her bag by the stairs and wandered in.

‘How was school?’ her mum asked, standing by the stove.

‘Fine,’ she said, sitting down at the kitchen table.

‘Have you got much homework?’ her mum asked, opening a can of tomatoes.

‘Can I just sit down for a moment?’ Ava snapped.

‘Excuse me? What’s got your nose out of joint?’ Her mother crossed her arms.

‘Nothing,’ Ava said. ‘I’m just tired.’

‘Well, maybe you shouldn’t do the play on top of the homework,’ her mum said, voice calm but clipped. ‘As I said, drama is just a hobby, not your future. Your real subjects—maths, science, English—those are where you need to focus. If your work starts to slip, well . . . maybe it’s time to reconsider.’

Ava picked at a thread on the sleeve of her jumper.

There it was. The quiet, polite suggestion disguised

as motherly concern. Quit. Drop out. Give up. Her mum would never say that if it were about debating or science club or anything with grades attached. But because it was theatre, because it was creative, it didn’t count. Not really.

‘Mum, I’ve only just been cast. I don’t know how it will affect anything, let alone my marks,’ Ava said quietly.

‘You have to think about what matters more long-term,’ her mum replied. ‘There’ll be other plays. Right now, your focus needs to be on your future. On things that matter. This school production will be over in a few weeks, but your marks will follow you into Year 10, into university applications, into everything.’

Ava’s stomach tightened. Why was her mum thinking so far ahead? It was so stressful.

‘You’re a brilliant student, Ava,’ her mum added. ‘You can be anything, but not if you let something temporary throw you off course. You can’t risk your whole year for a part in a play that, quite frankly, you said to Aaron at dinner you didn’t even want to audition for in the first place.’

That part hit hardest. Because it was true. And not true.

Yes, she hadn't wanted it, not at first. But now? Now she wasn't so sure.

Still, the way her mum talked about it, as though it was temporary, upset her. Her mum didn't even ask what she wanted to do. Any pride she might have felt in the moment was well and truly gone now. Maybe her mum and Izzy should be mother and daughter, because they certainly weren't happy for her, and she felt foolish for even trying to hold onto it.

She went upstairs and pulled her laptop from her bag and drafted an email.

Subject: Withdrawal from Play

She stared at the blinking cursor for a long time before typing:

Dear Mr Galloway,

I really appreciate the opportunity to be involved in the production, but due to other commitments, I think it would

be best if I stepped down from the role of Juliet. I didn't think I would get the role, so it's all a bit of a misunderstanding. I was just trying to support Izzy, who by the way would be a great Juliet.

Thank you again for your understanding.

Short. Polite. Humiliating.

Her heart thudded against her ribs so loudly she was sure it could be heard downstairs.

You're not an actor, Ava. You're not meant to be seen, she thought. You do whatever it takes to stay out of the limelight, and now you want to stand in the spotlight?

Her finger hovered over the 'send' button.

'Hello there, young superstar. Have you started rehearsals yet?'

Her dad was standing in the doorway of her bedroom.

'Not yet, Dad,' she said. 'First rehearsal is on Thursday.'

Her dad clapped his hands. 'How exciting. I can't wait to see it. You're going to be great. I always saw that spark in you, you know? That something special.'

‘You did?’ she asked, surprised. Usually, her dad focused on Aaron and his soccer prowess.

‘Of course! You used to do little plays and sing songs when you were small. I always loved them. I don’t know why you stopped,’ he said, frowning as though trying to remember.

Ava was silent. She knew why she had stopped, but she wouldn’t bring that up now. It didn’t matter because she was going to drop out anyway.

It was back in Year 6, after Ava had been picked to narrate the school play. She’d been thrilled and had practised every line, even made up hand gestures to go with the story. She came home buzzing, cheeks pink, voice loud. But her mum had frowned and said, ‘You’ve got a new maths tutor, and that’s the only time she can see you, so you’ll have to let someone else take the spotlight.’

Ava remembered nodding, even as her excitement had shrunk inside her.

Her mum had told the teacher that Ava wouldn’t be available for the final performance because she had a personal appointment, and just like that Izzy had taken

her place. The teacher had called it ‘disappointing but understandable’. Ava had called it her own fault, and Izzy never knew why Ava hadn’t performed.

She hadn’t auditioned for anything after that.

Until now.

‘Mum said dinner isn’t far away.’ Her dad smiled at her. ‘And please, if you want to learn lines, I am more than happy to help you.’

‘Thanks, Dad,’ she said, meaning it. Her mum might be hard work, but her dad was the sunshine of the family.

She turned back to the laptop, where the cursor still blinked in the email draft, patient and expectant.

Ava dragged the mouse to the top corner and clicked ‘save as draft’.

She shut her laptop. *Tomorrow*, she told herself. Tomorrow she’d figure it out.

Chapter 5

Ava became very good at rerouting to ensure she missed Izzy at school the next day. She knew exactly how long she could linger at her locker before Izzy arrived. She knew which stairwell to take to avoid crossing paths at the end of lunch. Thankfully, they didn't have any classes together until Friday, but the guilt was starting to turn into something else. Not quite anger—Ava didn't really know how to do anger—but something else, like a weird frustration, similar to a rubber band being pulled back too far. Any day now she thought she would snap, but she wasn't exactly sure what she was angry about. Izzy had been a bad sport and insulted Ava, but it was more than that.

Frustration, maybe. The kind that built up when

someone you loved acted like a stranger and you kept saying sorry even though you weren't sure what for anymore. Their friendship was weird at times, something Ava couldn't explain to people. But she was tired of the way she had always bent herself around Izzy's moods, biting her tongue when she didn't agree, letting Izzy pick the plans, laughing off the little insults because that's just how Izzy was. Their friendship had always tilted slightly in Izzy's favour, and Ava had never minded until now. Until it had started to feel like she was apologising for existing and for getting the lead role.

Ava pushed open the doors to the rehearsal room, which smelled like too many deodorants and body sprays mixed together, and she went and stood awkwardly by the old upright piano, clutching her script.

Izzy walked into the room and Ava gave her an awkward smile, but Izzy frowned at her and then gave her a cursory head nod, the sort you gave to kids you used to be friends with once in the fifth grade when you both really loved Pokémon cards but had now moved on to different interests. The unspoken pact of

silence that once you were dorky kids and were now cool teenagers.

Looking away from Izzy, Ava concentrated on trying not to look at Cameron, who was sprawled in a beanbag like he hadn't a care in the world. Maybe he didn't? Maybe having the lead role meant he didn't lose any friends or have nightmares that Izzy told the school assembly that Ava had ruined her life.

She watched as Izzy pulled up another beanbag and flopped on it in front of Cameron and ad-flicked her hair in the way older girls did. Of course Izzy had that move perfected, as she had an older sister, Grace, who was in Year 11 and was the prettiest and most popular girl in school.

Izzy had the same sort of easygoing energy about her as her sister and she was popular—though not the most popular girl yet; that role hadn't been decided by the students, but she was definitely in the top three girls. Ava was just along for the ride, she'd always thought, but she loved Izzy. Izzy was optimistic and funny and had deepened their friendship when she'd taken Ava under her wing on the first day of

high school, when Ava had told her that she thought the girls who wore their skirts shorter with pulled up socks looked chic, and Izzy had told her that she thought Ava's dark-brown hair was very chic. Ava hadn't known how 'chic' had been pronounced till that moment and was saying it like 'chick', so she was grateful that Izzy had corrected her without embarrassing her.

Just as she was walking towards Izzy and Cameron, Mr Galloway came into the room.

'Right, team,' he called out. 'We're doing a full read-through today. Let's aim for focus and flow, not Oscar-worthy performances. That comes later. Phones away. Scripts out. Let's begin.'

Some people pulled up chairs and some sat in the remaining beanbags. Ava pulled a chair next to Cameron. When she looked down, she could see he had already highlighted his lines in the script, and had made some messy doodles and written little notes in the margin. She hadn't done anything, so she opened her pencil case and took out a yellow Texta and started highlighting her lines.

Izzy sat on the other side of Cameron, flipping through her script with the ferocity of someone looking for an error they could correct. She was clearly still angry at playing the nurse.

The read-through began, and Ava could feel the eyes of the room whenever she spoke. At first, her voice wobbled. But Cameron's line deliveries were surprisingly steady and funny, and something about his tone gave her the confidence to match him. Their scenes together actually felt kind of good. Even Mr Galloway made a few surprised 'mmm' sounds as they bounced lines back and forth.

When it was over, he nodded approvingly. 'Nice start. Romeo and Juliet, I can already see some sparks. Let's do a bit of blocking next. Balcony scene, page fifteen. For those of you who are new to the theatre, blocking is where I put you on the stage so we can see you and hear you. These are the positions you'll be in for each scene, so try to remember them,' he called out to the cast.

Ava's stomach dropped at the sight of Izzy's stare at her. *Sparks were not a good thing*, she thought as they

moved to the side of the room, while the others clustered around, pretending not to watch but were absolutely watching. Ava fidgeted with the edge of the sleeve of her school jumper, where she was slowly fraying the knit so she could eventually push her thumbs through it, even though she knew her mum would kill her. Cameron took his place below the 'balcony', which was actually just supposed to be Ava standing on a table.

She went to climb on a chair to get onto the table, her script in one hand, when Cameron held out his hand to steady her as she stepped up.

'You alright?' he asked with that laconic ease he had perfected.

'Fine,' she replied, even though her palms were sweating and her heart was doing aerobics; she was sure he would tell everyone later she had clammy hands.

Ava, the weirdo with the clammy hands. Cool.

They started the scene. At first it was stiff, her voice clipped and too fast, Mr Galloway said, and he made them start again, but then Cameron locked eyes with her and softened his tone.

'Listen to each other. Don't just say the lines.

Respond, rebuke, react,' Mr Galloway called out. 'If you don't know what you're saying and meaning, then how will the audience know?'

Ava took a breath and started again, and she and Cameron went back and forth in the scene. It wasn't perfect, but they were listening to each other, reacting and making it real.

Then Cameron said his line, 'If you're serious, then show me,' in a way that made Ava forget where she was for half a second.

'And then you kiss,' Mr Galloway called out.

Ava took in a short breath. 'Now?' she whispered to Cameron.

'Not unless you want me to,' he said and laughed until he looked at her face and must have seen how scared she was. 'No, um, we can do that later in dress rehearsal or whatever,' he said kindly.

Ava wondered if there was a word to describe relief and disappointment combined. She hadn't been kissed yet, but Izzy had kissed heaps of boys. It was like breathing for her and she took none of it seriously, while Ava, on the other hand, felt like she

might actually pass out just at the thought of it.

She wasn't just nervous, she was terrified. Of doing it wrong. Of not being good. Of feeling too much. *No thanks*, she thought.

Mr Galloway clapped. 'Better! Again tomorrow, we'll start building blocking. Please, learn your lines as soon as possible. I need you off book in two weeks at the latest,' he called.

Ava stepped off the 'balcony' as Cameron offered her a high five, which turned into an awkward halfway hug-handshake hybrid.

'That wasn't too painful,' he said.

'I didn't fall off the table, so that's a start,' she replied.

He grinned. 'You're really good, Ava, really good.'

Ava snorted, but her stomach fluttered. 'Thanks,' she said and wished she hadn't snorted. She would now be known as the snorting, clammy girl.

Across the room, Ava noticed Izzy watching them. Not glaring. Just watching, her face carefully blank. Izzy leaned towards Mia, who was playing Lady Capulet, and said something in a low voice. Mia looked over at Ava and Cameron, then laughed.

Ava felt her face flush with unknown shame and she hated herself for caring so much. She tried to pretend it was nothing. Maybe they were talking about something else. Maybe she had imagined the glance.

‘Are you planning on ignoring me forever or just for the play?’ Izzy was suddenly in front of her.

‘I’m sorry, I’ve been just feeling a bit overwhelmed. It’s not you,’ she lied. ‘I can call you tonight,’ she offered, but Izzy shook her head. ‘Wanna sleep over on the weekend?’

‘No, I’m staying at Mia’s,’ Izzy said and then gave a small shrug, like she was saying *who can blame me*.

As she left the rehearsal room, Ava could still hear Mia and Izzy talking and laughing about something, the kind that used to include her.

Izzy’s voice rose above the others for a moment, then faded again into the swirl of after-school noise. She was discussing a new song that she wanted to learn a dance to. The fact that they weren’t talking about Ava was almost worse. She was invisible once again. She left the room and walked down the hallway, where no-one called out to her. No-one waited.

She was just . . . no longer part of Izzy’s world, and she had created it by running away instead of facing Izzy’s pain.

She kept walking, clutching her script to her chest like armour.

Chapter 6

The weekend was long. Too long. It rolled out like a punishment. In fact, it felt like detention.

Ava didn't hear from Izzy once. No texts, no tags, no voice notes. Not even a reaction to the meme Ava sent late Saturday night, just in case it broke the ice. It didn't. She was frozen out and she understood why. She hadn't been a very good friend by avoiding Izzy, but Izzy hadn't been a good friend by being rude to Ava about getting the role. They were deadlocked.

Ava spent most of Sunday half-heartedly highlighting her script and ignoring the group chat where Mia had posted a string of photos from her and Izzy's impromptu sleepover that seemed to now have three more girls included.

Izzy was in two of them, hair pulled back in a high ponytail, smiling like nothing was wrong. They did dances and facemasks and looked like they were having a wonderful time.

Ava wondered if she could Photoshop herself into a first-class flight to Paris, but then gave up. Izzy had set out to prove she could have fun without Ava, and she had succeeded. In fact, Ava thought that someone on death row would be having more fun than she was this weekend.

By Sunday evening, Ava had re-read Act Two three times, cried once for reasons she couldn't quite explain, and eaten an entire packet of mini biscuits from the emergency snack drawer in the kitchen.

By Monday, she was more than ready to go back to school. Not for the classes or for Izzy, but for rehearsal.

Ava spotted Izzy by the lockers before lunch. She was standing with Mia and another girl from the netball team, laughing at something on her phone. For a second, Ava felt brave. Maybe today would be the day things went back to normal.

She took a step forward.

‘Hey,’ she said, not too loud, not too soft. Just enough for Izzy to hear.

Izzy looked up, made brief eye contact, then looked straight past her like she hadn’t spoken at all.

‘Wait, show me the one of you doing the jump,’ she said to Mia, turning the screen towards her. Mia laughed and swiped through photos, not even glancing at Ava.

Ava stood there for a beat longer than she should have. Then she smiled, feeling small and stupid, as though the moment hadn’t happened, turned and walked towards the canteen, forcing herself not to look back at the others.

She didn’t need confirmation. That had been clear enough.

She was in Siberia and she had put herself there.

That afternoon, after a clunky run-through of the balcony scene, Mr Galloway called a break, and Ava collapsed onto the floor near the back wall, pulling out her water bottle with shaky hands.

‘Nice work, Shakespeare,’ Cameron said, flopping down beside her.

Ava gave him a look. ‘That scene was a train wreck. I think I forgot my own name halfway through.’

‘Only for a second. You got it back. I could see you thinking. And the pause, it was good, it added to the moment.’

She laughed. ‘That was not intentional. It was me trying to remember what the line was.’

He shrugged. ‘I think all the best stuff never is,’ he said, tapping his script against his knee. ‘Hey, um, do you want to run lines on the walk home?’

Ava blinked. ‘You’re going my way?’
‘Sort of. I’ll just cut through the oval and meet the bus further down.’

She hesitated. It wasn’t a big deal. Just a walk. With a guy. *The* guy. The one Izzy had liked since Year 7. *But he wouldn’t like me, I’m getting too far ahead of myself*, she thought, and even thinking it made her feel even more disloyal to Izzy. Besides, he just wanted to run lines, nothing more.

‘Sure,’ she said finally. ‘Why not.’

After rehearsal, they gathered their things and slipped out through the side gate. The sun was low in

the sky, casting long shadows across the cracked pavement, and Ava noticed the tops of the trees that lined the street were turning yellow.

‘So,’ Cameron said as they walked, ‘do you actually like the acting? You’re so good at it.’

Ava couldn’t look at him because she knew she was blushing. ‘It’s okay. I mean, for me it’s trying to learn all the lines, but it’s kind of . . . exciting. Terrifying. But exciting.’

Then, turning to him, she asked, ‘Have you done many plays? Or performances?’

‘Yeah, I did this acting workshop during the school holidays because the soccer one was booked out. My parents put me in there because they work in the holidays—actually they work all the time—but I liked it. It was fun. I like pretending to be someone else for a bit. Feels easier, somehow,’ Cameron said.

They walked in silence for a few steps, the kind that wasn’t awkward, just quiet.

‘Hey, are you and Izzy okay?’ he asked suddenly. ‘I haven’t seen you together much lately. You’re usually, like, always hanging out.’

Ava’s chest tightened. ‘Sort of. She’s . . . been, um, different.’

‘She stopped sitting with you, I noticed,’ he said. ‘Did you have a fight?’

‘Not really. More like . . . I got the part she wanted, and then I panicked and tried to avoid her because I didn’t know what to say to her, and now she won’t talk to me. I know I messed up.’

As they reached the end of the street, Cameron slowed down.

‘This is me,’ he said, gesturing to a path that cut across the field. ‘Well, sort of. Shortcut to the bus.’

Ava nodded. ‘We were supposed to do lines,’ she said. ‘Instead, you just listened to my drama.’

‘Can I call you tonight?’ he said, his voice stuttering a little, and he ran his hand through his hair. ‘I mean, just so we can run lines, you know, it’s easier with someone else.’

Ava felt her eyes widen and then tried to be cool, like she had seen Izzy be when guys talked to her like this. ‘Sure. Okay. I mean, I’d like that,’ she said. ‘Do you want my number?’

'I have it,' he said, and she frowned at him.

'You do?'

'It's on the call sheet that Mr Galloway handed out at the start of rehearsals last week.'

'Is it? I didn't read it, too busy panicking about learning my lines,' she said, feeling silly for a moment. Why would he have her number? *Calm down, Ava*, she told herself.

'Cool, I'll call you after dinner,' he said, then he was walking away, the wind catching the edge of his blazer as he walked, script pages poking out of his backpack like white feathers.

So, by the time she reached the bus stop, Ava's heart was thudding in a way that had nothing to do with the walk.

Chapter 7

Ava had rushed through dinner, telling her mother she had to study for the maths test that was coming up, which pleased her mum and got Ava out of cleaning up after the meal but cost her a dark glare from Aaron as she left the kitchen.

Now she sat on her bed with her laptop open, script beside her, and her phone resting against a mug of pens. She checked the time.

It was 7.04 pm. She repositioned the mug. Checked her hair. Rearranged her collection of ornamental erasers, putting the fruit at the front, then the animals and Seven Wonders of the World. She and Izzy collected them, and these were her prized ones on her desk.

The clock showed 7.06 pm. She played a Fruit Ninja

game on her phone and cut thirty-eight watermelons in one minute.

Then her computer screen lit up with his number and she answered the call.

‘Hey,’ he said, the camera moving a little before settling on his face. His hair looked like he’d towel-dried it in a rush and he had on a white t-shirt.

‘Hey,’ she replied, wishing her voice sounded less excited. She needed to play it cool like Izzy did.

‘How’s your night been?’ he asked. She could hear a dog barking in the background behind him.

‘Fine, dinner, you know, nothing exciting.’

‘What was for dinner?’ he asked.

‘Um,’ she said.

‘Yum, I love um,’ he teased, and she rolled her eyes.

‘Gnocchi,’ she said. ‘With a tomato sauce. My *nonna* makes the sauce from her own tomatoes.’

‘Oh yum. Please invite me over for dinner. I love Italian food.’

As if that would ever happen, she thought, imagining her mother seeing a guy at their table who wasn’t one of Aaron’s friends.

‘What about you?’ she asked. ‘What was your dinner of choice?’

‘Pizza. I ordered it. My parents are working late.’ He paused. ‘Again.’

‘That’s kind of Italian,’ she said, trying to ease the sense of resentment in the air from him to his family. ‘Do you have any brothers or sisters?’ she asked.

‘Nah. My parents waited too long, so they only had me, and now they have their jobs.’ He gave a hollow sort of a laugh.

‘Are they home now?’ she asked.

‘Nah, just me and the pup,’ he said.

‘Oh, I love dogs. I want one. What sort of dog is it?’

‘Minxy,’ he called, and then leaned out of the camera’s view and came back holding a sausage dog that was small but feisty, by the way it wriggled in his arms.

‘Oh my gosh, he’s so cute.’

‘It’s a girl, but she won’t mind. She has the attitude of a wrestler anyway.’

She laughed. ‘Fair enough.’

There was a weird silence for a moment.

‘So, are we running lines?’ she quickly asked.

‘Yes, yes, good idea,’ he said, nodding and putting the dog down.

They started with the script. Cameron read Romeo’s lines with unnecessary intensity, occasionally putting on terrible accents to keep things interesting.

‘You’re doing that Scottish thing again,’ Ava said, flipping through her pages.

‘It’s Romeo of the Highlands,’ he said. ‘A lesser-known version.’

‘It’s terrible. I hope you never try for Macbeth,’ she replied.

‘What’s wrong with my Scottish accent?’ He pretended to be upset.

‘Where should I start?’ she said. ‘Let me count the ways.’

‘Ha-ha,’ he said.

They laughed more than they rehearsed. By the time they made it through the end of the scene, Ava had stopped worrying as she was getting more right than wrong, and so was Cameron.

‘Alright,’ she said, after they hit the last line of the act. ‘That was kind of decent.’

‘High praise from Miss Riccardo,’ Cameron said. ‘You want to keep going?’

‘We’re off book for Act Four next week,’ she said. ‘Might as well.’

But they didn’t keep reading. Not really. Instead, the conversation drifted. Ava couldn’t remember when she had found it so easy to talk to a guy; perhaps at times he was even easier to talk to than Izzy. She felt disloyal saying that, but Izzy was super sensitive sometimes, and Ava had to be careful with what she said because Izzy would take offence, and then Ava would have to apologise for something so minor it felt insulting to both girls.

Cameron leaned back a little and said, ‘Did you ever do a school play in primary?’

‘Yeah,’ Ava said, smiling. ‘Year 3. I was the magic faraway tree and I played a branch.’

‘A branch?’

‘Yep. It was a big tree though. I really made it special in my brown tights and the cardboard leaves taped to my arms. It was a moment.’

He laughed. ‘I was a goat in *The Sound of Music*. Knocked over a fake fence and cried in the toilets.’

‘You cried?’ She tried not to laugh.

‘Only a little. I was very passionate about my craft.’

Ava grinned, the image of tiny Cameron with goat ears making her chest feel warmer than it should have.

‘Any other shows?’ he asked.

She thought about the show in Year 6 she was supposed to be in but left it. It was too hard to explain and she didn’t want to speak badly about her mum.

They kept going. One story turned into another. Favourite school lunches. Worst haircuts.

Then Ava said, without really planning to, ‘Sometimes I think I want to be a writer or an actor. I like the play more than I thought I would, but I keep seeing ways I could improve it.’

‘You want to improve Shakespeare?’ He laughed. ‘That’s bold.’

‘No, the story is the story, but it’s this modernised version. You know, the dialogue feels stiff at times, like they’ve just translated it into modern words but it’s not really flowing.’

‘Oh wow, you’re right,’ Cameron said, leaning in. ‘You should speak to Mr Galloway about improving it.’

She laughed. ‘Nah, I don’t reckon he’d do it, but it did make me think about writing a play one day.’

‘You totally should.’ He was nodding his head enthusiastically.

She hesitated. ‘But then I remember I’m supposed to be aiming for law.’

‘Says who?’

‘My mum. My *nonna*. My aunts. Everyone.’

He looked at her for a moment, then said, ‘What about your dad?’

‘He wants me to be famous, like Elvis.’

‘Elvis? As in the singer?’ He laughed.

She nodded. ‘He loves Elvis.’

‘Interesting.’ He paused. ‘I reckon you’d be a great writer.’

‘What makes you say that?’ She tilted her head and squinted at him to see if he was serious.

‘Um, you see things. Like, I’ve noticed that you notice stuff most people don’t. If that makes sense?’

Ava blinked. Compliments usually felt throwaway, like someone passing her a napkin or the potatoes over the dinner table. This one felt like it meant something.

‘Thanks,’ she said quietly. ‘That means a lot.’

Cameron smiled and reached down to pick up Minxy, now a sleepy dachshund, and placed her on his chest, her tail thudding softly against his t-shirt.

‘Do you do any art or music?’ he asked.

‘Not really, but I’m trying to do more.’ Ava turned her laptop around to show her pinboard to him. ‘This is my vision board from last year,’ she said. ‘That’s a bookshop in Paris, and that,’ she pointed to a jagged image, ‘is a drawing . . . actually a very tragic attempt at a croissant.’

‘Solid pastry goals.’

‘I was in a phase,’ she said, embarrassed. ‘I thought I wanted to be an artist until I realised I would actually need artistic talent.’

‘I like it. Makes me want to visit a bakery and then buy a book.’

They laughed, and the conversation kept flowing, weaving in and out of serious and silly.

At one point, Cameron said, ‘I hate my birthday.’

‘Why?’

‘It always feels . . . I don’t know, like I have to act a

certain way to keep my parents happy. Like I have to enjoy it for everyone else’s sake.’

Ava nodded. ‘That makes sense. I once cried during a biscuit commercial. One of those Christmas ones where the grandad saves the last biscuit for the kid because he knows it will be his last Christmas.’

‘The kid or the grandad?’ Cameron looked concerned.

‘The kid!’ she said loudly.

A knock interrupted her laughter, and the door opened and her mum put her head around the frame.

‘Stop gossiping with Izzy—you’re being loud. And I thought you had a test,’ she said firmly.

‘Sorry, yeah, I better go, see you tomorrow,’ she said, and she ended the call before Cameron could say anything and give away that it wasn’t Izzy she was speaking to.

‘Sorry, Mum, it was just a quick call.’

Her mum raised her eyebrow and closed the door.

Ava lay back on her bed.

The room was quiet. But her mind was full.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so

known by anyone, let alone a guy. And now she wished more than ever that she had Izzy to talk to about how her heart was doing somersaults and it seemed like her brain couldn't catch up, and about how it felt to be seen for the first time.

Chapter 8

Ava capped her pen and stared at the test paper in front of her. The final question was still blank. She had no idea what the cosine of anything was, let alone how to prove it.

The awful truth settled in her stomach that she simply hadn't studied enough. She'd meant to. She'd told herself she would just learn a few more lines first, just finish blocking that scene with Cameron, just review the nurse dialogue with Izzy. Except Izzy wasn't speaking to her and Cameron was.

She'd spent the last four nights talking to Cameron, supposedly running lines but mostly just talking about nothing and everything. Teasing, giggling, playing each other music they liked, watching old reruns of

Spongebob together. It was now a habit and one she didn't want to stop, except maybe this maths test would be the spanner in the works.

Around her, students were still scribbling, calculators whirring softly.

She looked at the clock. Five minutes left.

There was no saving this. She was done. Her mum was right, and that meant she would never hear the end of it at home.

Mrs Prestius called time, and Ava handed in her paper, heart sinking, and walked back to her seat with the hollow sort of dread that only followed a test you knew you'd failed.

At lunch, she sat outside the library with her knees tucked up and her script resting on her legs. She tried reading a scene from Act Two, but the words wobbled on the page like they were under water. Her highlighter slipped, leaving a neon-pink smear across Juliet's monologue.

Her phone buzzed beside her. Izzy.

hey

Ava's heart jumped. She typed back quickly.

Hey! Rehearsal today went well. We blocked the scene with the nurse. You were really funny in it 😊

The reply came almost instantly.

Soz, wrong person.

Just that. She was the wrong person.

Ava blinked. She waited a moment, hoping more would follow. It didn't. She locked her phone and stared at the screen. She just wanted to go home, go to bed and wish she had never agreed to audition for the stupid play.

Chapter 9

The rehearsal room was a mess, with half-drunk water bottles rolling under chairs and crumpled scripts strewn across the stage. Ava was standing on the taped out stage on the floor, while opposite her, Izzy was scrolling on her phone, her expression bored to the point of insult.

Mr Galloway called from the back of the room, ‘Ladies, let’s try to stay in it. Ava, pick it up from the top of the scene.’

Ava took a breath. She’d rehearsed Act Two, Scene Five in her bedroom so many times that the lines felt like blood in her veins. It was just a shame that Izzy didn’t have the same intention or care factor.

‘The clock struck nine when I did send the nurse . . .’

She tried to bring Juliet’s urgency to her voice, that fluttery impatience of a girl waiting for news of her love, but she could already feel Izzy’s disinterest prickling beneath her skin like static.

‘Ugh, she’s so slow!’ Ava continued, voice rising slightly. ‘If love had a messenger, it’d be a thought, fast, faster than sunlight. Not her.’

Izzy finally looked up. ‘Do you even hear yourself?’

‘What?’

‘You’re being so . . . intense. This scene isn’t life or death.’

Ava blinked. ‘Well, it kind of is, for Juliet at least.’

Izzy rolled her eyes. ‘Are you for real? Stop taking it so seriously. It’s embarrassing. You’re not like a famous actress or anything.’

A few people from the wings turned to look. Mr Galloway tried again. ‘Izzy, can you just give us your next line?’

Izzy raised her eyebrows at Ava. ‘Can you stop performing like we’re already on opening night?’

Ava flinched. ‘I’m sorry I care. Someone has to.’

‘Oh right, because you’re the only one taking it

seriously? Or are you just trying to impress Cameron?’

Izzy’s voice was syrupy now, mean and slow.

That landed harder than Ava expected. Izzy always knew where to place the brutal blow. She stared at Izzy, then down at the floor, her face burning. But she refused to shrink in front of Izzy. Somehow she found the courage to speak, even though everyone was listening in now.

‘You don’t get to say that,’ Ava said, voice low. ‘You don’t get to twist this into something else just because you’re not prepared.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, should I bow to the great Ava Riccardo? Star of every play and emotional martyr of the drama department?’

‘Why are you being so awful?’ Ava cried, beyond caring who was witnessing this. ‘Is it jealousy or the fact that for once you didn’t get what you wanted?’

Izzy gasped as Mr Galloway stepped forward.

‘Enough, you two. Take a break.’

It was too much for Ava. Something splintered inside her—three weeks of trying to ignore Izzy’s distance, trying to keep everything together, trying

not to crack. She threw her script onto the floor and walked off the stage without a word.

Behind her, Mr Galloway called her name, but she was already gone.

She walked outside into the front oval. The school was quiet. The bell for finishing had sounded earlier, and for once it was quiet. Ava sat on the grass, buried her face in her hands and started to cry.

A minute passed. Then another. *I should leave the play. I should leave the school*, she thought.

‘Ava?’ Cameron’s voice was quiet, careful. ‘Hey. You okay?’

She didn’t look up, but he sat beside her anyway, cross-legged like they were kids at story time. He held out a water bottle wordlessly. She took it and wiped her face with the sleeve of her jumper.

‘I’d give you a tissue, but they’re in my bag in the rehearsal room,’ he said.

‘I don’t deserve a tissue,’ she said dramatically.

‘Whoa, everyone deserves a tissue. Tissues are egalitarian,’ he joked, clearly trying to change her mood, but Ava was not having it.

'Izzy is so mean,' she said as her tears finally started to subside.

'Yeah, she's being a lot,' he said after a pause. 'That wasn't fair.'

'She embarrassed me,' Ava said.

'No, she tried to embarrass you. But, you know, it's up to you if you let her or not,' Cameron said gently.

'She basically said that I'm doing too much and trying too hard and that I'm doing it to impress you.'

Cameron shook his head. 'Why does she care? Anyway, I'm already impressed by you,' he said, and then seemed surprised at his own words. 'I mean, like, you're good at learning your lines and stuff, and you know, you're smart,' he said hurriedly as though covering himself for saying too much.

Ava looked at him, confused for a moment and unsure what to say, so she looked back at her hands in her lap. She wasn't sure what he meant. Her acting? Her learning lines? It felt like a weird half-compliment, or maybe he was just clutching at things to say to try to make her feel better. Her throat was tight with unshed tears, and she hated that he was seeing her like this,

sort of like a crumpled tissue, too sensitive, falling apart. But she didn't move away.

'Izzy's just been . . . weird,' Ava said finally, voice hoarse. 'And I keep thinking if I just do everything right, she'll stop. But she won't. And now I feel pathetic because I let it get to me again. We were best friends and now I have no-one.'

'You're not pathetic,' Cameron said firmly. 'You're the only one who shows up prepared every single time. You actually care and that's why you're so good.' He nudged her with his elbow. 'And you don't have no-one, you have me. We're friends, aren't we?'

'That's what she hates,' Ava muttered. 'That I care about the play and it being good, and that we're friends. You know she had a crush on you—that's why she wanted to audition.' Ava no longer cared about telling him Izzy's feelings now, since Izzy had been so careless about her feelings.

'You want the play to be good. That's what I learned in my acting workshop—if actors care then the audience members care, or something like that. I can't remember exactly, but does that make sense?'

Ava let that sink in. Her chest was still aching, but something about his voice, so certain, so unbothered by the drama, felt steadying.

She exhaled shakily. 'Yeah, it does.' She paused. 'You always say the right thing.'

He grinned. 'Sometimes. Sometimes I say the wrong things and I get sent to Miss Elliot's office, but we live and we learn.'

Ava laughed, the sound surprising both of them.

'You're coming back in, right?' he asked.

She nodded, wiping her face.

He stood up and held out his hands for her to take, then pulled her to her feet.

'By the way, I never had a crush on Izzy, ever, so I don't know what she thought was going to happen. I liked someone else.'

Ava nodded, afraid to ask who it was, because if she knew then she would be jealous, and the last thing she wanted was more pain in her heart right now.

Chapter 10

Ava walked back into rehearsal with Cameron, and saw Izzy glaring at her and then whisper to Mia, who looked slightly shocked at what Izzy was saying. Ava could only imagine.

Mr Galloway clapped once, sharp and authoritative. 'Right. Everyone, you can have an early mark today, except Ava and Izzy.'

Ava's stomach dropped. This was it. She was about to be fired, or whatever teachers did in school plays when people weren't performing properly.

Izzy, who had been standing near the light rig with her arms crossed, turned slowly. 'Seriously?'

Mr Galloway nodded. 'Yes. Seriously.'

The others cleared the room like a fire drill and

Cameron gave Ava a sympathetic glance as he left with the others.

Finally it was just the three of them, sitting in the plastic chairs, Mr Galloway pinching the bridge of his nose like a man preparing to deliver bad news.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘I’ve tried to give you both space. I figured, you know, teenagers, hormones, personality clashes. It happens. But what happened today crossed a line.’

Neither of them spoke.

He looked at Izzy. ‘This production matters to a lot of people. To me and to your other actors, and your behaviour in that scene was not acceptable.’

Izzy flinched slightly, her jaw tightening. ‘I just thought Ava was being too much. It’s very attention seeking. She takes it all so seriously.’

‘You weren’t taking it seriously enough,’ Ava muttered.

Izzy’s eyes snapped to her. ‘You don’t get to talk about serious when you’re the one who stormed off.’

‘Enough,’ Mr Galloway said firmly. ‘You’re both talented. You’re both capable. But this show doesn’t

work if Juliet and her nurse are locked in a silent war. I don’t care what’s going on outside of rehearsal. You leave it at the door. Got it?’

Ava swallowed hard. ‘Yes, sir.’

Izzy hesitated, then nodded. ‘Fine.’

‘I mean it,’ he continued. ‘I don’t know what happened between you both, but you need to get over it. I don’t need you to be best friends. I don’t even need you to like each other. But I do need professionalism. Because if you two fall apart, this whole show falls with you.’

There was a heavy silence.

‘And as for attention seeking, Izzy, Ava is seeking the attention of the audience and doing a fine job. In fact, you could learn from her. You have a natural comedic timing, Izzy, but right now you’re getting in your own way by being so sulky and ridiculous on stage. You are embarrassing yourself by not honouring your talent.’

Ava glanced over at Izzy, who was staring at a point on the floor like it had personally offended her, but she could see her shoulders straighten at little at the compliment from Mr Galloway.

‘It’s true, you’re very funny when you stop hating me on stage,’ Ava said quietly.

Izzy finally met her eyes. Her face was unreadable, but not entirely cold.

‘I don’t hate you,’ she said. ‘I’m just upset you didn’t speak to me about you getting the role and me not, and then you ignored me and hid from me.’

‘I didn’t hide,’ Ava said, feeling tears well up.

‘You did. I saw you run the other way one day. It was so rude and mean,’ Izzy said, and Ava could hear the pain in her voice. ‘And I texted you and called you and you ignored me. You know I hate that.’ Izzy’s voice cracked, and Ava felt guilt flood her body.

And suddenly it clicked—of course Izzy would take it personally. Ava had disappeared, and Izzy knew exactly what it felt like to be left. Her dad had been in and out of her life for years, always with excuses and silences. Being ignored didn’t just hurt her feelings. It confirmed every fear she already carried.

‘I didn’t know what to say,’ Ava said. ‘I was surprised to get the role, and I know how much you wanted it.’

‘I don’t care, you hurt me.’ Izzy crossed her arms.

‘You hurt me too. You were horrible when I got the part.’ Ava heard her voice rising.

Mr Galloway shook his head. ‘Stop. If you two are going to get through this play together, then you have to accept that perhaps I saw things in you both that you didn’t.’

He looked at Izzy. ‘You’re a natural comedian, and you’re a great character actor. You make people feel good when they watch you act and that’s why I gave you the role of the nurse. She needed someone who would make people sit up in their seats.’

Ava saw Izzy’s chin lift at the words about her ability.

‘And Ava is Juliet because she has a natural vulnerability in her acting, and she reads Juliet’s part beautifully. I chose the right actors for the roles, and who knows, next year we might do a different play, and, Izzy, you would be the lead and Ava in the chorus. This isn’t about who is better but about who is right for the role.’

Izzy and Ava were silent, both processing his words.

Mr Galloway stood up. ‘Now, shake hands, make a truce, extend an olive branch, send a white dove, whatever you need to do, but we just need to get through the

rest of the rehearsal time without you two acting like it's the *Hunger Games*.'

He walked away, muttering something about his blood pressure.

The silence between them was thick and awkward.

Ava didn't know what to say. Sorry felt too big. Too raw. And maybe Izzy owed her one first. But something had shifted, and if Mr Galloway hadn't stepped in, they might've wrecked the whole play for everyone.

Izzy crossed her arms and finally spoke. 'Truce?'

Ava blinked. 'Really?'

'I'm not going to hug you or braid your hair, Ava. I'm just saying, we've got a few weeks left. I want this show to be good too. So, a truce is fine.'

Ava nodded. 'Truce.'

They stood there for a second too long, not quite smiling, not quite glaring. It wasn't a friendship. It wasn't even forgiveness. But it was something more like neutral territory.

Izzy turned away first. 'Let's run lines. You still come in late on the "O honey nurse" bit.'

Ava exhaled, half laughing. 'Okay. But you always

miss the part where Juliet tells the nurse to go away if she can't speak fast enough.'

Izzy gave her a tight smile. 'Trust me, I never miss that part.'

'Want to run the scene?' Ava asked and Izzy sighed.

'Sure, why not.'

This time, when the scene began, the rhythm between them wasn't perfect, but it wasn't broken either, and they listened to each other as Juliet and the nurse, and Ava wished that perhaps she and Izzy could listen to each other a little more as the friends they used to be, but that was over now. All those years of secrets and sleepovers and laughter and love, gone, over a guy and a role in a play.

Chapter 11

Today, the rehearsal room smelled like whiteboard cleaner, sweat and faint eucalyptus from the cracked window that never quite closed where the trees waved outside when the wind was strong. Posters from past school productions peeled slightly at the corners—*Guys and Dolls*, *Into the Woods*, *Annie*—all with older students smiling in costume, arms around each other like a different kind of family. *Clearly, there would be no happy families in the poster for this play*, Ava thought as she looked at the shows before theirs.

The Year 11s had finished their class when Ava arrived, and she saw Grace, Izzy's sister, carrying a bubble tea and her backpack. *She is so cool*, Ava thought.

'Hey, I haven't seen you at ours in ages. What's happening?' Grace asked.

Ava sighed. 'Izzy and I sort of had a fight.'

'About what?' Grace looked surprised, but Ava was even more surprised that Izzy hadn't said anything to her.

'This,' Ava gestured to the room. 'She's mad that I got the role she wanted, I avoided her because I didn't know what to say and it's just a big mess.'

Grace blew air out of her cheeks slowly. 'That's tough, but you guys are so good together, give it time. I reckon you'll come back around together again. It's just a blip. As my girlfriends and I always say, don't let guys and competition come between you and your mates.'

'Too late,' Ava sighed.

Grace touched Ava on the shoulder. 'I'll talk to her if you want?'

Ava shook her head. 'No, she'll think I asked you to. We'll have to work it out ourselves.'

Grace smiled, and then the door opened and the cast came in, including Izzy.

'What's up, loser?' Grace said to Izzy as she passed.

‘Nothing, just looking for a new sister who isn’t a cow.’ Izzy stuck her tongue out at Grace, who laughed and kept walking.

Ava watched them banter, that easy sibling short-hand zipping back and forth, like it always had between the sisters. She used to be a part of it, Grace teasing them both, Izzy with her hilarious comebacks, all of them laughing.

For a long time, Ava hadn’t just been Izzy’s best friend; she’d felt like an honorary part of their family and Grace was an older sister. Just like Izzy was a part of hers, teasing Aaron and having sleepovers that turned into Sunday pancakes; shared jokes that spanned two households.

Now, she felt like someone watching through a window. Still smiling, still close enough to see it . . . but not inside anymore. And she missed it; she missed them.

She moved to stand on the taped floor of the ‘stage’ and placed her water bottle on top of the old upright piano that had half its keys chipped. Someone named Clara had scratched her presence at school into the side of the instrument in 2021, and Ava traced the words

with her eyes to steady herself with Izzy standing so close. They had formed a truce, but it didn’t mean things were back to normal. There was still silence, no messages, no hanging out at lunchtime. But no more whispers about her to Mia or giggling at Ava as she passed by in the hallway.

Mr Galloway clapped his hands once, the sound sharp against the worn linoleum. ‘Act Two, Scene Five. Let’s go, Juliet and Nurse.’

Ava stepped into position. Izzy mirrored her. They didn’t look at each other.

‘The clock had struck nine when I called for the nurse . . .’

Ava’s voice floated through the room and Izzy responded on cue. No rolling eyes. No interruptions. Finally, just them speaking the lines and none of their personal drama on stage with them. The mood was cordial and controlled, but it felt so weird acting opposite her former best friend, now treating each other like strangers.

Mr Galloway nodded slowly as they reached the final beat. ‘Better,’ he said. ‘Still a bit tense, but the

timing's improved. You're starting to listen, not just recite. That's how chemistry is created.'

Ava stepped back, finally letting out a breath. Izzy grabbed her water bottle from the piano and joined her, close enough to share space but not warmth.

'Hey,' Izzy said after a moment. 'Do you and Cameron talk . . . outside of rehearsal?'

Ava blinked. 'Sorry?'

'He used to message me sometimes. Not a lot. But before we stopped being friends. I was just wondering.'

Stopped being friends. Three words that felt like three concurrent slaps.

Ava hesitated. Her eyes stinging, she concentrated on a peeling corner of masking tape beneath her shoe.

'We've been running lines. Sometimes.'

Izzy didn't look at her. 'Does he ever ask about me?'

The question dropped between them like a pin in a silent hall.

'No,' Ava said. 'Not really.' She paused. 'We just talk about the play, not school stuff.'

Izzy nodded, as though she'd expected a different answer and was disappointed. 'Cool.'

That was all she said. *Cool*. But Ava knew it was very uncool for Izzy, and she wished she had a different answer for her, perhaps that might heal the split between them, but then she wouldn't have Cameron to herself. It was all so confusing.

They managed to get through the rest of the rehearsal with no more drama, and afterwards, when Ava was tucking her script into her bag, Cameron appeared at her side.

'You were good today,' he said, slinging his bag over his shoulder. 'You hit a proper rhythm in that last scene with Izzy.'

'Thanks,' she said. 'You too, even though you weren't in it all that much.'

'Still counts.' He shrugged. 'Think of me more as emotional-support Romeo.'

They walked towards the school gates and past the empty canteen, where a lonely sandwich triangle still rotated slowly in the display fridge. Out by the oval, a few guys kicked a football in their socks, still in school uniforms, ties shoved in pockets. The sound of a distant whistle cut through the soft gold light of late afternoon.

‘So . . .’ Cameron said. ‘You and Izzy seem to have put down your swords.’ He raised his eyebrows at her, but Ava groaned and shook her head in reply.

‘We called a truce, but she mentioned that our friendship is over, so that’s great news,’ she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘She might come around when the play is over?’

Ava snorted, not caring that she sounded like a disgruntled piglet. ‘She asked about you today,’ Ava said. ‘You should give her a call, and maybe just talk a bit more. She’s great when she’s not mad at you.’ She gave a hollow laugh. ‘As I said, she has a pretty big crush on you.’

Cameron frowned. ‘I told you, I don’t like her like that,’ he said firmly. ‘I like someone else.’

‘Okay, sorry, it’s just she might stop hating on me so much if she thought you liked her.’

At the corner where he usually turned off towards the bus stop, he spun around and looked at her, as though trying to think about what to say. ‘Listen, Ava, I don’t play games with people. Like, if I have a crush

on someone, or something like that,’ he said, his face reddening. ‘I mean, if I like someone for real then that’s it. I don’t mess with people’s feelings. It’s not my thing. You know?’

Ava heard the low rumble before she saw it. That sound was definitely from her dad’s beloved 1967 Chevrolet Impala. She turned and there it was, painted deep navy and polished to a mirror shine with white trim. It pulled up to the kerb with all the subtlety of a heavy-metal rock concert.

Ava’s dad leaned across the passenger seat, elbow out of the window. ‘Ava! You ready, superstar?’

‘Who is that?’ Cameron asked.

Ava groaned softly. ‘That’s my dad.’

Cameron’s eyes lit up. ‘No way. Is that a real Chevy?’

She frowned. ‘Uh . . . yeah? You know cars?’

‘Sort of, but I love vintage American cars. That’s so cool. Is that . . .? Hang on, is that an Elvis bobblehead on the dash?’ he asked, leaning into the open window on the passenger side to look at the inside of the car.

Ava’s dad grinned as she opened the door. ‘That’s the King himself. You a fan?’

‘I mean, who isn’t? “Can’t Help Falling in Love”? Classic.’

Her dad gave an approving nod. ‘Good taste, my friend. Real music. Not that computer stuff. Who is this young man, Ava?’

‘Dad, this is Cameron Reed. He’s playing Romeo in the play. Cameron, this is my dad.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Mr Riccardo,’ he said politely.

‘Tony, please,’ he said, gesturing with his hands as though he was showing Cameron how big the fish was that he caught.

Ava slid into the front seat, mortified and mildly fascinated at this interaction.

‘You enjoying being in the play?’ her dad asked Cameron, who was walking around the car to the driver’s side to take it all in.

‘I am. Your daughter is very talented,’ Cameron replied.

‘Takes after her father. I was an Elvis impersonator when I was younger, but I hurt my knee, so I can’t do the jailhouse rock like I used to and that one is a fan favourite. It was sad to give it up.’

Cameron nodded understandingly. ‘I bet. I imagine that once you feel Elvis in your soul, you can’t un-feel it.’

Ava’s dad turned to her. ‘He’s a smart kid. You should bring him home to dinner to meet your mum and brother.’

Ava smiled, but inside thought she would rather stub her toe on a metal door.

‘Okay, you want a lift, Romeo?’ her dad asked.

‘No thanks, but thank you anyway,’ Cameron said and then looked at Ava. ‘Run lines tonight?’ he asked, his eyes locked on hers.

She felt that stomach-flipping thing that had started to happen more around Cameron and she nodded as the car took off.

‘Bye,’ he said.

‘See ya,’ she answered.

As they drove off, her dad hummed a few bars of ‘Suspicious Minds’ and said, ‘He’s got style. I like him.’

Ava stared out of the window, her stomach flipping once again.

This wasn’t good, not even a bit.

Chapter 12

Dinner that night was spaghetti and meatballs, which was her dad's idea of a 'hearty, post-rehearsal feast'. He added extra garlic to everything and was singing along to Elvis while her mum had actually cooked.

Ava twirled her fork through the pasta, pretending to listen while her dad recounted every moment of Cameron's two-minute admiration of the Impala like it was a historic event.

'He knew about cars and Elvis,' he said proudly, pointing his fork at Ava like it was a mic. 'That's a sign of good character, I'm telling you.'

Her mum looked unimpressed as she passed the grated parmesan. 'Being into Elvis doesn't get you into university.'

Her dad raised his eyebrows. 'Elvis didn't go to university. It's not for everyone.'

'Tony, don't put ideas in her head,' her mum snapped, and Ava half smiled but kept her head down.

'So,' her mum said, turning her attention to Ava, 'have you got your maths test back yet?'

Ava's stomach clenched, but she kept her voice calm. 'Not yet.'

It wasn't a lie. Technically. She hadn't looked at the result yet, which was in an online portal from her maths teacher. It had come with an email, which was never a good sign, but she hadn't opened it, despite the red exclamation mark that said 'urgent'.

Her mum narrowed her eyes. 'Strange. Everyone else in your class got theirs back today. I saw Bethany's mum post about it in the Year 9 Parents' Facebook group. Her daughter got ninety-two.'

Ava poked at her meatball with her fork, her appetite suddenly gone. 'Well, I don't know, maybe Mrs Prestius hasn't finished marking mine.'

Her dad jumped in. 'Sonia, let the kid breathe. Also, why is Bethany's mum boasting about her kid's maths

test? That's not right. Maybe Bethany's mum should focus on her own maths results.'

Ava bit her lip to stop from laughing. She agreed with her dad about that much. That Year 9 Parents' Facebook group was a nightmare—so much competitiveness and boasting. It was embarrassing that her mum was even on it. It was mostly the parents on there who didn't have lives of their own, which Ava was starting to think was her own mum.

Her mum pursed her lips but let it drop. For now.

After dinner, Ava offered to clear the table, desperate to avoid more questions. Her mum looked surprised but didn't object, so Ava scraped plates and stacked the dishwasher with a robotic efficiency, then slipped upstairs and closed the door behind her like a lifeline.

She stared at her computer for a long time. Then she opened it and logged into the portal and closed her eyes while it loaded and then slowly opened them.

Forty-two per cent.

She opened the email.

Please ask your parent or guardian to arrange a

meeting with me. I'd like to discuss how we can support your learning.

Mrs Prestius

Her heart sank. The humiliation was immediate and total. A meeting. With her mother. This was it. Her mum would freak out and make her leave the play, and then Izzy would get the lead role, and then Cameron would fall for Izzy and Ava's life would be over.

She imagined the look on her mother's face. The sharp inhale through the nose. The soft, patronising 'I'm not angry, just disappointed'.

She closed the email and stared at the ceiling, trying to blink away the burn behind her eyes.

Everything was going so well with the play. She was finally feeling something good, and she and Izzy were on okay terms; not back to besties, but it was bearable. And there was Cameron. She looked at her phone and saw he had already tried to call her. And now it was all about to unravel because of one test.

No, because of one truth. She wasn't coping. She was putting too much into the play and Cameron, and

as far as her mother was concerned, that was the worst kind of failure.

Ava picked up her phone and typed a message to Cameron:

Bad test result. Really bad. Parent-teacher-meeting bad.

She watched the little 'typing . . .' bubble appear. Then disappear. Then appear again.

That sucks. For what it's worth, you're still brilliant. Want to call? You can vent and I'll rate how dramatic you sound from one to full-on Shakespeare.

Ava smiled faintly, but her chest still ached.

She glanced at her door, then back at the test paper. She knew she couldn't hide it for long. But tonight? She could delay the collapse. Just a little longer.

She typed quickly.

Okay.

Chapter 13

Ava stared at her wardrobe like it was a maths test. Nothing made sense and she hated everything.

Sure, it was only a rehearsal at school on a Saturday afternoon, but it meant no uniforms, and Cameron would see her in her casual clothes and what if she looked like a dork? She wished she and Izzy were talking. Izzy would ask Grace for advice and then Facetime her, and they would critique each other's outfits and everything would be fine. Instead, she was left staring at her options and wondering if it was too late to run to the shopping centre and get something new. But she knew what her mother's response to that would be, so she went back to searching.

Her stomach was doing weird somersaults, and she

was sweating too much after her shower and everything just felt too hard. She didn't want to look like she was trying, but she didn't want to look like she hadn't tried either. *It was such a fine line*, she thought.

She settled on her favourite jeans, a pretty floral top and her sneakers. She left her hair down, and applied a tiny amount of mascara and some lip gloss. She looked casual and probably like every other girl in Year 9 on the weekend. She held up a silver necklace to see if it worked, but it looked like she was trying too hard, so she put it back in her jewellery box.

Whatever, Ava, it doesn't matter. No-one is looking at you, she reminded herself.

It was just rehearsal. Still, she checked the mirror one more time before grabbing her bag as her dad called her to leave.

Arriving at the school, she realised she had never been here on a weekend. It was quieter than she'd ever seen it, in a weird, eerie way. There was no shouting, no bells, no kids playing sport on the ovals and basketball courts, but as she walked towards the rehearsal room, she could hear the low murmur of people talking

and laughing as though having a great time.

She pushed open the doors and stepped inside, greeted by faces turning to look at her and the buzzing of fluorescent lights.

Izzy was already here. She was standing by the stage with Mia, talking too loudly and laughing in that fake way Ava had seen her do before, when she was trying to draw attention to herself. When she spotted Ava, she turned away slightly, shoulders stiff, and whispered in Mia's ear, who in turn looked over at Ava and rolled her eyes, not even pretending to be subtle.

Ava's heart sank. This was going to be an awful rehearsal, and it was all afternoon.

She hovered by the side of the room, pretending to check her phone.

'Happy Saturday,' she heard, and she looked up to see Cameron.

He was wearing a hoodie with the strings chewed at the ends and skate shoes, and carried a skateboard and had headphones around his neck. *He was too cool for school*, she thought as she looked at him. Literally.

He gave her a small, easy smile.

‘Same to you,’ she said, grateful that he was talking to her.

They walked towards the stage together, avoiding the narrow-eyed stares from Mia and Izzy.

Cameron bumped her shoulder lightly. ‘Want to run lines?’

Ava smiled. ‘Sure.’

They sat cross-legged near the stage as Mr Galloway was talking to the boys playing Mercutio, Tybalt and Benvolio, all the guys holding swords and pretending to fight. They opened their scripts and Cameron turned to a page.

‘Okay, but seriously, hear me out,’ Cameron said, grinning. ‘If I climbed a wall to see you, I’d be arrested. It’s not romantic, it’s trespassing.’

‘It’s Shakespeare,’ Ava replied, laughing. ‘Everything sounds more noble when you say it in iambic pentameter. And besides, they didn’t really have texting back then. You had to write a letter with a feather quill and source paper and ink, and you know, bribe a servant to take it to the enemy family. It was a lot.’

Cameron gave a loud laugh, and she could see a few

cast mates turn to look at them.

He raised an eyebrow. ‘Fair enough.’ He rummaged through his bag. ‘Dost thou want a chip, fair lady?’

‘Depends what flavour,’ she said.

‘Thought you knowest it is salt and vinegar. The only true chip for such a fair maiden.’

Ava laughed harder than she meant to. For a moment, the tension around her chest eased.

‘You’re good at the emotion stuff on stage, like being sad,’ he said, looking a bit awkward. ‘I like making people laugh—it’s easy—but it’s harder to make people feel sad or sorry for you. How do you do it?’

Ava looked at him, startled. ‘Thanks. I mean, I don’t really know what I’m doing, I just try to feel what she would be feeling when I say the lines.’

‘Ah, you see, I avoid feeling that stuff, ’cause you know, emotions and me, us guys aren’t good at it.’ He half laughed.

‘You could practise,’ she teased. ‘You can’t pretend you don’t care about anything forever.’

‘Ah, I knew you were onto me.’ He shook his head dramatically, and she noticed how blond some of his

waves were, the sort of highlights girls paid hundreds of dollars for in a salon.

‘Romeo and Juliet?’ Mr Galloway called, and the pair looked up at him.

‘You’re up. We’re going to block the balcony scene.’

Ava followed Cameron to the taped area on the floor that was supposed to reflect the stage.

Mr Galloway moved them through the scene, and Ava tried to concentrate as the cast members came in and out of the room, the heavy door banging on occasion. She could see Izzy and Mia in the doorway, whispering and staring at her.

Ava fumbled a line, and Mr Galloway peered at her and then at where she was looking.

‘Girls, in or out, stop banging that door,’ he roared at them, and the girls left the rehearsal, laughing loudly outside.

‘Focus, Ava,’ she heard Mr Galloway say.

‘You okay?’ Cameron whispered, and she nodded, wishing today was over already.

Chapter 14

Monday came with a grey sky and the kind of drizzle that soaked everything it touched, and it felt as though it had dampened Ava’s mood even more.

She arrived at school feeling like she hadn’t slept properly in a week, which, to be fair, she hadn’t. Between learning the many lines for the play, worrying about Izzy and Mia and talking to Cameron online, she was exhausted, and she wished she didn’t have to be here today.

She walked into homeroom with her head down, hoping to get through the morning without making eye contact with anyone.

No such luck.

Just before first period, her name came over the

speaker in that familiar, polite tone used for lost jumpers and Friday detentions.

‘Ava Riccardo to the Year 9 office, please.’

Her stomach dropped.

She packed up her books and made her way through the corridors. Mia and Izzy passed her near the lockers, mid-laugh. Ava didn’t catch what they were saying, but she felt the pause in their conversation as she walked by.

She didn’t look back. There was nothing there between them anymore.

She waited outside the Year 9 coordinator’s office, who she could see was on the phone through the window. Miss Elliot gestured for her to come in and shut the door behind her.

She finished her call. ‘Ava, thanks for coming. Have a seat.’

Ava sat down slowly, placing her bag in her lap like a shield.

Miss Elliot folded her hands, her voice calm but clipped. ‘I just wanted to check in. I noticed you submitted your English reflection late, and your last maths

test result wasn’t what we’d expect from you.’

Ava nodded, staring at the edge of the desk. ‘Yeah. I’m really sorry about that.’

‘Are you okay?’

The question was simple enough, straightforward even, but it made Ava’s throat tighten, and she had to work hard to hold back her emotions.

She nodded again, too quickly. ‘I’m fine. Just been a bit tired, you know, with rehearsals and stuff.’

Miss Elliot tilted her head. ‘How’s the play going?’

‘Good,’ Ava said. ‘It’s fine. Busy but good.’

‘And how are things socially? With friends? I’ve noticed you and Izzy aren’t as close as you normally are. Anything happening there I should know about? Are you two still friends?’

Ava hesitated. That was a trap of a question. If she said no they weren’t friends, that she and Izzy were no longer speaking and Izzy was being mean to her, then she would be sent to the school counsellor, and probably Izzy would be called in and then it would make it all worse.

Ava smiled and said, ‘Yeah. It’s all good. Just a big

term. We're both super busy, but we see each other in the play rehearsals.'

Miss Elliot gave her a long, quiet look. The kind that said *I don't believe you, but also, I know better than to push.*

'Alright. Well, if that changes, you know where to find me.'

Ava nodded. 'Thanks.'

'And make sure you get the next assessment in on time, okay?'

'I will.'

She left the office feeling like Miss Elliot had seen straight through her and knew what was coming next, even if Ava had no idea herself.

As she walked back to class, she passed the drama noticeboard. The rehearsal schedule had been updated: more after-school sessions, another Saturday blocked out and a note from Mr Galloway in red marker:

You've got this. Trust the process. Be brave.

Ava stared at the words for a second longer than she meant to. Then she turned and kept walking.

Still not brave enough to say how hurt she was by

Izzy. Still not brave enough to say sorry to Izzy for avoiding her. Still not brave enough to tell her mum to be more supportive. And certainly not brave enough to tell Cameron he was the one good thing in her life right now.

Chapter 15

The rehearsal room was quiet as Ava and Cameron came inside. Sunlight streamed in through the high windows, creating natural spotlights on the stage. A few keyboards sat idle against the wall, their cords tangled and their keys marked with fading stickers from a Year 7 music class.

Ava shifted nervously, her back to the wall, script clutched in one hand even though she knew all her lines. But it felt like a safety blanket, and right now Cameron was sitting on the piano stool, bouncing his knee like a metronome.

‘Okay,’ he said, flipping to the right page, ‘Act Two, Scene Two. Balcony. Technically.’

‘Technically,’ Ava repeated, looking at the peeling

sticker on the keyboard that said ‘G sharp’ with a faded smiley face drawn above it.

It was Cameron’s idea to skip the final lesson to run lines and get the blocking right. Ava could hear the hum of the students who had sports, calling out and laughing, while others took it more seriously and yelled instructions.

‘You ready?’ he asked, standing up.

‘As I’ll ever be,’ Ava said, tucking her hair behind her ear.

He stood, cleared his throat dramatically, then began to recite his lines.

‘I climbed these walls like they were nothing because love makes you braver than you think. No fence, no threat, no-one can stop me if I’m coming for you.’

Ava rolled her eyes. ‘You always put on the posh voice.’

‘It’s my “I’m in love and probably dying soon” voice.’

‘It sounds like Prince William.’

‘Exactly.’

‘He’s a bit wet.’

They both laughed, and then she found her place on the page.

‘If they catch you here, they’ll kill you,’ she said, lowering her voice, trying not to sound like she was reciting in English class.

‘Honestly, the look in your eyes scares me more than twenty guys with knives.’ He looked up at her, reading but somehow meaning it too.

Something in her stomach fluttered. Just a little.

Remember this is a play, acting, she told herself.

They moved through the scene, their rhythm getting steadier. Ava started forgetting she was holding a script, her eyes rising to meet his more often, the words coming out naturally and easily.

She leaned towards him as he leaned into her. His face was so close to hers, she felt herself close her eyes and then she heard . . .

‘Avaaa . . .’

The sound was long and whiny. Familiar. Dreaded.

Her brother, Aaron, stood in the doorway, grinning like a lunatic.

‘Excuse me,’ she said in slight shock. ‘What are you doing here?’

Aaron stepped into the room like he owned it,

looked from Ava to Cameron, then made a series of goat noises, complete with fake bleating and some sort of snorting laughter at the end.

Cameron snorted too, just once, but immediately looked sorry for it.

‘I have a curriculum day and Mum has a meeting with one of your teachers. You’re in trouble. She told me to come and find you,’ Aaron said. ‘Didn’t know I was interrupting Romeo and Juliet: The Kissy Years.’

Ava’s face burned. ‘A meeting? Who with?’

Aaron ignored her question. ‘If there is kissing in this play I’m going to barf. Like run up to the start and barf all over the stage. Just saying. Mum will love this story. “Ava was snogging Cameron in the rehearsal room.” Classic.’

‘OUT!’

He made another goat noise, then finally slunk off, still chuckling to himself.

Ava turned back to Cameron, horrified. ‘I am so sorry.’

‘It’s fine,’ he said, smiling. ‘I mean, that was . . . something.’

‘I’m never coming back to school. I’m going to live in a bin behind the service station.’

Cameron laughed. ‘Don’t. Then who’ll help me remember my lines?’

She shook her head, unable to stop the embarrassed grin forming on her lips. ‘I hate him.’

‘He’s got a weird sort of confidence. I respect it. But yeah. I’d hate him too if he was my little brother.’

‘I have to go and find my mum. Her coming to a meeting and not telling me, that’s bad, like bad, bad,’ she said.

Cameron nodded. ‘Yeah, it’s not good,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘See you at rehearsals later,’ she said, and she ran from the room in search of the music she was about to face from her mother.

Chapter 16

Ava spotted her mum the second she walked into reception. Sonia Riccardo was in work mode, complete with a power walk, dark sunglasses pushed into her hair, blazer on despite the humidity and a slash of red lipstick. Her handbag was slung like a weapon, and the look on her face said she was about to sue the entire education department.

Ava’s stomach dropped. She had never actually seen her mother ropable before, not like this. She’d seen her mother cross, frustrated, disappointed, but this was a new mode for her and Ava didn’t like it. She stood by the fish tank pretending to read the faded school-values poster while the receptionist buzzed Mrs Prestius, the Year 9 maths coordinator.

Ava's mum turned and saw Ava. 'Come on,' she said in a clipped tone, and marched down the corridor like she had something to prove, which maybe she did, but Ava wasn't sure whether it was to Mrs Prestius or Ava, or maybe it was both.

Mrs Prestius was waiting in her office, smiling too widely. She gestured to the two chairs in front of her desk. 'Thanks for coming in, Mrs Riccardo. Ava. Please, take a seat.'

Ava sat. Her mum didn't.

'I want to know,' her mum began, voice tight, 'how my daughter went from high marks last year to forty-two per cent on a test in Term One this year. Something's clearly wrong.'

Mrs Prestius blinked. 'Yes. Well. Ava's focus has shifted lately. She's fallen behind in her homework, missed key concepts. She's capable, but she's not applying herself. She is distracted.'

'She's in a play,' her mum said flatly. 'That'll be it.'

'Possibly,' Mrs Prestius said. 'Though to be fair, many students balance extracurricular activities without an issue. Ava just needs a bit more structure and

some accountability to help balance things.'

Ava flushed. The words hit her like darts. Structure. Accountability. Not good enough.

'What do you think, Ava? Is the play taking up too much of your time?'

Ava shook her head. 'No, I don't think so,' she said, being honest. She knew it wasn't the play taking her away from studying, it was Cameron.

'But it was clear you didn't study for this test. There were basic concepts in there that you know, and you weren't thinking straight. I was surprised. You're so clever, Ava. What happened?'

Ava went to speak but her mum jumped in.

'It's this play. It's taking up too much time and distracting her from what she wants and where she should be focused.'

Mrs Prestius looked at Ava's mother. 'Let Ava tell us what she wants and where she is focused.'

Ava knew this wasn't going to be taken well by her mum, who exploded.

'She's a child! She doesn't know what she wants, but right now, she's distracted and failing, and so we need

to take it all off her and get her back to the basics,' she said loudly. 'Let's go, Ava,' she demanded, and she left the room with Mrs Prestius shaking her head.

'Sorry,' Ava said to the teacher as she ran down the hallway to catch up to her mother, who was outside and striding towards the car.

'Mum, wait . . .'

'Get in the car,' her mum snapped. Aaron was sitting in the front seat, but Ava didn't try to fight for it. The further she was away from her mother right now, the better. She threw her bag onto the back seat and her mum started the engine and took off.

The car was too hot, too quiet, too full of everything Ava didn't know how to fix, and she felt a tear fall down her cheek.

'Do you have any idea,' her mother said finally, 'how embarrassing that was? Sitting in front of a teacher I don't even know while she explains that my daughter has become a cliché. Distracted by a play, can't pass maths, acting like nothing else matters but that silly school play?'

'It's one bad test,' Ava muttered.

'It's forty-two per cent,' her mum snapped. 'Do you know what happens when your marks start dropping like this? You fall behind. You get streamed into the bottom classes and you don't get offered the electives you want. You don't get scholarships. You don't get into law.'

'I never said I wanted to do law!' Ava burst out, shocking herself as much as her mother, but she simply couldn't hold it in anymore.

The silence that followed was worse than yelling.

Her mum's knuckles tightened on the steering wheel. 'I want you to drop out of the play,' she said coldly.

Ava froze. 'What?'

'It's too much, Ava. We'll email Mr Galloway. You'll apologise and explain that your education is more important than being Juliet in a school production that no-one will remember in six months.'

'No,' Ava said firmly. She wasn't sure where the courage came from, but it was there, as though it had been waiting for her to call on it, finally.

Her mum pulled over on the side of the road, disbelief written all over her face. 'Excuse me?'

‘I said no. I’m not quitting,’ she said, heart pounding in terror but also determination. ‘I’ve worked hard. I’ve learned lines. I’ve put in the time. I care about it. And for once, I’m good at something that isn’t a grade or a percentage. And I like it.’

‘That’s not the point,’ her mum said, voice rising. ‘This isn’t about you liking something. This is about your future. You don’t get to just like things and do them for fun when they affect your performance in real subjects.’

‘I’m not quitting,’ Ava said again, voice shaking. ‘You can ground me. You can take my phone. You can yell at me all you like, but I’m not dropping out of the play.’

Her mum didn’t respond, and eventually they pulled into their driveway in silence.

Aaron opened the front door just as they got out of the car. He took one look at their faces and backed away like someone had set off a firework.

‘Uh . . . I’ll be upstairs,’ he mumbled, vanishing into the hallway.

Inside, Ava’s mum dropped her bag on the kitchen

counter and faced Ava with arms folded.

‘I will be emailing Mr Galloway.’

‘I’m not dropping out. We open in two weeks, and it will ruin everything for the entire cast who have worked so hard. You told me never to be a quitter. I’m going to rehearsals anyway. You can’t physically stop me from showing up.’

‘You think this is about control?’ her mum hissed. ‘This is about responsibility. This is about you not becoming the kind of person who gives up real goals for fake applause.’

Ava stepped back, heart hammering. ‘Maybe you don’t get to decide what’s real for me.’

Her mum was silent.

‘I will finish the play and then work really hard to get my maths mark up. Yes, I was distracted, but I’ve had other things going on that have upset me. The play isn’t the only thing right now in my life. But if you cared about me as a person and not just my marks you would know this.’

Her mother’s mouth dropped open in shock. ‘Ava, you can tell me anything.’

Ava gave a loud laugh, a mean sound that she wasn't aware she could make, that filled the kitchen.

'That's a lie and you know it! You put so much pressure on me. If you love law so much why don't you go and study it? I never even said I wanted to be a lawyer.'

'Ava.' Her mother stepped back as though she had been slapped.

In that instant, Ava's dad walked into the room. He looked between them, eyebrows raised.

'Okay,' he said slowly. 'Should I . . . put the kettle on? Or call the fire brigade?'

Neither of them laughed.

'Ava failed an important maths test. I think she should drop out of the play,' her mum said.

'It's one test, and yes, I didn't study for it because I've been feeling bad and the play is the only thing that makes me happy at the moment.'

Her dad walked over and gave Ava a hug. 'I'm sorry, Ava, that's awful. You can talk to us, you know.'

Ava buried her head into her dad's chest.

'You have other things that make you happy. Izzy is a good friend, and us. We're happy, aren't we?' her

mother asked, desperate for confirmation.

Ava pulled away from her dad, shaking her head. 'You have no idea, do you? Izzy and I haven't been friends for weeks! I'm a complete loser with no friends at school, and the only person who talks to me is a guy who Izzy has a crush on, and if she knew that then school would be worse than it already is, and then I come home and all you want to talk about is my marks, and you put down the play and dismiss me and my love for it. Did you know I can actually act? That I'm good? When you say demeaning things about the play, Mum, you're saying demeaning things about me, and if you don't know what demeaning means, then I suggest you look it up, since you're the one so obsessed with learning.'

And with that, Ava took her bag, went up to her room and wrote an email to Mr Galloway saying she couldn't come to rehearsals today because of a family drama, but that nothing would stop her from being there tomorrow.

Chapter 17

‘Right, listen up!’ Mr Galloway raised his voice, thumping his clipboard against his leg for emphasis. ‘Today, we move into the theatre. That means lights, staging, full run-throughs. No more half-effort blocking during rehearsals while someone eats chips in the corner.’

A few people laughed nervously.

Mr Galloway paced like a commander preparing his troops. ‘Now I want you all to hear this clearly: the theatre is not just a venue. It’s a space that deserves respect. You treat it like a professional stage because that’s what it is. No drinks in the wings. No slouching or messing about in the dressing rooms, and no excuses. You should know your lines by now, your blocking and your cues.’

He paused, scanning the cast. ‘This is where the magic happens, but only if you show up for it. We’re charging money for people to see this show, so make it worth their while.’

Ava felt a flutter in her chest, the mix of nerves and adrenaline she got before something mattered. They were really doing it. They were going on stage. For real.

Everyone picked up their bags and followed Mr Galloway to the senior section where the theatre was.

‘You excited?’ Cameron asked as they walked.

‘Yeah, it’s going to be good,’ she replied.

‘What happened yesterday? You didn’t come to rehearsals and you didn’t answer my calls.’

‘Just family stuff,’ she said vaguely.

‘Your mum and the meeting?’ he asked.

‘Can we not right now? I don’t want to talk about it,’ she said abruptly, and she pushed ahead, away from one of the distractions in her life at the moment.

‘Fair enough. Sorry for being nosy,’ Cameron said good-naturedly.

‘Sorry, my life is a bit weird right now,’ she said, feeling bad for snapping at him.

The theatre smelled different. It wasn't the dusty old rehearsal room, and there were no old pianos and rotting banana skins in the bin.

Ava stood on the wide wooden stage, blinking into the full glare of the theatre lights. Rows of velvet-covered seats stretched before her, empty for now, but humming with the ghosts of opening nights past. This was a proper venue with real curtains, real wings, and dressing rooms with mirrors rimmed in bulbs that actually lit up.

She felt a pulse of nerves fizz in her throat, but underneath it, excitement. Something buzzy and dangerous, as though she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

'Places for Act One!' Mr Galloway's voice boomed from the front row, clipboard in hand.

The rest of the cast scattered into wings and shadows. Ava slipped into her opening position. The lights dimmed. A hush fell over the stage.

Then it began.

The first act rolled out smoothly. Mia nailed her over-the-top Lady Capulet entrance. Benvolio and

Mercutio bantered like they'd been doing it forever. Cameron, always steady, delivered his first lines with just enough swagger to make the Year 10 tech assistant watching from the side blush.

Ava felt her way in gently, letting Juliet unfold rather than appear suddenly, and by Act Two, she could feel herself stepping into the role properly. Her body moved instinctively and her voice didn't shake. She wasn't Ava reciting lines. She felt like Juliet. She inhabited her, she understood her love for this guy who climbed walls to see her, and finally they kissed.

Up to this point they had avoided the kiss, but now, they couldn't. It was the masked ball scene, and Ava stepped towards Cameron, their faces inches apart, the rest of the cast melting into shadows around them.

'If I've taken something I shouldn't have,' Cameron said as Romeo, voice low, 'maybe you should take it back with a kiss?'

Ava's breath caught. She didn't have to pretend to be nervous. She was. She had never kissed anyone off stage, let alone in front of an audience.

She leaned in, and he met her and kissed her, just

once. It felt as light as a question but lasted longer than a moment. It wasn't dramatic or showy, but it felt incredibly real.

For a second, her lines disappeared. The audience, the tech box, the blocking, all gone. It was just Cameron and her.

When they pulled apart, she opened her mouth to say her next line, but it took a beat longer than it should have. Cameron was smiling, still in character. Or was he?

'You kiss like you mean it,' Ava said in character but feeling more like Ava than Juliet in that instant.

'But I do, Miss Juliet,' he replied, deadpan.

The tension between them snapped like a rubber band, and the scene moved on. But something had shifted. And not just in the script.

The run-through went on. And by the time Act Three began, the show had a rhythm, it felt like the play was alive, and Ava hit every cue. Izzy was fantastic as the nurse with her witty, sharp energy that Izzy found so easily, making the students helping backstage laugh at jokes they'd heard a dozen times. She

delivered each line with perfect timing, and for the first time in weeks, Ava saw a flicker of joy on Izzy's face that wasn't forced.

They were in sync again. Not best friends, but more like partners. And on stage, that was enough.

And then finally, the tomb scene came. It was a hard scene, and Mr Galloway had blocked it so Ava sat beside Romeo's body. But as she said her lines, she felt herself drop to the ground, and she curled against Cameron, her voice cracking on the word 'poison'. She held that silence for a moment longer than scripted, and when she finally delivered Juliet's last lines—'This is the place. This is where I stop. Love brought me here, and love ends it too'—Ava didn't just say them. She let the lines fall in a whisper and the lights faded to black.

There was no applause as it was a run-through. But someone in the tech box muttered, 'Whoa.'

Ava stood slowly, dazed and sweaty, blinking under the sudden return of house lights.

Mr Galloway stood up and clapped once. 'That's it,' he said. 'That's the show. Lock it in.'

The cast let out a cheer, half from relief, half from adrenaline. Cameron grinned and pulled Ava into a quick side-hug, then wandered off towards the wings.

Ava turned, catching Izzy watching her from downstage left. Izzy gave her a small smile.

‘Alright,’ she said, walking over. ‘You were good. A little dramatic, but it worked. Though Juliet is so annoying. Imagine being like that over a guy.’

Ava smiled. ‘You were hilarious in the rope-ladder scene.’

Izzy smirked. ‘I know.’

They stood in silence for a second. It was something; not quite a rebuild, but the beginning of something.

‘Come on,’ Izzy said. ‘Green-room snacks are calling my name.’

‘I’ve gotta go, Dad’s picking me up,’ Ava replied. ‘Next time?’

Izzy’s eyebrows lifted. ‘Sure.’

Ava grabbed her things and stepped out into the fading light. The theatre doors closed behind her with a soft *thunk*, the hum of rehearsal still buzzing faintly in her ears.

The sun was setting low, gold bleeding across the pavement. She squinted across the road and spotted the familiar navy shape of the Impala, parked a little way down from the main entrance. Her dad was leaning against it, sunglasses perched on his head, arms crossed like he’d been waiting a while.

‘Hey, Dad,’ she said as she walked towards him.

‘Hey,’ he replied, then paused. ‘I caught the end of the play.’

She blinked. ‘You did?’

He nodded slowly. ‘Slipped in through the back, just in time for your big scene. Didn’t want to spook you.’

Ava’s face heated. ‘Oh.’

‘You were incredible,’ he said. ‘Like, goosebumps-level incredible.’

She ducked her head. ‘It’s just school theatre.’

Her dad shook his head. ‘No. That was something else. You were honest up there. Real. You’re my star, Ava-Rava. Always knew it.’

She looked away, trying not to smile, heart fluttering like stage lights flickering to life. ‘Shame Mum doesn’t think so.’

‘Meh. She’ll see eventually, and besides, this isn’t her experience, it’s yours. She’ll get over it. But you can’t let your schoolwork slide.’

‘I know,’ she said.

They climbed into the Impala, and her dad started the engine. Elvis roared from the speaker, singing about not being cruel to a true heart as they pulled out, and Ava sat thinking about the kiss with Cameron.

How light it had been, and how it had felt it was just them in that moment, even though she knew it wasn’t.

How it hadn’t felt fake, not really. Or was she kidding herself? And who was this girl he said he liked?

She had been avoiding thinking about her because it meant she would be jealous, but now, she realised she *was* jealous. She wished she and Izzy were still friends because Izzy would be able to find out about this girl easily enough. She had no trouble asking the questions that would have made Ava shrink.

She would just have to stop kidding herself that what happened on stage was real and be a professional about it all. But when she thought about it, it was weird. She liked Cameron. Izzy liked Cameron but didn’t know

Ava did, and Cameron liked someone else. What a mess. If they weren’t in a play, she would have said it was like a movie, except this was real life and someone was going to be hurt no matter what happened.

Chapter 18

Ava had read the same line in her script three times and still couldn't concentrate. Her mind was racing, and after a tense dinner with her family, where she and her mum ignored each other, and her dad and brother filled the room with overexuberant boy jokes, Ava was happy to be upstairs. The tension at home coiled around her like a wire, and since the meeting with Mrs Prestius, her mother had been on high alert. There was now a printed study schedule pinned to the fridge, and a conversation about tutoring every second evening.

Her door creaked open.

'Ava?'

She looked up from her script, highlighter poised

mid-line. Aaron stood in the doorway in his pyjamas, holding a library book as though he was allergic to it.

'Can you help me read this?' he asked.

'Not now, Aaron,' she said. 'I have to learn, like, half this scene before tomorrow.'

He hesitated. 'It's just, the words go kind of weird sometimes. They blur.'

She sighed. 'Then maybe you should stop staring at screens all day.'

'I'm not,' he said quietly. 'I just can't always tell what the letters are. They move.'

'Then ask Mum,' she muttered, turning back to her script. 'Seriously. I need to focus.'

Aaron hovered a second longer, then backed out of the room, closing the door with a soft click.

Ava re-read her line. She couldn't even remember what scene she was in.

Her phone buzzed on the desk beside her. It lit up with Cameron's name and the beginning of a message.

u good? want to run lines later?

She ignored him. If she started to talk to him, then they would talk all night, and then she would wake up

tired and grumpy and not concentrate in class and end up failing the next test.

She walked out to the kitchen for a drink of water and saw her mum at the table, laptop open, browser tabs filled with local maths tutors and their hourly rates. Ava didn't say anything. She poured the water, sipped it and walked back to her room without a word.

She replied to Cameron under the blanket later, fingers tapping quickly.

I can't. I'm in major trouble. Mum wants me to leave the play. I have to re-sit the maths test.

Cam: You can't leave the play. We open in ten days! I can help you study for maths. I got 70%, which is amazing for me.

Ava: Thanks, but I have to do this by myself.

She stared at the screen for a moment, then turned it over again and lay in the dark, willing her brain to stop spinning.



The next day, Ava spent her lunch and recess in the library, studying for maths and avoiding Cameron and Izzy. The test was the day before opening night,

and she knew if she didn't do well, her life on stage would be over.

By the time she got to rehearsal in the afternoon, her head was swimming with algebra and numbers and nothing about a young couple in Verona. It was as though the world read her mood because rehearsal was already off to a bad start. Mr Galloway was being grumpy, his glasses were perched halfway down his nose, and he kept glancing at his watch like it had personally offended him.

'We're not here to drift through scenes like we're reading bedtime stories,' he snapped. 'You should be off book. That means no scripts in hands. That means intention. Focus. Energy. I need fire. Or at least a convincing matchstick. Let's go again,' he said loudly to a sheepish Mercutio, Benvolio and Tybalt.

Mr Galloway called a new scene. 'Masked Ball, now!'

Ava and Cameron rushed onto the stage. They started the scene, but Ava couldn't get her lines right. Her tongue felt heavy, her limbs wooden and she forgot her marks, which were the locations she needed to stand on the stage.

She delivered her line, 'If they catch you here, they'll kill you,' but it came out too fast, flat, with no breath behind it.

Cameron frowned at her and he adjusted slightly, stepping closer. 'Honestly, the look in your eyes scares me more than twenty guys with knives.'

She was meant to say something back. She knew it. She felt the pause. But nothing came.

Mr Galloway exhaled loudly. 'Stop. Ava, are you alright? Cat got your tongue?'

She nodded quickly, trying not to look at Cameron. 'Start again?' Cameron called, looking at Ava. 'Are you okay?'

She nodded, but she noticed his jaw was set as though he was angry with her or someone.

'Take a break,' Mr Galloway sighed. 'And come back in fifteen minutes ready to perform.'

Ava went backstage and sat on the ground by a costume rack flipping through her script again, trying to prove to herself that she wasn't losing it. Then she heard Mia's laugh.

'I mean, they've got, like, more chemistry off the

stage than on,' she sniggered cruelly.

Ava froze.

'It's a bit cringe,' Mia added. 'Like, are we watching Juliet and Romeo or Ava and Cameron's little romance hour? The way she looks at him is so embarrassing. Does she know how sad her little puppy-dog face is?'

'Wow,' Ava said, loud enough to make them stop talking. She looked Izzy in the eye. 'How could you say that about me? Do you even know how much that hurt? I don't know who you are anymore, Izzy.'

Izzy froze, mouth slightly open, but Ava didn't wait for a response. She grabbed her bag and walked towards the door, blinking hard against the sting in her eyes. 'I just need some air, it's toxic in here,' she muttered to no-one in particular, even though her chest felt like it was caving in.

The sun was bright, too bright. It bounced off the windows and the asphalt and her forehead. She sat on the low wall by the basketball courts, script folded on her lap.

Everything felt like it was whirling around her and she couldn't catch a single thought. Izzy, Cameron, her

mum, Aaron, the play. She should quit. She should do a thousand things, and the weight of them all made her shoulders ache.

Today sucked, she thought and closed her eyes, wishing she was anywhere but here.

Chapter 19

The house was unusually quiet for a Saturday. Ava's dad was at work, her mum was upstairs doing a wardrobe clean-out after watching some organising show on Netflix, and Aaron was in the living room.

Ava sat at the kitchen table with her laptop open, trying to memorise her monologue and pretending her maths book didn't exist. A cold bowl of cereal sat beside her, untouched.

From the living room came the faint sound of Aaron reading aloud. She paused, only half listening at first.

'The . . . the kni-knight . . . ro-rode through the f-f' There was a long pause. 'Forget it,' he mumbled. Then the sound of the book shutting.

Ava got up and wandered past the doorway, just in

time to see him tossing the book onto the couch and rubbing at his eyes.

‘That from the library?’ she asked casually.

He nodded. ‘Yeah. It’s dumb anyway. Boring.’

She walked over and picked up the book, looking at the cover. ‘I thought you liked the knight books.’

‘Not this one,’ he said quickly. Too quickly. ‘The words are all squashed. Whoever printed it didn’t do it right.’

Ava leaned against the couch. ‘Aaron, you sure you’re not just being lazy?’

He rolled his eyes. ‘No! At least I didn’t fail a maths test,’ he snapped.

Ava felt her anger rise but didn’t want to cause any more drama; she was so tired of fighting everyone. As she left the room, Aaron grabbed the remote and began watching some YouTube sketch show, curled into the corner of the couch like he wanted to disappear into it.

She lingered a moment longer, then turned away. She wasn’t sure what to do. *This is too hard for me to work out right now*, she thought, and she took her things and went up to her room.



That evening, Ava’s mum knocked gently on her door.

‘I booked you a tutoring trial for next Wednesday. You’ll miss half of rehearsal, but I’ve told them you might be late.’

Ava looked up from her laptop. ‘What? I can’t miss rehearsals, Mum. We open next week.’

‘You should have thought of that before you tanked your test.’

Anger rolled through Ava. ‘Well, you can waste your money because I won’t be there,’ she said, and put on her headphones and turned up the music, ignoring her mother.

Her mum walked over and calmly lifted a headphone. ‘I want your phone for the night also.’

Ava shook her head and handed it over.

‘Ridiculous,’ she muttered as her mum left the room.

Later that night, she sat on her bed with her script open and her pen between her teeth. But she couldn’t focus. Her lines blurred on the page, the sentences curling away from her brain like pencil sharpenings.

She then opened her maths book, but that looked like a foreign language at the moment.

She was losing her mind. Losing the play. Losing Cameron. She'd lost Izzy. She'd lost her mum's approval. She was now questioning her ability to breathe properly.

It was too much.

She tossed the pen aside and lay back on her bed, covering her eyes with her forearm. She had thought the play would make things better. But maybe it was just another thing she was about to fail at. Her mum was right: she shouldn't have done the play; it had caused too many issues in her life.

Too many cracks.

Too many disappointments.

In a burst of frustration, she got up, grabbed her script and threw it into the bin under her desk. It landed on top of a crumpled tissue and an empty wrapper from a protein bar she'd eaten earlier. She climbed back into bed and turned to the wall, pulling the blanket over her head.

Downstairs, the television was on. Her dad was probably watching something nostalgic. Something

where the hero won in the end, unlike her.

Ava padded quietly into the kitchen in her socks, trying to decide what would distract her brain from all the thoughts more, a ham, cheese and pickle sandwich or a honey-and-banana one? The light above the stove was on—her dad's signature 'I'm still up if you want to talk' move. He was in front of the TV, sipping tea and reading an old car magazine, glasses halfway down his nose.

'Hey, kiddo,' he said, not looking up.

'Hey,' she mumbled, opening the fridge for no reason and then closing it again.

She sat down opposite him and folded her arms on the table. 'Mum's . . . being Mum,' she said finally.

He chuckled under his breath. 'That she is.'

'She wants me to drop drama next year. Said if I want to be serious about uni, I need to start "getting real".' Ava did air quotes, the bitterness rising in her throat. 'She doesn't get it. Like, at all. Why is she so nuts about me doing what she wants? I always feel that I never do anything the way she wants me to do it. That I get everything wrong.'

Her dad nodded slowly and set his mug down. 'You know she was going to study law, right?'

Ava blinked. 'No.'

'She had the marks. Offers from two unis, but then your grandad got sick and you know they ran the fruit shop, so she went to work for them, ran the shop and then took a bookkeeping course so she could help Nonna run the finances. Figured she could always go back to law later but she never did.'

'Oh,' Ava said softly, shocked at learning this.

'She could have gone back.'

He looked at her over his glasses. 'Sometimes people don't go back not because they stop caring, but because life keeps moving, and it doesn't always wait for your dreams to catch up.'

Ava traced the edge of her pyjama top with her finger. 'So, she's pushing me because she thinks she missed out.'

'She's pushing you because she wants you to have options,' he said. 'She doesn't want you to make a choice now that you might regret later. She's just not great at saying that bit out loud. Your mum loves people

in exclamation marks. It's sometimes suffocating, but it's how she is.'

They sat in silence for a minute.

'She could've just said that,' Ava muttered.

Her dad smiled. 'Your mum doesn't do direct. She does schedules and report cards and "you should think about your future". It's how she loves. Loudly. And usually, with a spreadsheet.'

Ava exhaled, a knot she hadn't noticed loosening in her chest. 'She would have been a very good lawyer.'

He laughed. 'She would.'

'You know she can still go back? Lots of old people go back to uni. Sarah Milson's mum went back and did nursing.'

He reached over and squeezed her hand. 'I know, but she has to come to that decision herself.'

'Just like she has to let me make my own decisions,' she answered.

'Let her work through it. I'll talk to her again, but you have to keep your end of the bargain also. When is the maths test?'

'Thursday, the day before opening night,' she sighed.

‘Well, plan your time carefully and give it everything you have,’ he said.

‘Thanks, Dad, I will, I promise.’ She stood up.

‘Where’s Izzy these days?’ he asked suddenly. ‘She used to be here all the time. You two okay?’

Ava shook her head. ‘No. She hates me for getting the lead role. We aren’t speaking.’

‘Did you talk to her about it?’ he asked, frowning.

She sighed. ‘No. I messed up too and avoided her, and then it just got worse.’

Her dad made a face. ‘Ouch. You’ve gotta say your truth. It keeps the air clean.’

She nodded. ‘I know, I know. I’m just afraid it’s gone too far.’

‘You two? Nah, you can sort this out. Call her, send a text or a pigeon or whatever you kids do now. There’s nothing that can’t be fixed with a good chat.’

‘Thanks, Dad,’ she said, wishing he knew how much harder it was than he thought.

But what if it wasn’t so hard? What if she did say something? It couldn’t make it worse, could it? It was already pretty bad.

Upstairs, she sat cross-legged on her bed, phone in hand, thumbs hovering. Lately, it felt like she was letting everyone down and she was tired of it. She couldn’t confront her mum, but she could call out Izzy. She opened their last chat that had been empty for the past few weeks, and typed fast before she could second-guess it.

You’ve changed, Izzy.

You used to be kind and funny and silly, and you used to care when people were hurt, not laugh along. You used to stick up for people.

I know you hate me and that’s your choice, but I don’t hate you. I really miss the real you. I know that I messed up also, but I wonder if the real Izzy is there now or just this fake wannabe Mia?

Then without hesitation, she hit ‘send’.

A second later, the door opened and her mum stepped in with folded laundry.

‘Phone, please,’ she said.

Ava blinked. ‘What? Why?’

‘You’ve got a maths test soon, remember?’ Her mum held out her hand. ‘One night without it won’t kill you.

Get a good sleep without any messages in the middle of the night.'

Ava sighed and handed it over, the weight of the silence between her and Izzy now stretching into the dark.

Chapter 20

The next morning, Ava's script was no longer in the bin and instead it was on her desk with a note, written in her dad's loyal handwriting.

Don't give up what you love. You think Elvis ever did that?

No.

The man wore jumpsuits covered in glitter and sang with his whole heart, even when people didn't get it. He kept going.

Be like Elvis. Keep going. Rhinestones optional.

Love you always, Dad

(Thank ya very much)

Her throat tightened. Next to it, he'd placed a faded

photo from the fridge. Year 3, Ava standing on a milk crate in the school play, dressed as the faraway tree, arms wide, grinning like she'd just won an Oscar.

She hadn't remembered that she used to love performing and making people feel something as they watched. When had she stopped that and become so focused on her marks?

She opened her drawer and found the notebook she'd used at the very first audition. The one she'd scribbled in before she ever stood on the stage.

Inside was a list.

Why I said yes to the play:

- *to try something new*
- *because it felt right.*

She picked up a pen and wrote:

Because I was tired of being invisible.

She ran her finger over the line just as there was a knock at her door.

'Yeah?'

Aaron pushed it open, holding her phone. 'Mum said you can have your phone.'

She took it. 'Gee, thanks.'

As he turned to go, he added, 'You're not really quitting, are you?'

Ava blinked. 'What?'

'The play. You can't quit. You're the only reason anyone's even interested in it. Cameron said so last week. I spoke to him when you were with the teacher and Mum.'

'What do you mean I'm the only reason.'

'Cameron said he only auditioned because he saw you had put your name on the list.' He paused. 'Can I tell you something?' he said, and he shut the door.

'Of course, what's wrong?' she asked as she started to put her laptop into her bag.

'I don't think I can read,' he said.

'What do you mean? Of course you can read,' she said as she rolled up the computer charger cord.

'I can't tell the difference between the Cs and the Es,' he said, his face crestfallen.

She paused. 'What?'

He pointed at the script on her bed. 'These, they all look like Cs. Or Cs look like Es. I don't know. It just . . . doesn't make sense anymore.'

She moved close to him, peering at the page. He was blinking hard, like trying to focus took actual effort.

‘Have you told Mum?’ she asked.

He shrugged. ‘I tried. She said maybe I’m tired. Or lazy. I dunno.’

Ava stared at him. Really stared. She felt bad because she had said the same thing.

His lashes were wet.

She straightened, the guilt pooling in her stomach. ‘You’re probably just tired,’ she said, too lightly. ‘You’ve had a big week.’

‘Yeah,’ he mumbled.

‘Let me talk to Mum, okay?’ Aaron nodded and she quickly hugged him. ‘We’ll work it out, alright?’

‘Okay,’ he said, and he left the room as their mum called him down to eat breakfast.

Ava sat down and unlocked the phone. One new message from Cameron.

Hey. I don’t know what’s going on right now, but I just wanted to say that I miss you.

She stared at the screen.

Then another notification popped up. A voicemail

from Izzy. She didn’t want to listen but knew she should.

Her thumb hovered, then she listened. Izzy’s voice, shaky and rushed, filled her ear.

‘Okay, so . . . you have every right to hate me, even though you said you didn’t. But maybe you really don’t hate me. Maybe you just gave up on me completely, which honestly, fair. But I miss you too. And I was jealous and petty and stupid. You got the role and I got scared that meant I wasn’t special anymore. But you were always meant to be Juliet. You make people feel things. I just . . . make them laugh. And I love that. I do. I just didn’t love losing you. I hope it’s not too late. And you’re right. Mia and I have been mean about you and Cam, and I’m sorry. I am. I mean, it’s really obvious he has a massive crush on you, which is fine because I am kind of crushing on Mercutio right now, so you know, all good. Anyway, Mia is so mean and I miss you, but I also get that you might not want to be my friend anymore. Anyway. See you at school.’

Ava sat on the bed and shook her head. This was enough revelations for the time being. Between her mum’s past, Cameron’s text and Izzy’s message, life could really turn around in the space of a few hours.

Chapter 21

‘Alright!’ Mr Galloway clapped his hands until the chatter from the cast hushed. ‘I have some good news and some terrifying news.’

He tapped his clipboard with his pen.

‘Terrifying first: we are officially sold out on opening night. Every seat. Parents, friends, teachers. Even the headmaster’s wife is coming, and she loathes theatre. That means no more missed cues, no mumbling, no coughing into microphones. We are not doing *Romeo and Juliet: The Mumbling*. This is the big league now.’

A few kids laughed nervously. Mia gasped dramatically and whispered something about costume changes.

‘And the good news,’ Mr Galloway added, ‘is you’ve all earned it. This show is good. It’s sharp, it’s got heart,

it’s funny. Now, let’s not tank it in the final week. Run your lines. Hydrate. And for the love of theatre, don’t get the flu.’

With that, he dismissed them for the day, and the cast started scattering like marbles.

Ava found herself drifting towards the back steps again, drawn by the late-afternoon quiet and the comfort of her usual post-rehearsal spot.

Cameron was already there, sitting on the concrete ledge, elbows on knees. He looked up as she approached.

‘You hear that?’ he said, tilting his head. ‘Sold out.’

Ava sat beside him. ‘Guess we’re famous now.’

‘Or just deeply in debt to the PTA’s marketing committee.’

They shared a grin, and for a moment, it felt like old times again. Before misunderstandings. Before Izzy. Before everything got complicated.

‘My mum’s coming,’ Ava said after a beat. ‘I think. She said she took the night off, so . . . we’ll see.’

Cameron didn’t respond right away. Then, quietly, he said, ‘I don’t think my parents are.’

She turned to him. 'Seriously?'

He nodded. 'They've got some work thing. Dinner with clients. My dad has a meeting in Brisbane. Mum said she'd "try" to be there, but . . . I'm not holding my breath.'

Ava frowned. 'That sucks.'

'Yeah. I mean, it's not new. They've always been like that. Work is kind of their whole identity. They're, like, the kind of people who send a text instead of showing up.'

He gave a small, dry laugh, but it didn't reach his eyes.

'I remember in Year 6, I won this art prize. I stayed behind after school waiting because they said they'd come. But they forgot. The principal ended up giving me a lift home. I sat in the back seat with my painting on my lap, trying not to cry because it was dumb and I was too old to cry over stuff like that.'

Ava didn't speak. She just listened.

'And the worst part is, you start pretending it doesn't matter. You say things like, "It's fine," or "I didn't even want them there anyway" just so it doesn't hurt every

single time.' He looked down at his hands. 'But it does.'

She reached over and touched his sleeve lightly. 'I'm sorry, Cam.'

He shrugged. 'It's fine. I don't even care. You know, it's just a play.' His voice was defensive but his face showed hurt, and Ava wished she knew the right words to say.

They sat there for a while, letting the silence stretch gently between them.

'You didn't reply to my text about missing you,' he said.

'I know,' she answered.

'You didn't miss me?' he asked, nudging her gently with his shoulder.

She smiled. 'I did, but I have to sit the maths test tomorrow, Mum is furious at me and Dad is trying to be the peacemaker and not doing very well.'

Cameron gave her a small smile. 'You have a lot on,' he said.

'I do,' she answered, then leaned back, watching the sky fade into dusk.

Was it true what Izzy said about Cameron liking

her? Or was this more of her teasing and it was all made up?

Ava stood slowly. 'Right, I need to go and find Izzy. I have something I need to speak to her about.'

'You two are friends again?' he asked, looking confused.

She made an indecisive face at him. 'Not sure friends is the right term. I need to clear something up and then I will know.'

Looking into his eyes as she faced him, she smiled sadly at him.

'And to answer your question, yes, I've missed you. You know, our nightly chats and silliness. You've been a real friend to me, Cam, and I am so grateful for that. For you.'

And then she left him on the stairs as she went to look for Izzy.

Chapter 22

Ava found Izzy walking towards the bus stop. She had listened to the voicemail at least four times now, trying to find any secret messages or clues, because the first time, it was the surprise—hearing Izzy's voice crack a little when she said *I miss you*. The second time, Ava caught the joke about Mercutio and almost laughed out loud in maths. The third time, though . . . she noticed the bit about Mia.

'I know Mia and I have been mean about you and Cam, and I'm sorry. I am . . .'

But Ava didn't know what to believe. Mia had definitely been meaner than usual, as though her friendship with Izzy had made her untouchable. Subtle things, like comments Ava wasn't sure were insults, snide glances

during rehearsal, laughs that ended when Ava looked over. But had Izzy really told her off? Or was that just something you said in a message when you didn't want to sound like you were on the wrong side?

And what about Cameron? Had Izzy really moved on? Or was this all still some tangled mess of jealousy and damage control? There seemed to be more drama off stage than on at the moment.

Ava took a breath and jogged to catch up to Izzy.

'Hey.'

Izzy turned, her face lighting up for a second before she smoothed it out. She tugged at her sleeves. 'Oh. Hi.'

They fell into step beside each other, and Ava kept her voice casual. 'You're not walking home with Mia?'

Izzy shook her head. 'Nah. She left early. Said she had to get her eyebrows done before her cousin's engagement party. Also, she's mad at me for "taking your side", even though I didn't know we were still on playground rules.'

Ava glanced sideways. 'So, you did tell her off for being mean about me?'

Izzy stopped walking and turned to face her. 'Yeah.

I did. She was being awful. That stuff she said about you and Cameron? Not okay. I told her it wasn't funny, and that I was sick of her acting like she's better than everyone. Especially you.'

Ava blinked. That sounded real. The kind of thing Izzy wouldn't admit if she didn't mean it.

'I wasn't sure if your message was like, for real,' Ava said slowly. 'It was so much at once. I didn't know if it meant we were friends again or if it was just you feeling guilty for five minutes.'

Izzy winced. 'Fair. It was a bit of a voice-note novel, wasn't it?'

'A little.'

They started walking again, slower this time.

'I meant it,' Izzy said, after a moment. 'All of it. I was horrible. I was jealous. And not because you got Cameron, because you got good. Like, really good. And suddenly, everyone was watching you and not me, and it scared me. I didn't know who I was if I wasn't the one making everyone laugh.'

'You still do,' Ava said softly. 'Make people laugh. You're hilarious. Even when you're mean.' Ava paused.

'I have to apologise also, though, because I avoided you. I've started to notice that I run away from conflict. Like, it stresses me out so I avoid it.'

Izzy laughed. 'Ya think?'

'I know I do, but then I had this huge fight with Mum, and I realised I feel better when I say what I mean and not avoid it. It was good.'

'Oh wow. You two made up yet?' Izzy asked.

Ava shook her head. 'Not yet, but we'll get there.'

Izzy groaned. 'We have been so dumb, and I missed you. And quite honestly, I don't want to be that person anymore. Not with you. You never made me feel like I had to try so hard.'

Ava let that sit for a moment.

'You were right about one thing,' she said. 'You and Mia were super mean. Like, I would hate anyone else to feel how you two have been making me feel.'

Izzy looked horrified. 'I know. It was like I couldn't help it. I was so angry and it was awful. I hated myself being like that.' She paused. 'Mia's mean about everyone, like seriously. I told her today to stop it, and she said it was too late, so I said I wouldn't sit next to her if

she kept talking like that.'

Ava raised an eyebrow. 'That explains why you were on the other side of the dressing room today.'

'Yup. Full-on exile. I've been running lines with the Year 8s who are working on the set. They're obsessed with Taylor Swift and keep calling me "queen". It's been . . . humbling.'

Ava laughed.

'So,' Izzy said, tugging her hoodie sleeves down over her hands, 'can we be friends again? Not like pretend friends or school-only friends. Like actual, call-each-other-when-we're-sad friends?'

Ava hesitated. Then nodded. 'Yes. But with one condition.'

Izzy narrowed her eyes. 'Here we go.'

'We're honest with each other. I could tell you were upset with me when I got the part and you didn't say anything, just were a bit passive aggressive.'

'Deal, and if I am upset, don't run away from me.'

'Deal,' Ava said, and then she smirked. 'So, future Mrs Mercutio, hey?'

'Shut up. I mean, we just talk at night,' Izzy said.

Ava shrugged. 'Can I still call you Mrs Mercutio as a joke?'

'Absolutely not.'

'Too late. It's already saved in my phone that way,' Ava said.

They both laughed.

The bus pulled up to the kerb with a loud wheeze. Izzy stepped on but turned back to face her.

'You're still my person, you know,' she said. 'Even when I'm being a total mess. Maybe especially then.'

Ava smiled. 'You're mine too.'

And as the doors folded shut and the bus rolled away, Ava felt something in her chest lift. Not everything was fixed, not yet; it would take time. But the crack between them was finally closing, and that was perhaps the best thing that had happened in weeks.

Chapter 23

The next morning, Ava stepped cautiously into the kitchen, where her dad was standing at the stove, squinting at a frying pan like it had done something wrong to him. He wore his Elvis apron with the words 'Hunka Hunka Burnin' Toast' emblazoned across the front and had pancake batter on one eyebrow.

'Morning, star of stage and screen,' he said, flipping something vaguely circular. 'Or should I say . . . mathematical mastermind? Don't you have your test today?'

Ava groaned and slid onto a stool at the kitchen bench. 'Please don't. I already feel sick.'

He turned, lifting the pan in triumph. 'Then you, my daughter, need the breakfast of champions.' He slapped the pancake onto a plate with a flourish. It

looked like Australia in a heatwave, all warped and scorched edges.

‘That’s an unusual shape,’ Ava said, peering down at it.

‘It’s called rustic. Eat it. You’ll need fuel to outwit those equations,’ he said.

She took a bite, mostly to be polite. The pancake was strangely chewy but comforting, and her dad poured a liberal amount of maple syrup over it.

He leaned on the counter, sipping his coffee. ‘You know Elvis nearly failed music at school?’

‘Really?’

‘Yup. One teacher told him he’d never make it. Said he didn’t follow the rules.’

Ava raised an eyebrow. ‘What happened to that teacher?’

Her dad grinned. ‘Elvis happened.’

Ava laughed. ‘Is that true, Dad?’

‘Could be true, could be something dads say to their daughters to inspire them. Who’s to say?’

Ava ate and then sipped the coffee he had put on the table.

He grew a little more serious. ‘Look, I know this test has been hanging over you like a thundercloud, but you’ve been putting in the work. And more importantly, you want to pass, so that already makes you dangerous.’

‘Dangerous?’

‘Absolutely. Passion and prep? Lethal combo. It’s a bad day to be a maths test with Ava Riccardo on the loose.’

Ava picked at the edge of the pancake. ‘It’s just . . .

I don’t want to let Mum down, or mess up the play, or disappoint Mr Galloway, or . . .’ She went silent on the last name.

Her dad reached across the table and tapped her hand lightly. ‘You are not a disappointment. You’re a teenage girl doing a maths test, while also casually starring in *Romeo and Juliet*. That’s not failing. That’s rockstar material.’

Ava felt a smile pull at the corners of her mouth. ‘Do you think Elvis ever did algebra?’

‘If he did, he probably added his own flair and made it sound like a song. Look, no-one’s asking you

to be perfect. Least of all me. Just show up. Do your best. And if all else fails, channel the King.' He struck a dramatic Elvis pose and sang, *'A little less conversation, a little more algebra.'*

Ava laughed, nearly choking on her pancake. 'Stop. Please. My ears.'

'Ah, the sound of a proud daughter.'

She stood up. 'Thanks, Dad.'

He winked. 'Now go and clean your teeth, and head to school and show that maths test who's boss. And if you ace it, we celebrate with milkshakes. If not, we still celebrate. Deal?'

'Deal.'

She walked out of the door a little taller, Elvis's lyrics stuck in her head, and her dad's quiet belief tucked somewhere just behind a pancake that felt like it was stuck to her ribs.



The test paper landed on Ava's desk with a soft flutter.

She didn't flinch as Mrs Prestius tapped the table.

'I hope you're prepared today, Ms Riccardo. Your

time starts now. Good luck.'

Ava could hear lunchtime chaos outside, but she blocked out the noise, turned the paper over and held her breath steady.

The questions were different in this test, thankfully. No repeat of the nightmare from the last version. These made more sense. *Still tough but not impossible*, she thought as she worked through them.

She moved through each section of the paper carefully, answering what she could and circling what she didn't know. She would go back to them at the end. And somewhere around the midpoint, she realised she wasn't frozen. *I'm actually solving problems*, she thought with a smile. It felt like she had been solving quite a few problems lately.

When Mrs Prestius called time, Ava put her pen down with a quiet, surprising sense of relief. She hadn't crushed it, but she hadn't drowned either. *That would be more than a pass*, she thought as she stood up and took the paper to her teacher.

'I will mark it and send you the outcome tonight,' she said. 'Just to you, not your mum.'

Ava breathed out with relief. 'Thanks, I really appreciate that.'

Mrs Prestius nodded. 'Your mum has very high expectations of you, and it worries me. If you ever need to talk to someone, please know I am here.'

Ava nodded. 'I know, but I told her off. It wasn't easy, but I said I wouldn't leave the play and I could handle this test. I hope I don't prove her right.'

'If you studied, then you will be fine,' her teacher said. 'I'm looking forward to the show tomorrow night.'

Are your parents going?'

Ava laughed. 'Hey, we're Italian. I have my parents, brother, Nonna, two aunts and their kids, and the neighbours on either side.'



After school, when Ava arrived at the theatre, her stomach was starting to churn, but this time it was for different reasons.

Dress rehearsal, first time in costumes, with makeup and hair and everything.

Opening night was less than twenty-four hours

away. The lighting team was still taping cables. The tech crew had argued over the fog machine twice already. Lady Capulet was claiming her fake eyelashes had gone missing and that she couldn't 'feel' Mercutio's energy. Meanwhile, Mercutio and the nurse were very close backstage.

Mr Galloway had his clipboard out and his voice up to full teacher volume.

'This is your final run! Cues clean, blocking sharp, no improvising unless you are actually Shakespeare himself!'

Ava stepped into costume, checked her mic and pulled her hair back into the low Juliet braid. Her heart was beating faster now, but not from fear. Instead, she felt more focused than she had ever been in her life. She was laser-like and ready to go.

She caught sight of Cameron near the edge of the stage. He was adjusting his belt awkwardly, eyes cast down.

She crossed over. 'Hey.'

'Hey.' He didn't meet her gaze.

'You okay?' she asked.

Chapter 24

He nodded, then sighed. 'Mum texted. Said she's sorry, but they won't make it tomorrow. Dad and Mum have a dinner with a client in Brisbane. She said they're disappointed to miss the show.' He used air quotes to emphasise her words, trying to laugh like he didn't care. But Ava could see the tightness in his jaw.

'I'm sorry, that's awful,' she said.

'I'm used to it,' he added. 'They always say sorry. Doesn't change anything.'

Ava didn't respond. Just stood there, heart quietly breaking on his behalf.

Then Mr Galloway shouted, 'Juliet! You're up in five! Where's my nurse? Someone get me my nurse!'

Cameron gave her a small smile. 'Showtime.'

He turned and walked into the wings.

Ava watched him go and wished she could make it all better.

The theatre lights had long cooled by the time Ava got home, but she was about to step under a new, much harsher spotlight—the cold stare of her mother's expectations.

She dropped her bag by the stairs and headed for the kitchen to find something to eat, when her phone buzzed with an email alert.

She opened the app. The subject line read: *Maths Term Test—Results & Feedback*. Mrs Prestius was quick. She'd said tonight, but it was just after school.

Her heart thudding, she tapped the message.

Seventy-eight per cent.

Her breath caught. Underneath, Mrs Prestius had written:

Well done. You worked for this, so keep it up. My door is always open to you.

For a moment, Ava just stood there, stunned. It wasn't survival, and it wasn't scraping by. She had passed!

Just as she turned, her mum walked into the kitchen, still in her work clothes, arms crossed.

'Hello, love.'

Ava lifted the phone like a trophy. 'I got my maths test back.' She passed it over.

Her mum took the phone and read silently. Ava searched her mum's face, but it gave nothing away.

Ava waited, smugness creeping into her smile.

'Seventy-eight per cent,' her mum said at last. 'Well, that's something.'

Ava was taken aback.

'It's more than something,' she said. 'I passed and I passed well, after everything else that's been going on

and learning forty pages of Shakespeare.'

Her mum nodded, not quite looking at her. 'Well, you chose to do that. Maths isn't a choice, is it? It's necessary, and you want to get over an eighty-five for the final exam.'

Ava's jaw tightened and she shook her head slowly. 'You just can't let me have this, can you?'

'I said well done,' her mum said, looking offended.

'No, you said "that's something"'. Like I picked up my shoes without being asked. Not like I actually achieved something.'

Her mum exhaled. 'Ava, this whole term you've been emotional and defensive. If I don't say anything, I'm unsupportive. If I do, I'm controlling. I don't know how to win with you anymore.'

Ava's voice sharpened. 'It's not about winning, Mum! It's about seeing what's in front of you. You're missing everything because you're too worried about me, but I'm not the one you need to be worried about.'

'Excuse me?' She raised her chin, her jaw set in the way that signalled pure fury was about to emerge. If her mother was a dragon, she was about to breathe fire.

‘You don’t see me, not properly. You only see what I don’t do or my marks. You see the mess. The mistakes. Not the fact that I didn’t quit, even when you wanted me to, and that I went back and passed the test with a great mark. I had one blip and you acted like it was the end of the world.’

Her mum blinked. ‘I never wanted you to quit, I just wanted—’

‘Yes, you did!’ Ava snapped. ‘You told me to drop out of the play because you were embarrassed about one bad test. You didn’t ask if I was okay. You didn’t ask about the play. You didn’t ask about anything that wasn’t a percentage on a report. You’re always talking about the stupid Facebook group and comparing me to the kids at school—stop it! It’s so toxic and awful and it’s embarrassing. You look pathetic! You know, all the kids whose parents are in that group are ashamed of their parents. I hate it!’ She yelled the last bit and had zero regrets.

Her mother’s mouth opened then shut again.

Ava stepped back, her voice trembling with heat. *Maybe she would be the one to breathe fire instead,* she thought

wildly. Anything was possible right now.

‘And while you were busy picking me apart, you didn’t even notice that your other kid can’t see properly.’

Her mother froze. ‘What?’

‘Aaron told me, more than once, and he said he told you but you said he was lazy or something. He said the letters blur when he reads, and he mixes them up and then he gets headaches. Has a teacher told you about that? They should have.’

Her mum gasped and went pale, but Ava wasn’t finished.

‘He gives up because no-one listens. And I ignored him too because I was too busy trying to be your gold-star child, but you let us down, Mum.’

Her mother blinked, slowly, like someone had slapped her, and Ava felt bad for yelling but not for what she’d said. She lowered her tone.

‘He’s struggling, Mum, and I’m sorry I didn’t say something sooner. But maybe if you took some of that pressure off me, you’d notice your other kid literally can’t see.’

The room went very still. Then her mother slumped

into a kitchen chair and put her hands over her face and started to sob.

Ava had never seen her mother do that. Not when her dad's mum died. Not when the car broke down on the way to school camp. Not when she and Dad argued behind closed doors.

'I didn't know,' she said softly, voice muffled. 'I didn't see it. I brushed him off. I am a terrible mother.'

Ava felt the fight draining out of her, but the truth still hung between them, raw and humming. 'You're not, Mum. You're just being a lot. Like really,' she said with a sigh.

'You've been carrying too much,' her mother said finally. 'I've been too harsh. On you. On myself. I just wanted to get it right. And now I'm realising that I've been getting it wrong.'

Ava sat down across from her, still holding her phone.

'Mum, please. Just because you didn't get to do the things you wanted, it doesn't mean I have to do what you want me to do. I'm not you, Mum. I just want to figure out who I am.'

Her mother nodded and wiped her eyes with a clean tea towel.

'Aaron needs you too, Mum, and so does Dad, and you need to focus on you also.'

Nodding, her mum stood up and washed her face at the sink, then went to her bag and pulled out her phone, but not before she walked behind Ava and kissed her on the head.

'How did I get such a wise, clever, talented and brilliant daughter?' she said.

'I take after my mum,' Ava said, tipping her head back to her mum, who now kissed her on the forehead.

'I'm sorry, darling,' she said.

'I know.' Ava nodded.

Her mum opened her phone. 'And now I'm calling the optometrist for an emergency appointment, and then I'm ringing the school to find out why no teacher alerted me to the fact that my son cannot see properly in class.'

The fire was back in her voice, and Ava giggled as she made her way upstairs to her room.

She opened her school bag, took out her laptop and

set it up at her desk. She hesitated only a second before pulling out the crumpled contact sheet from her folder of all the kids in the play and the parents' contact emails if someone needed a pickup from another parent. She typed the address into the email.

Her fingers hovered above the keyboard. She knew it wasn't her job to fix things, but lately, she'd been finding her voice, passing tests, standing her ground, speaking her truth and showing up when it mattered.

She couldn't make Cameron's parents care. But she could give them the chance to try.

Subject: Tomorrow's show—from Cameron's friend

Dear Mr and Mrs Reed,

My name is Ava Riccardo, and I am playing Juliet opposite Cameron in the school play.

He told me today that you might not be able to come tomorrow. I know this email is unexpected, but I thought I should try.

Cameron is incredible in this role. He is brave and funny and so talented. He's made this play more than just

a school project. He brings a level of professionalism that is more than just a school play. He has been so kind to me, as this is my first-ever show. And I think, even if he doesn't say so, it matters to him that someone close sees what he's done.

The play is on for three nights, and tomorrow is the opening night. It begins at 7 pm sharp. If you can come, Mr Galloway will make sure there's space for you. I guarantee it. So, please try to come because you're missing out on so much.

Thanks for reading this. I know Cameron wouldn't ask, but I wanted to.

Warm regards,

Ava

She pressed 'send'.

This time, her heart didn't race with panic. It swelled with something steadier. Braver.

I'm becoming the parent whisperer, she thought, and she sat back in her chair and wondered who else's parents needed a reality check because she was on a roll.

Chapter 25

The theatre buzzed like a live wire with the audience starting to mill about, looking for their seats and chatting amongst each other.

Backstage, it was all nervous laughter, hairpins clattering on the floor and whispered line checks. The scent of stage makeup, hairspray and adrenaline filled the air, and Ava thought she had never been happier.

Mr Galloway paced like a man preparing to launch a spaceship. He had his clipboard, his headset and the kind of intense focus that made people step quickly out of his way.

‘We’re not improvising Shakespeare!’ he barked at Toby, who was trying out a new dramatic twirl. ‘Stick to the blocking, hit your marks, and if anyone drops a

line, keep going like you meant to!’

Izzy was bouncing on the balls of her feet near the dressing room mirror, pretending she wasn’t checking her reflection every three seconds. ‘Do we look like actual actors? Because I think we might be actual actors now,’ she whispered to Ava.

Ava smiled, but her stomach was tight. She smoothed down the bodice of her Juliet costume, already warm under the stage lights bleeding through the curtains.

‘Is Cameron okay?’ Izzy asked.

Ava glanced around. He was near the prop table, quiet, fiddling with the fake ring used in the wedding scene. He wasn’t pacing or stretching or making ridiculous jokes like usual. Just still.

‘He’s nervous,’ Ava said.

‘Aren’t we all?’ Izzy shrugged, then added in a stage whisper, ‘Also, I can’t feel my eyebrows. Tell me if they fall off mid-scene.’ She touched where the heavy stick-on eyebrows were.

Ava laughed, but her eyes flicked to the heavy red curtain and she peeked through the crack. The audience was already filtering in. She could hear them

chattering, shuffling coats, the occasional cough or laugh.

The theatre was nearly full. Teachers. Parents. Students. Some Year 7s holding programs upside down. Mr Galloway's wife, possibly, in the front row, looking bewildered. There were Ava's parents, and Aaron, with her aunts and cousins and the neighbours behind them.

She wasn't sure if Cameron's parents were there—they hadn't answered her email, and she didn't know what they looked like.

Ava stepped back, her heart sinking slightly. She didn't know what she'd expected. She'd sent the email. Maybe it hadn't worked. Maybe they hadn't read it. Or maybe they had and just . . . didn't come.

She turned and nearly bumped into Cameron, who had stepped forward and was now peeking through the same gap in the curtain.

'It's a full house,' she said, but she noticed that he had become still.

Totally still.

'They came,' he said, barely more than a breath.

Ava blinked. 'Who?'

'My parents. They're here.' His voice cracked the tiniest bit, but he didn't look away. 'Third row.'

She leaned forward, just enough to see what he saw.

A tall man in a dark suit, arms folded but alert. A woman beside him, her coat draped neatly over her knees. Both of them were looking towards the stage, not checking their phones, not chatting. Just . . . waiting.

Cameron pulled back slowly, then turned to Ava. He didn't say anything, but his eyes met hers with a quiet kind of wonder. Like he'd been walking around in a story he didn't believe, and suddenly realised someone had written him into the next chapter after all.

She didn't say anything either, just nodded, a small, steady smile on her lips.

He gave the faintest shake of his head, like he couldn't believe it. And then, just before Mr Galloway barked for everyone to take their places, Cameron leaned a little closer.

'How . . .?' he began.

'Places!' Mr Galloway bellowed. 'Let's go, team! Curtain in three!'

Chapter 26

Cameron stopped. His hand brushed hers for a second, and then he grabbed it and squeezed it and beamed at her.

‘Chookas,’ he said with that broad smile of his, using the theatre term for ‘good luck’.

‘Chookas,’ she replied. *He’s back*, she thought.

Then he turned and walked into the wings.

Ava stood there a moment longer, heart full, nerves buzzing, but differently now.

Not in panic. In readiness.

She stepped into the wings as the lights began to fade and the stage came to life.

It was opening night. And this time, everyone who mattered was here.

The lights rose slowly on Juliet’s balcony. Ava stood centrestage, one foot perched on a painted balcony step, her hand resting lightly on the railing.

The gauzy curtain behind her fluttered with the soft push of the fan they were using to simulate night air. The tension was thick around them.

She could hear the hush settle over the crowd. Someone coughed. A chair creaked. Then silence.

She breathed.

Below her, Cameron stepped into the light, his face angled upwards, lit by the blue wash that cast soft shadows across the set.

He looked up at her, not just Juliet, but her, and Ava felt the shift.

This wasn't rehearsal.

This wasn't a run-through in the rehearsal room with buzzing lights and someone rustling chip packets in the wings.

This was the real thing.

'With love's light wings did I fly over these walls,' Cameron began, his voice quieter than usual, steadier. 'Nothing could keep me away. Not fences. Not family. Not fear.'

Ava's heart beat a little faster. She wasn't afraid; she was ready for this moment.

He was still looking at her. Still in character, yes, but underneath, there was something else.

The same guy who used to make silly puns during warm-ups. The one who walked her to the bus and didn't try to fix her, just listened. The one who counselled her over Izzy and who made his dog wear silly hats on their video calls together, and the one whose parents were in the audience tonight.

She relaxed into her lines.

'If they see you here, they'll hurt you.'

He smiled. 'More danger in your eyes than in

twenty blades.' His eyes held hers, and Ava forgot how to breathe.

She exhaled, letting the words fall from her like truth. 'I'm not dangerous.'

'You are to me.'

The words weren't in the original script exactly. They were the modernised version their class had adapted. But it still landed like a spark and lit up the stage.

The audience was silent, watching them closely. Ava let the tension stretch just long enough before she spoke again.

'Then don't get caught.'

Cameron reached up, resting his hand just under the edge of the set. Not quite touching her. Just close.

'I won't. Not if you'll meet me here again. Tomorrow. And the day after. And the day after that.'

There was something soft in his voice. Something that didn't sound rehearsed.

Ava swallowed and gave her final lines, the ones that sealed the scene.

'I'll meet you. Every time.'

The lights dimmed.

Applause began. It was light at first, but then it became louder as the lights cut fully and they exited in opposite directions.

Backstage, Ava stepped into the shadowed wings and leaned against the scenery flats, trying to steady her breath. Her fingers were tingling.

Cameron appeared a few moments later, shrugging off his cloak and pulling at his collar.

He didn't say anything straightaway. Then, quietly, 'You were amazing.'

'So were you,' Ava said, her voice barely above a whisper.

'I can't believe they're here,' he said. 'My parents.'

She nodded.

He looked down at the floor for a second, then up at her again. 'How did they even know? I mean, I told them, but they had already fobbed me off. They were away and they came back for me.'

Ava smiled. 'I sent them an email.'

His eyebrows rose. 'Sorry? You emailed them?'

'I didn't think you would,' she said. 'And I thought you'd want them to see this. To see you.'

The lights were becoming too warm on her face.

'We're on,' she said, and they got into position.

Ava stood at Juliet's balcony, costume clinging slightly to the back of her neck, palms damp. The hush of the theatre felt deeper than usual. Like the audience was collectively holding its breath.

Below her, Cameron stepped into his light. He looked up at her, but his stare was cold, the warmth of the last scene gone.

Ava flinched at his gaze, trying to remember where they were.

Stage. Scene. Juliet and Romeo.

She forced herself back into the moment.

He launched into his lines. Not too fast. Not too slow. Every beat measured. Every word precise. But something was off.

It wasn't his voice; it was his face. His jaw was set too tight, his smile too thin.

Ava moved through her part, unsure whether to match his energy or soften hers.

The scene clipped along smoothly enough. They hit every cue. The audience clapped right on time.

But backstage, the moment it ended, she felt the shift in energy. Whatever love he had for her on stage hadn't come with him off stage.

Cameron pulled off his cloak and tossed it onto a chair. He didn't look at her.

'That went well,' she offered, still catching her breath.

'Did it?' His tone was flat. Tired. Something colder than usual.

Ava paused. 'What's wrong?'

He folded his arms, looking anywhere but at her. 'I can't believe you just went behind my back! What, you just decided you knew what was best for me?'

'No! That's not . . . I mean, I just thought . . .'

'You thought they'd feel guilty enough to show up,' he cut in. 'And you were right. Because here they are. Sitting in the third row like they planned it all along.'

Ava swallowed. 'I just . . . wanted them to see how good you are. You deserve that.'

'Yeah, well . . . what I deserved was a choice.' He shrugged, not looking at her. 'You didn't give me that. You know that thing people say, "If they wanted

to, they would"? Well, they didn't. They only came because you made them feel bad. Not because they actually wanted to be here.'

He was still keeping his voice low, too aware of the people changing in the wings, the buzz of the next scene being set.

'Cam, I was trying to help.'

He looked at her finally. Not furious but definitely hurt, as though she'd exposed something he'd worked hard to keep buried.

'I know,' he said. 'But now it doesn't feel like they came because they wanted to. It feels like they came because they were pressured into it.'

'Would it have been better if they stayed away?' Ava asked, feeling cross now.

'I don't know.' He dragged a hand through his hair. 'At least that would've been honest.'

Ava's throat ached. 'I just didn't want you to be alone in this.'

'You think I haven't been alone before?' he asked. 'I've gotten used to it.' He took a deep breath. 'I know you meant well. But it still hurt.'

A beat passed between them. Then he walked away.

Ava stood still, her heart thudding, the echo of the scene still hanging in her mind. She had wanted to do something kind.

She hadn't expected it to bruise quite so badly.

Chapter 27

Act One ended to thunderous applause, but Ava felt none of it.

She stood in the wings, hands clasped in front of her costume, trying to steady her breath. Around her, the cast scattered into the dressing rooms, flushed with adrenaline and excitement. But her mind stayed frozen on Cameron's expression earlier. Tight-lipped. Guarded. Cold.

She hadn't spoken to him since.

He'd been Romeo, word perfect and passionate on stage. But the warmth that usually lingered behind his lines, the humour, the spark, the shared rhythm, was gone. Replaced with a sharp professionalism that stung more than if he'd simply flubbed his lines.

Ava rubbed her arms, goosebumps rising even in the warmth of the theatre.

‘Riccardo,’ came Mr Galloway’s voice, low and gravelly.

She turned. He was watching her from the edge of the wings, clipboard in hand, headset looped around his neck. He didn’t say anything for a moment.

Then, simply: ‘Theatre is truth. Use it.’

She blinked. ‘Sir?’

He tapped the clipboard once. ‘Whatever’s going on out there, channel it. Don’t run from it.’

She nodded, but her throat was thick. How could she tell Mr Galloway that she had betrayed the guy she liked?

The backstage corridor buzzed with movement. People swapping costumes, searching for props, whispering about cues. Ava drifted towards the dressing room but paused when she saw Izzy waiting outside it, holding a bottle of water.

‘Hey,’ Izzy said, offering it.

‘Thanks.’ Ava took it, the plastic cool in her palm.

Izzy didn’t press. Didn’t ask what had happened.

She just said, ‘You were really good out there. Even with the . . . you know, tension.’

Ava gave a weak smile. ‘It’s kind of obvious, isn’t it?’

‘Only to people who’ve seen you two sneak looks at each other for the past few weeks.’

Ava sighed. ‘He’s mad at me.’

Izzy leaned against the wall. ‘Why?’

‘I emailed his parents and told them they needed to come and to not miss him in this because he’s great, and then he was surprised that they came and then I told him I emailed and now he’s mad.’

Izzy let out a long whistle. ‘You really did step in it, didn’t you?’

‘Step in it or overstep?’ Ava asked.

‘Both?’ Izzy made a face.

‘It was supposed to be a good thing. I thought . . .’
Ava stopped herself. ‘I just didn’t want him to feel invisible.’

Izzy nodded. ‘You saw he was hurting and you tried to fix it. That’s . . . very Ava.’

Ava winced. ‘I’m not really sure that’s a compliment right now.’

Izzy gave her a side smile. ‘Maybe not, but it’s the truth. You’re a good person, Ava.’

Ava looked away, the weight of it all pressing in. The rest of the show was still ahead. The wedding scene. The argument with the nurse. And then the end, the hardest part. Where everything breaks, although she was already feeling that everything was falling apart.

Ava headed back towards the stage. Cameron was there, standing just inside the curtains, rolling his shoulders and whispering lines to himself. He looked calm. Effortless.

He didn’t look at her.

She stepped into position as the house lights dimmed once again.

Act Two began.



The wedding and the fight scene passed in a blur, and Ava hit every line, every mark. Her voice projected clearly. Her movement was fluid. She didn’t miss a single cue. But inside, she was untethered.

Of course, Cameron was flawless. Polished. Precise.

But there was a distance to him. He no longer lingered in the space between scenes. No subtle glances. No softness in the pauses.

It was acting. Brilliant acting. But it wasn’t them.

Ava moved through Juliet’s grief with heavy limbs, second-guessing every beat. Was she overdoing it? Was she falling flat? Was he noticing?

Every time she looked at him, she hoped for a flicker of the old Cameron. A half-smile. A spark of something that said *we’re okay*.

It never came.

When the act ended, she walked off stage feeling hollow. Applause roared behind her, but she could barely register it.

Mr Galloway called something about costumes and timing, but she didn’t hear it. She slipped past the dressing rooms and sat on a folded stack of stage curtains, heart pounding.

She knew they could be better than this, but she had to get Cameron to forgive her.



The stage had emptied again. Act Two was done. The cast spilled into the green room for snacks and selfies, their nerves replaced with sugary adrenaline and eyeliner smudges. Ava ducked into the girls' dressing area to fix a loose ribbon, and mostly to breathe.

Her hands were still shaking. She'd said the lines. Hit every mark. But she hadn't felt them. Not like before. Not with Cameron pulling away in quiet, perfect silence.

She sank onto the wooden bench, letting her fingers trail along the edge of the small prop drawer beside her. It was the one they used for Juliet's 'potion scene'—a little ornate box that held the fake vial, a silk cloth and the folded script.

Something rustled and she pulled it open.

Tucked beneath the fabric was a piece of lined notebook paper. Folded three times. Her name was written across it in slightly smudged blue ink.

Ava.

She stared at it. For a moment, she didn't move. Then she unfolded it with careful hands.

Ava,

I was going to say this to you after the dress rehearsal, but I chickened out and shoved it in here like a complete coward. I thought maybe I'd give it to you tomorrow. Or never.

But if you're reading it, I guess that means I wasn't entirely gutless.

This play has been a lot. Not just the acting, though that's been huge, but the way it's made everything feel sharper. Like I'm not watching my life from a corner anymore. I'm in it.

And you're the reason.

Not in a weird, pressurey way. Just . . . in the honest way. You make things feel more possible. You make the stage feel safe. You make me feel like maybe I'm not pretending anymore.

I don't know what's happening between us. I just know I've looked forward to every rehearsal because of it. Because of you. I have liked you since Year 8, and you being in the play and becoming my friend has been the best thing this year. I hope you feel the same way, but it's okay if you don't. I won't get all Romeo dramatic on you.

Anyway. You probably think this is cringe. And that's fair. I just wanted to say it once.

Thanks for being brave.

You made this really special because you are really special.

Love,

Cam

Chapter 28

Ava didn't realise she was crying until one of the teardrops smudged the bottom of the page. She wiped her cheek quickly, folded the note again and pressed it against her chest for a moment.

He'd written this before their fight and he had wanted to tell her how much she meant to him.

He had wanted her to know.

Her fingers tightened around the paper. Then she slipped it into her pocket, stood up and caught her reflection in the mirror. Her face was flushed. Her eyes were red. But something in her chest had lifted.

She had to make it up to him somehow and give the audience the show they deserved.

The theatre lights dimmed again. The final act.

Mr Galloway's voice came through the wings, low but steady: 'Places. Let's make it count.'

The air backstage thickened. Ava adjusted the tie of her gown, smoothing it flat across her ribs. Her palms were sweating again, but this time she didn't try to fight it.

The note was still folded in her pocket. She hadn't seen Cameron since finding it. He hadn't come to the dressing rooms or the water table, or even to change costumes. But now, she could hear him breathing softly just on the other side of the curtain.

She turned slightly. 'I got your note,' she whispered.

Cameron was silent.

‘You might be angry at me for emailing your parents, but I only did it because I wanted them to see what I see. And yes, I like you. I’ve liked you since you introduced me to your dog, and I think about you all the time, and I want to tell you everything that’s happened to me during the day, and I look forward to our calls, and I’ll miss you so much when this show is over and I worry we won’t spend time together again.’ The words tumbled out of her, and she saw Cameron’s eyes widen.

And then the curtain went up, the lights went on and they were in the tomb.

The audience was still, leaning forward, caught in the shadowed blue wash of the lights.

Ava lay motionless across the stage, the potion’s effects still meant to be masking her from the tragedy about to unfold. Her eyes were shut, her breathing slow. But every sense was open, alert, ready.

She felt Cameron arrive before she heard him. The way his boots hit the stone set. The pause before his lines began.

His voice cracked on the first word.

‘Here lies Juliet . . .’

He kneeled beside her, and the room shrank. It was just them now.

Ava opened her eyes slowly, just in time to see the expression on his face. Devastation, yes, but also something rawer than performance. He had forgiven her.

Cameron held the plastic vial between his fingers, the one meant to be poison, and his hand trembled.

‘My love, my wife . . .’

He said the words like a confession, pure heartbreak in his voice.

Ava felt a lump rise in her throat as she listened. Juliet was supposed to stay still. Supposed to be asleep. But her fingers curled slightly at her side.

Cameron leaned closer.

‘I forgive you, my love,’ he said.

That wasn’t in the script. It was whispered. Barely audible. But Ava heard it.

His lips brushed her forehead before he drank the poison and collapsed beside her, the bottle rolling out of his hand and spinning until it hit the base of the set.

Silence.

Then her cue.

Juliet stirred.

She sat up slowly, hands shaking, eyes wide.

The script called for shock. Horror. But Ava added something else.

Grief.

And love.

She dragged herself over to his side, voice shaking on every line.

‘What’s here? A cup, closed in my true love’s hand?’

The prop dagger was cold in her grip.

She looked out across the audience, just once. Past the lights, into the dark. She thought she could make out her mum’s silhouette, still and leaning forward. Maybe even her dad’s ridiculous Elvis glasses catching a sliver of stage glare.

She looked back at Cameron. ‘This is your sheath,’ she whispered, voice cracking.

She raised the dagger.

‘There rust, and let me die.’

She fell beside him.

The lights dropped.

Silence.

Then a surge of applause that felt like it might split the walls.

Ava’s ears buzzed as the curtain fell, cast and crew rushing from the wings. People were hugging. Crying. Mr Galloway clapped so loudly he almost dropped his clipboard.

Cameron was still lying beside her when she opened her eyes again.

He looked at her. Not as Romeo. Not as someone still hurt. But as someone letting go.

‘You were incredible,’ he said.

Ava blinked, her throat tight. ‘So were you.’

‘I meant it,’ he added softly. ‘All of it. Even when I was mad.’

‘So did I,’ she whispered.

There were still things to say. But for now, they just sat in the hush between applause and aftermath, side by side on the floor, finally breathing the same air again.



Ava’s ears were ringing from the applause as she ran

off stage with Cameron and waited in the wings. They had rehearsed these bows, but it felt different now that there was a real audience in the theatre.

Mr Galloway stepped forward and gave the nod.

The cast emerged one by one. Mercutio bowed with a wink. Tybalt raised a single eyebrow like a villain in a film trailer. Izzy did a perfect curtsy that made the Year 7s squeal. One by one, the cast came out.

Then it was her turn.

Ava stepped forward into the light and she looked out blinking into the sea of faces that rose to their feet like a slow wave.

The clapping swelled.

She looked out. Not searching for anyone in particular, just letting the crowd land in her chest. But then, she saw her.

Her mum. Standing. Not clapping politely, not checking her phone. Standing with her hands together and tears on her cheeks, like she'd just seen something she hadn't known she needed.

Ava's dad stood beside her, recording everything on his phone with one hand, and Aaron was holding a

huge bunch of flowers, his face in awe as he looked at his big sister.

Ava laughed softly under her breath and took her bow. Then she stepped back as Cameron moved into the spotlight.

There was a small pause before the audience responded.

Then applause again, loud, like that for Ava.

Cameron gestured for her to come and take a bow with him, and she ran and took his outstretched hand and they bowed together.

Ava looked down at his parents. They were standing and clapping, smiling, and his dad let out a loud whistle. She turned to Cameron, but his eyes weren't on them.

They were on her.

She smiled at him and he smiled back, then let go of her hand and ran off the stage, leaving her there. She stood awkwardly for a moment, wondering what to do, when Cameron came running back with a bunch of red roses for her. She kissed his cheek, and the crowd roared again.

Their individual bows done, the whole cast formed a line and gestured to Mr Galloway, who ran on and gave a short, embarrassed bow of his own, and the curtain fell for the last time.

Backstage exploded. People cried, laughed, hugged. The lights felt brighter than usual, the energy louder.

Ava slipped through it all, heart full, body humming with exhaustion and joy. Then she felt a tap on her arm and she turned to see Cameron.

‘Hi,’ he said with a smile that made her stomach flip and her face ache from smiling so wide.

‘Hi,’ she said, feeling like she wanted to laugh and cry at the same time.

They stood there for a second, the noise folding around them. Then he pulled her into a hug. One of those real hugs that meant something, filled with all the things they hadn’t said but felt.

Ava let herself melt into it, and she felt his breath just above her ear when he spoke.

‘You were amazing,’ he said.

She smiled against his shoulder. ‘You weren’t bad either.’

They pulled back at the same time, neither of them moving away fully.

‘So,’ Cameron said, rubbing his thumb over her wrist before dropping his hand, ‘do we call this an end-of-night kiss or . . .?’

Ava laughed. ‘More like an opening night one. For something else.’

He nodded slowly. ‘Something else sounds good.’

And then, finally, gently, he kissed her.

No lights. No stage.

And Ava knew, this was real, not for the audience, but for them.

The rehearsals were over, and now the real thing had started.

Chapter 29

After the show, when Ava had taken off her costume and makeup, she took the flowers Cameron had given her and went out into the foyer of the theatre, where all the family and friends waited.

It was her mother who found her first. She didn't say anything—she couldn't because she was still crying. Instead, she wrapped Ava in a hug that was tighter and longer than any she could remember getting before.

'You were . . . astonishing,' her mum finally said, getting herself together and pulling back. 'I'm so glad I was here to see you.'

Ava smiled. 'Thank you for coming. I'm so glad you liked it.'

Aaron shoved a bouquet of flowers into her hands.

'You were okay,' he said. 'I didn't hate it.' She looked at the flowers and saw a packet of her favourite sour worms in with the blooms.

Ava beamed. 'Perfect, thank you.'

Her dad pulled her into a hug. 'You were just unbelievable,' he said. 'Better than anything on telly. Seriously. If Baz Luhrmann had a brain, he'd cast you as Juliet in a new production.'

After she had received congratulations from her extended family and her neighbours, Ava turned to see Cameron standing with his parents right next to the drinks table.

His dad was sipping orange juice and nodding vaguely, while his mum read the program like it was a tax document. But they were there. Still. Not rushing off. Not avoiding.

Cameron saw her and gave a small wave.

Ava's heart thudded.

Then he walked over to her.

'Hey,' he said, hands in his pockets, still in his costume trousers, with a hoodie thrown over the top.

'Hey,' she replied. 'Mum, this is Cameron.'

Her mum straightened. 'You were absolutely brilliant, Cameron. Congratulations.'

Her dad gave him a small salute. 'Mate, the death scene? I was genuinely emotional. And I hate crying in public. I just save it for when my footy team loses each weekend.'

Cameron chuckled. 'Thanks. Means a lot.'

A pause. Then Cameron gestured back towards his parents. 'They want to say thanks, by the way. For the show and everything.'

'Yeah?' Ava said.

'Yeah.' He nodded, scratching the back of his neck. 'You were right, I guess. I was just . . . I don't know, maybe scared they'd come for the wrong reasons. But they didn't. They stayed, and they actually watched the whole thing. And they said they liked it. They liked me in it. And . . . that they're proud of me. I haven't heard that in ages.'

Ava's eyes pricked with sudden tears.

He shifted closer. 'I didn't even know that I cared that much until they came. I guess I really did want them to see me.'

'We can't stay invisible forever,' she said.

Then his parents approached. His mum gave Ava a polite smile and his dad held out his hand.

'You must be Ava. We just wanted to say thank you for your email and for being such a good friend to him.'

Ava blinked. 'I didn't do that much.'

Cameron glanced at her, something flickering in his eyes. 'You kind of did,' he said.

'What did Ava do?' Her mum leaned in, arms crossed.

'Your lovely daughter sent us an email about the show and how good Cameron was in it, and suggested we not miss out on the opening night,' Cameron's mum said without menace or judgement. She seemed genuinely pleased.

'Ava,' her mum gasped. 'You didn't?'

Her dad stepped in. 'She's good at that, always looking out for people.' With a twinkle in his eye, he added, 'Sometimes too good.'

Ava's mum pulled her close and wrapped her arms around her shoulders. 'We're still working on "boundaries".'

Chapter 30

Everyone laughed. Even Cameron's dad. 'I am glad she did. I would have been sorry to have missed out,' he said and he ruffled his son's hair. Cameron looked equally pleased and embarrassed.

Ava stood there in the middle of it, the noise fading slightly, the lights behind the foyer glass still glowing soft and warm. She thought of the first rehearsal. The way she'd barely been able to speak. The way she'd felt invisible, like she was only ever background noise in her own life.

Now here she was.

No more invisible Ava. She was finally allowing herself to be seen, and to be honest, she didn't hate it.

The glow of Ava's bedside lamp lit the room in soft amber light.

Her script was still on her desk, even though she knew all the lines, the pages dog-eared, the highlighted words disappearing into the fraying edges. But she couldn't quite let it go yet.

Her costume hung on the back of her chair like a shadow of the girl who had worn it just hours earlier for the last time. She had showered, changed into her pyjamas and was half-heartedly scrolling through her phone when there was a knock at her door.

Her mum stepped in, holding a cup of tea. 'Can I come in?'

Ava nodded and shifted over on her bed to make

space. Her mum sat down slowly, tea balanced on top of her knee.

‘I wanted to say something,’ she said. ‘Actually, a few things. But I’ll start with this: I’m sorry I stopped you from performing.’

Ava blinked. ‘What do you mean? I just finished three nights of the show.’

Her mum took a breath. ‘Do you remember Year 6? The end-of-year play? The one you were going to narrate?’

Ava nodded.

Her mum gave a sorry look. ‘I took you away from something I know you wanted to do because of maths, and I’m sorry. I thought I was doing something good, but now I see that I was stopping you from finding out who you are, not who I want you to be.’

There was a long pause.

‘I told myself it was the right thing,’ she continued. ‘That maths mattered more. That the play was just for fun. But the truth is I was scared.’

‘Of what?’ Ava asked.

‘That you’d love it. That you’d want to keep doing it.

And I didn’t know how to support that. I thought I was doing what was best. But really . . . I was just afraid of you wanting something I didn’t understand and something I couldn’t control.’

Ava didn’t answer straightaway. The silence between them wasn’t angry. It was thoughtful, both of them processing their own versions of what happened.

‘I was gutted,’ Ava said finally. ‘I remember watching from the audience while Izzy read my lines. I didn’t even tell Izzy why I wasn’t doing it. I just said I changed my mind.’

Her mum winced. ‘I’m so sorry, Ava. I didn’t see it then. But I do now. Watching you on stage . . . you were incredible. Not just good, but honest, brave and magnetic. You lit up the stage, and I realised I’ve spent years trying to dim something in you because I thought it would keep you safe. That’s not what love should do. It should make us shine.’

Ava’s eyes stung. She hadn’t expected this conversation, but now that it was happening, it felt like something she hadn’t known she needed.

‘And you are shining. I love this sassy, funny, brave

Ava I see now from doing the play. You're everything I hoped you would be and more, so I hope you can forgive me.'

'I'm not angry anymore,' Ava said, her voice thick. 'But I did carry it. For a long time. Feeling like maybe wanting creative stuff was . . . wrong or selfish.'

Her mother put her mug down and reached for Ava's hand. 'It's not wrong and it's not selfish. It's part of who you are. And I'm sorry I didn't honour that sooner.'

Ava smiled. 'You're here and doing it now, that's all that matters.'

There was a pause, then her mum asked, 'So, what do you want to do next?'

'I don't know. But something brave. I'm thinking about things.'

'Thinking is good, and then you need to follow your curiosity.'

'What do you mean?' Ava asked, frowning.

Her mother looked at her for a moment, then said, 'I mean the thing that sparks something in you. Even if it's strange or small. The things you wonder about when no-one's watching. That's where the fun is. That's

where you find out who you are.'

Ava nodded slowly, starting to understand.

Her mum sighed. 'I didn't follow my curiosity, which I regret. I was curious about the law, sure, but I also loved languages and history. When I was young, I used to write little speeches in a notebook and pretend I was in parliament.'

'That's so cute, Mum!' Ava sat forward.

Her mum smiled. 'I wanted to travel and learn to cook food from every country. But I didn't, and it wasn't as though your dad wasn't up for any challenge. I admire him for being so himself, but I kept picking the safe path until it narrowed so much, there wasn't room for wonder anymore.'

'Do you regret it?' Ava asked.

'Every now and then,' she said honestly. 'But mostly, I just wish I'd been braver. Or let myself play a little longer before I decided I had to be serious. I know it was hard with Nonno's death and I had to be there for Mum, but I didn't let anyone else help, so my sisters got to explore and I didn't, and I make people remember it. Don't be like me. It's so boring being a martyr.'

Ava laughed.

Her mum patted her hand. 'So now, I want you to do it. Follow your questions about life, chase what excites you. That's how you find your real path, not just the one that makes sense on paper.'

Ava nodded. She had never heard her mum speak like this before, or maybe she hadn't listened before, but being in the play had taught her to listen, and to respond and to understand people's motives. And she realised her mum wasn't bad; she was just scared of life.

'Okay,' she said solemnly. 'I promise to follow my curiosity.'

They sat like that for a while, the lamp flickering gently, the house finally quiet around them. And in that stillness, a new chapter began, one where Ava didn't have to choose between being seen and being safe.

She could be both.

Chapter 31

'Want to take Minxy on a walk?' Cameron asked. It was a Saturday and they had spent the day at Cameron's house, making pizzas for lunch and watching a movie.

'Thought you'd never ask.' Ava smiled at him.

They clipped on Minxy's lead and stepped out into the warm afternoon, their steps in sync as they walked along the pavement.

The sky was clear except for a few happy-looking clouds in the distance. Ava could hear the soft sounds of a wind chime somewhere.

'So,' Cameron said after a few minutes. 'My parents sat me down and apologised to me.'

'They did? What for?' she asked as Minxy stopped to sniff yet another tree as they walked.

‘For not being around, for dismissing me and the show, that they realised they’d messed up and that if they didn’t fix our relationship now, it might be broken forever when I get older.’

‘Wow, that’s pretty insightful,’ she said.

He nodded. ‘Yeah. They said they’re going to be around more and come to stuff. Not just work and talk about working and thinking about work. They’ve even booked a weekend away, with me this time, so I won’t get shipped off to a relative.’

Ava glanced at him, her heart lifting. ‘That’s huge.’
‘It is, and it’s because of you. I know I was weird about the email, but it was the right thing to do, so thank you.’

‘I don’t think it was me,’ she said as Minxy sniffed a stop sign.

‘No, it was. I think they were so ashamed of being told by a friend of mine, it kind of hit home. I could hear them after the show, when I was in my room. They were fighting and Mum was crying, and then the next day they apologised to me.’

‘Wow,’ Ava said, ‘that’s great. I mean, it’s not

great that they had a fight, but good that they finally understood.’

‘So, thank you for listening and knowing what I needed even when I didn’t know and didn’t think I cared. I did care, a lot.’ He laughed, embarrassed.

They kept walking down the road. ‘You know, it’s the people who say they don’t care who actually do, like, really care,’ Ava said.

Cameron looked over at her, curious. ‘How so?’

She shrugged. ‘I used to pretend I didn’t care about much, so I hid from everything. I didn’t want to be picked on, or to stand out, but I think I was just scared to want something and not get it. It felt safer to act like none of it mattered.’ She paused. ‘But it did. It does. I care so much sometimes it’s like, am I caring too much? I’ve spent a lot of energy trying to hide that.’

Cameron didn’t interrupt as they walked.

‘But maybe caring isn’t the weakness I thought it was,’ she added. ‘Maybe it’s the whole point.’

He reached down and held her hand as they walked down to the park at the end of his street. The park had some play equipment and a fenced in dog area,

so Cameron unclipped the leash and Minxy happily trotted off to meet a small white dog.

Cameron and Ava sat on the swings, quiet for a moment, watching the dogs chase each other, their little legs running through the freshly mowed grass.

‘You know it’s weird, my parents are overly involved in my life and your parents haven’t been. Maybe the answer is somewhere in between,’ she mused.

Cameron laughed. ‘That’s a pretty accurate description.’

‘I mean, I love them and everything, but I had a huge fight with my mum recently because she wanted me to be a lawyer and thought my failed maths test meant I could never go to law school. I had to work really hard to get her to understand that I’m in Year 9, and I don’t even know what I want for lunch most days, let alone the rest of my life.’

‘Right?’ Cameron was swinging now, higher and higher. ‘I have no idea what I want either, but this is pretty good, right now with you.’

Ava smiled and started to swing too. At first, she did so slowly, her toes brushing the bark chips underfoot,

then she pushed higher and higher, rising to meet him.

They sailed through the air, perfectly in time. Back and forth. The breeze rushed against their faces, and she could hear the creak of the chains above her, the rhythmic swoop; it was strangely peaceful. She hadn’t been on a swing since she was in primary school, and now she wondered why she had ever stopped.

Back and forth they went, just like the lines in the play. Call and response. Beat and breath. Question and answer. She didn’t need to rehearse this moment, or script it, or worry if she was saying the right thing or if she was letting someone down. Right now it was just them, suspended for a little while between gravity and something close to joy.

She looked sideways at him mid-swing and saw him already looking at her.

‘You’re not bad at this,’ he said.

‘At what?’

‘Life. Swinging. Being here.’

Ava laughed. ‘Takes practice.’

‘You ready?’ he asked, turning to her.

‘For what?’ she called out.

‘To jump off!’ he cried. ‘One, two . . . three!’

They soared and landed with a thud and a tumble, both breathless, grinning up at the sky. Cameron’s hand found hers in the grass without looking. Neither of them said anything.

Above them, clouds drifted lazily across the blue. Birds flew, and somewhere nearby kids laughed, a bike bell rang and the world kept spinning.

Ava let her eyes fall closed for a second, chest rising with a long, steady breath.

Right now didn’t need a plan or a script. This was her own story she was writing.

They lay there, fingers still touching, caught in that perfect moment where everything felt open and possible.



By the time lunch rolled around on Monday, the school was already buzzing with rumours about who cried the most during the final death scene (Mr Galloway), who forgot their lines during curtain call (Ben from tech), and who was definitely dating now (Ava and Cameron,

apparently, according to at least five group chats).

The school halls felt different now. It wasn’t that people stopped Ava to talk, although some did. A few Year 9s she barely knew offered quiet congratulations. Quite a few of the senior students who passed through middle school spoke to her and said how good she was, and the teachers also congratulated her. One of the English teachers gave her a thumbs up at the lockers, and one of the music teachers clapped when she passed, but mostly, it was the way people looked at her. She was no longer invisible or a part of someone else’s orbit; she was her own star now.

The one thing Ava hadn’t fully resolved was her friendship with Izzy. She hadn’t seen her properly since the play, and then on the weekend she had seen Cameron and then slept a lot. She was also unsure how ready she was to have the full debrief about their friendship and everything else that had happened, including the bullying with Mia.

Ava found a quiet spot on a bench under the old jacaranda near the oval. A breeze went through her ponytail, and she sat quietly, thinking how peaceful

it was. She looked up and saw Izzy watching her from the other side of the oval. Ava lifted a hand, something between a wave and a peace offering, and then gestured for Izzy to come and sit with her.

Izzy wandered over and stood next to her, wearing a non-regulation headband and a pensive smile.

‘Mind if I sit?’ she asked.

Ava patted the seat beside her. ‘Be my guest.’

Izzy flopped down. ‘I can’t believe it’s over. Like, over, over.’

Ava grinned. ‘You say that like someone died.’

‘Technically, two people did die.’

‘And yet we live on. Miraculous.’

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment. Izzy reached down, picked a blade of grass and tied it in a knot.

‘Do you miss it?’

‘What?’ Ava asked carefully. She wasn’t sure what Izzy was referring to exactly.

‘The play?’

Ava thought for a moment. ‘I do and I don’t. You know, it was a lot of work, and well, not all of it was

nice, like you and I fighting.’ She waited to see how Izzy would respond.

To her credit, she was thoughtful.

‘You know,’ Izzy said eventually, ‘I didn’t think we’d come back from it.’

‘What?’ Ava asked, now confused. ‘The play?’

‘No, our fight,’ Izzy said, and Ava glanced at her and saw how down she seemed.

‘I was really awful,’ Izzy added. ‘I don’t think I realised how scared I was until you got that role.’

‘Scared of what?’

Izzy hesitated, twisting the end of her sleeve. ‘That if you found your voice you wouldn’t need mine anymore. I think I thought I was protecting you all this time. Like, shielding you from stuff, like mean girls, awkward moments, embarrassment. But I ended up doing all of that to you. It’s awful. And really, I was kind of controlling you. Like if I could keep you quiet and close, I wouldn’t have to worry about you outgrowing me.’

She looked down, voice growing softer. ‘Then you got on stage and it was like watching someone finally wear the outfit they were always meant to.

It was like I was handing you cardigans and telling you to play it safe, when really, you were made for sequins and bold colours. You were never meant to blend in, Ava, you were meant to stand out.'

Ava blinked. 'Izzy . . . I never didn't need you. I just didn't know how to balance things. I was figuring myself out, and I was so surprised I got the role.'

Izzy tugged at her hoodie sleeve. 'It's weird. I used to think I wanted to be the main character. But I think I'm better at being the best friend who steals scenes and makes fun of the main character's love-life.'

Ava laughed. 'You're good at that.'

'Speaking of,' Izzy added with a smirk, 'I saw Cameron waiting for you this morning. You guys are so painfully cute now. It's like a Wattpad story I accidentally downloaded.'

Ava rolled her eyes. 'Don't start.'

'Too late. I'm invested. I'm going to need updates. Texts. Pictures. Kiss ratings.'

'Gross.'

'You're welcome.'

Ava took a breath, then looked at Izzy properly.

'You bullied me, Izzy, you and Mia, and it was awful. Don't do that to anyone again, or I can't be friends with you.'

Izzy was silent, and Ava saw tears falling, but she didn't speak. She had learned that sitting with the uncomfortable feelings was where the lesson was, no matter how much she struggled watching Izzy wrestle with her behaviour.

'You're right. I'm so sorry, Ava. I love you. You're my gal, my emotional-support goblin, my last chip in the packet, my day-one drama queen, my forever plus-one, my non-bio twin, my human glitter bomb and my end-of-the-world buddy.'

'Wow, that's a lot of things.' Ava laughed but not meanly, then paused. 'Izzy, you've been my best friend since forever. You're my Spongebob and I'm your Patrick, but I was being a scared loser. I didn't want to have the uncomfortable talk with you, so I hid. I know it was super immature of me.'

'Maybe if we had both dealt with a short moment of feeling yuck, we would have avoided weeks of feeling terrible,' Izzy mused.

‘Probably,’ Ava said, then turned to Izzy. ‘Never let me run away from facing stuff again, okay?’

Izzy nodded. ‘Deal. And next time I start acting like a jealous gremlin, just throw a juice box at me or something.’

‘Deal.’

Izzy stood, brushing bits of grass off her trousers. ‘Also, heads up, I heard there’s going to be a production next year, definitely. This time it’s a comedy. Auditions are next term.’

Ava raised an eyebrow. ‘You in?’
‘Obviously. I need a new excuse to wear eyeliner and make everyone wet their pants with my jokes. It’s my time to shine.’

Ava laughed. ‘It is. You’ll kill it.’

‘You going to audition?’ she asked.

‘Probably. And I’m also thinking of joining debating club. Lately, I’ve been really good at arguing.’

‘Love that for you,’ Izzy said, and Ava could tell she meant it.

Izzy paused. ‘You know, I don’t think we’re the same as we were before. But maybe that’s a good thing.’

‘Maybe it is. A new and improved Izzy and Ava,’ Ava said.

‘Ava and Izzy two-point-oh,’ Izzy quipped.

They walked back towards the school building together, the jacaranda leaves fluttering above them like confetti. Ava looked up, feeling a flicker of excitement.

From now on, she decided, she had three new rules for herself:

- 1) Have fun with Cameron.
- 2) Be a good friend to Izzy.
- 3) And never hide in the wings of her own life again.

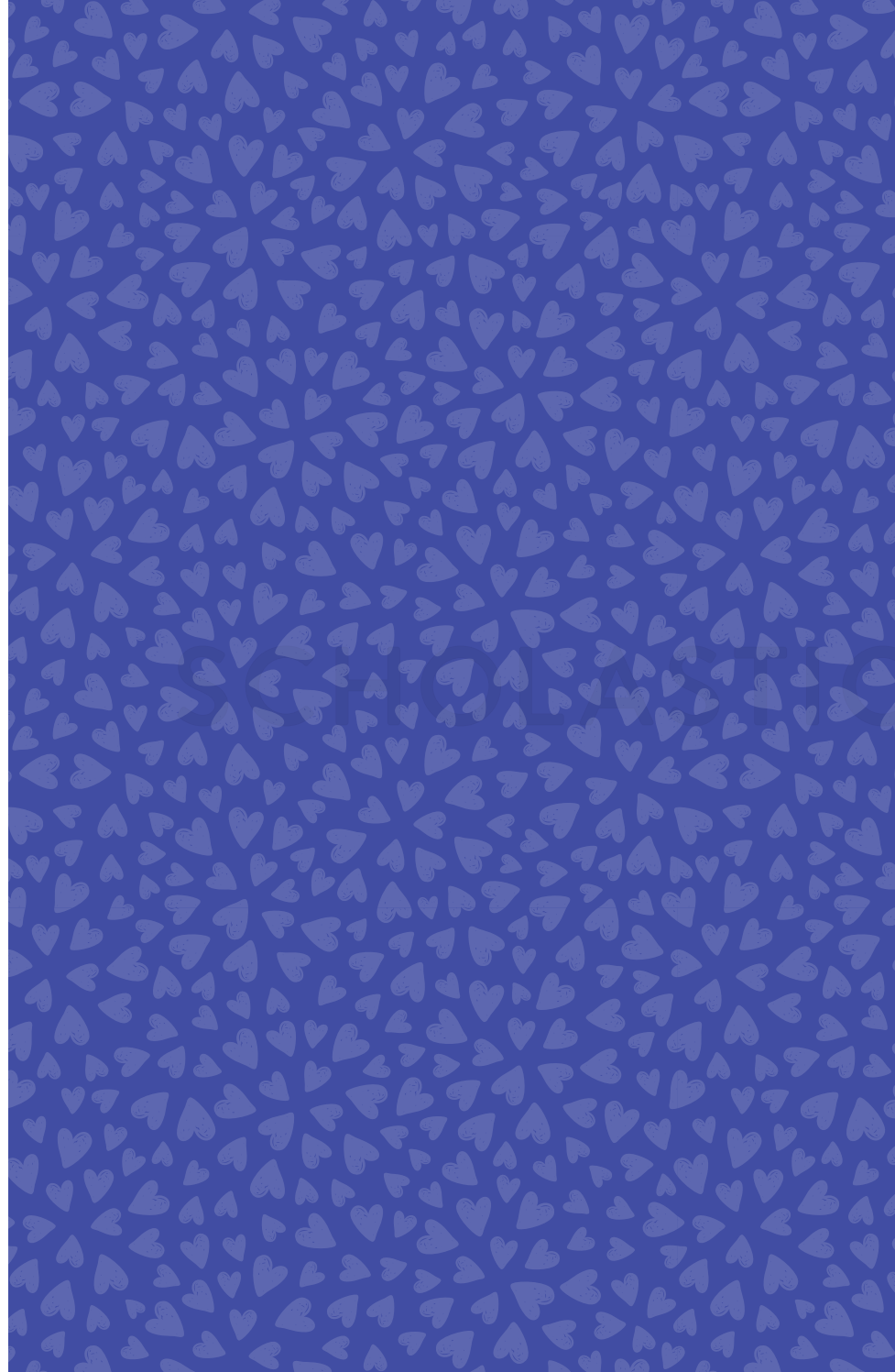
About the author


Kate Forster writes books filled with love, laughter and the enchantment of everyday life. Kate, a Melbourne-based author, crafts realistic characters and touching stories that feel like you're catching up with old friends. When she is not writing, you can find her sharing glimpses of her creative life on social media, soaking up inspiration from her dynamic online community, or spending time with her loving dogs, who are constantly by her side (and occasionally steal the spotlight). Kate, who is tea-fuelled and often daydreaming on the beach, is all about finding joy in the little things and sharing them through her writing.

You can find more about Kate at:

<https://www.kateforster.com>

SCHOLASTIC





When it comes to surviving Year 9,
Ava Riccardo has three rules:

1. Stay invisible.
2. Stay quiet.
3. Never bring attention to herself.

But when her best friend, Izzy, convinces her to audition for the school play, a modern *Romeo and Juliet*, everything changes.

Somehow, Ava lands the lead role, opposite Cameron Reed, Izzy's longtime crush and the funniest, cutest guy in their year.

Now, Ava must navigate rehearsals, school work, Izzy's anger with her for getting the lead role, and her own growing crush on Cameron. But as the spotlight grows brighter, so does the tension between friendship and first love.

Ava never wanted to be the centre of attention. So, why does it feel so right standing beside Cameron on stage?

*Fall in love with Two Hearts—
romantic fiction for young hearts.*